

Vatican, U.S. women religious tensions go back decades

Ken Briggs | Aug. 9, 2009



LCWR former president, Mercy Sister Theresa Kane, addresses Pope John Paul II at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC Oct. 7, 1979, asking pope to open all church ministries to women.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella organization for the large majority of American congregations, is meeting in New Orleans this week at a critical moment in its history. Two sweeping investigations of American sisters are being pursued by the Vatican, one aimed at LCWR itself, the other at the hundreds of congregations across the land. What follows is a time-line in the strained relationship between Rome and American sisters provided by Ken Briggs, based on his book: ?Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns,? (Doubleday, 2006.) It is aimed at providing context for the reporting of the meeting, which readers will find on line and in the Aug. 21 issue of NCR.

1954 ? Establishment of the Sister Formation Movement by Sisters Mary Emil Penet and Ritamary Bradley. The remarkable organization promoted college education for sisters became a catalyst for developing inter-community consciousness around issues of religious life and its relationship to society.

Autumn, 1965 -- The Second Vatican Council approves a document addressed only to religious orders: *Perfectae Caritatis* (?Perfect Love?). It gives permission to each congregation to renew itself as it saw fit.

?Calling for ?a conscious return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community,? the instruction asserts that the church profited by the ?special character and purpose? of each community. (p. 76)

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Spring, 1966: Cardinal Ildebrando Antoniutti, head of the Congregation for Religious, warns sisters against interpreting the council's mandate in ways he found dangerous. His speech was to Italian superiors months after

the council decree.

tt?The vocation of a nun was the ?state of perfection,? he said, using the phrase that had been rejected as an elitist anachronism by council progressives ? You must not permit yourself to be easygoing, tolerant, weak,? the cardinal said. ?Remember that when you fail to correct or punish, life itself will correct with merciless blows.? Exercise ?maternal correction,? he advised; ?radical feminism? had smothered [women?s] natural instincts toward humble and retiring self-growing?..?

1967 ? First Sister Survey. Conducted by Sister Marie Augusta Neal (Harvard PhD), shows overwhelming support for steps taken by congregations to renew themselves and provides a baseline for further attitude changes.

tt?The first Sister Survey (1966-68), which reached all 180,000 nuns in the United States, found that two thirds of the respondents (63 percent) were opposed to allowing sisters freedom to choose to wear secular clothes on some occasions and 64 percent were opposed to sisters being allowed to wear contemporary dress at all times. In 1982 (the second Survey), the ground had almost totally shifted ?

1968 ?Cardinal James McIntyre of Los Angeles demands that the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters back down from the changes in dress, work and living arrangements approved by the community?s chapter ? and submit to his control instead -- or be forced out of the order. In what became a national scandal, the great majority of sisters refused to give in, and left to form a community separate from hierarchical control.

1971 ? The Conference of Major Superiors of Women (CMSW) proposes changing its name to Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The Vatican denies the request on grounds that the word ?Leadership? implied a furthering of autonomy and independence among women?s communities. ? ? by the mid-1970s, many American sisters felt that the church had subjected them to forms of injustice they couldn?t ignore.?

ttA seemingly trivial matter signaled that displeasure: Rome?s attempt to stop the national association of sisters from changing its name. It was an important fight over symbolism ? Although Vatican II?s call for activism on behalf of social justice presumably applied to nuns no less than to the rest of the church, the (conference?s) assertiveness signaled by the name change could make it more difficult to limit sisters to issues ?outside? the church.

ttFriction over giving the upstart CMSW a more commanding title was never resolved by discussion between conference officials and Rome because Vatican officials refused to agree to talks. After the conference went ahead with the name change in 1971, its leaders regularly trekked to Rome and asked to meet with the pope and other authorities. The requests were repeatedly denied ?.

tt?What we found was shocking,? Sister Margaret Brennen (head of the conference 1972-73) said. ?The church had called us to renewal, and we took it seriously. When we began to live it out, however, we became a threat to the centrist church. In dealing with Rome, their insistence was that we weren?t obeying. I can?t count the number of times we met in Rome and tried to speak out to the Holy Father ? not to complain, just to explain who we are and why we?re doing what we?re doing ? but our requests were never granted?..?

