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Louise Akers: Silenced or louder than ever?

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

History is a dangerous thing. Somebody ought to be reviewing some of it carefully now -- for the sake of the church, if nothing else. There may be a lesson to be learned here.

In Richard Attenborough's film, "Gandhi," one scene of Gandhi's life and the revolt of Indian nationalists against British control stands out above all others. Intent on defying new British taxes on Indian salt, Gandhi leads a march to the sea to collect the salt water that would enable poor Indians to make their own.

It was an ugly sight.

As they march in silent ranks to the shore, the Indians are met head on by hundreds and hundreds of British colonial police -- many of them Indians themselves -- clubs and muskets in hand, who systematically beat every rank of unarmed demonstrators to the ground. But the ranks never stop coming. One after another they come, row after row of them. Beating after beating after beating, they walk over one another in ordered formation into the butt of British rifles, certain of their