1971 ? The Consortium Perfectae Caritatis forms in opposition to LCWR policies. Its founding as a break-away group was encouraged by the Vatican whose policies it supports against LCWR. In 1992, the Vatican officially recognizes CPC under the name Council of Major Superiors of Women, on an equal, competitive footing with LCWR. In effect, the Vatican now had an organizational platform with which to wage its campaign against alleged LCWR radicalism. America became the only country with rival sister organizations.

1971 ? A liaison group of U.S Bishops assigned to look into the LCWR recites a long list of complaints against

the sisters at a joint meeting in Detroit with LCWR representatives. The bishops mostly complain about disobedience. Nothing gets resolved.

1975 ? Another group in reaction to the widespread nature of sisters' renewal, the Institute on Religious Life, emerged, also with Vatican support, further ostracizing LCWR. Cardinal John O'Connor was its chief hierarchical supporter and benefactor. The Institute, in turn, encouraged CPC to expand its efforts.

Sister Vincent Marie Finnegan, the Consortium's director (1995), said assistance was forthcoming. "We began because major superiors saw deviation from church teaching," she explained. "We felt we couldn't reform within [the LCWR]. We had to have heavy backing from cardinals and bishops."

1975 ? Founding of the Women's Ordination Conference, with participation by many sisters, both those who believed they had a vocation to priesthood and those who generally stood for women's ordination. With a year, the pope issued a document flatly rejecting women as candidates for the priesthood.

1979 ? During Pope John Paul II's visit to the United States, Sister Theresa Kane, speaking in her capacity as head of the LCWR, stuns a nation-wide audience by calling on the pope to consider admitting women to all offices in the church, including the priesthood.

Renewal had shocked many into conscious awareness of the huge disadvantages women religious had suffered because of their gender and the low status assigned to them because of that. The fact that Rome was obliged to uphold a teaching that didn't convince many leading theologians gave some advantage to the nuns. Pope John Paul subsequently forbade even discussing the ordination issue; at the same time he endeavored to calm the waters by emphasizing his opposition to sexism without changing a dot or tittle of church teaching.

November, 1983 ? The pope orders a study of U.S. sisters' congregations under the direction of Bishop John R. Quinn. The study sparked fears of an investigation whose goal was reining sisters back in from renewal. The fact that it became a less threatening instrument was credited to Bishop Quinn's sagacious, respectful handling of the process. Sister Margaret Cafferty, who was executive director of LCWR at the time, said Bishop Quinn became "the best friend we could have had." It was widely believed that the results might have been disastrous in other hands.

The [Quinn] final report asserted that the bishops had learned a great deal about the enhanced status of the individual and the value of women in religious life. It noted both a weakening of identity in many congregations and "a decline in respect for the Pope and the Magisterium of the Church." There remained "certain tensions" between some religious and the Holy See," the report states.

The Quinn report came as close to a defense of American sisters as the bishops had ever achieved.

1983 ? The pope issues "Essential Elements of Religious Life," attempts to reestablish firm, traditional guideposts for religious congregations, ones that contrasted sharply with the course of much of the renewal.

Essential Elements was the most aggressive effort yet to restrain what the Vatican saw as a renegade renewal. Nuns had ventured too far into the world, the pope thought, and it was time to head back to the convent. Little of the renewal experienced by the majority of nuns could be found in the nine elements that were being promoted as criteria for sister communities. In terms of dress, housing, work, and prayer, the document echoed the now familiar refrain that the Sacred Congregation for Religious wished renewal had never happened the way it did, or perhaps at all.

1995 ? Cardinal John J. O'Connor returned from the Synod of Bishops month-long session on religious life (he was one of three picked by the pope to preside) with a blistering attack on its widespread practice in America.

He made his allegations, which ultimately were rooted in his concept of "radical feminism," to the annual meeting of the Institute on Religious Life, which he had helped launch. He had also established his own community, the Sisters of Life, on the tradition style of Mother Teresa.

The cardinal's spirited defense of tradition argued that too many nuns were trying to refashion religious life to their own liking in defiance of church teaching and in an effort to steal power from priests and bishops. He alluded to "a relentless pursuit of power, power sought at the expense of faith, exclusive power to determine for ourselves" as the scourge of the allegedly rebellious nuns. The authority structure as it existed was divinely ordered, he said, and to threaten it was a sin. "Power is sought at the expense of faith," proclaimed the prelate, who had walked the corridors of church power for most of his adult life. "Too often it is sought by those whose faith in God and in the church has been seriously weakened".

2009 Two investigations ordered by the Vatican: one aimed at all congregations, the second specifically at LCWR, especially its theology.

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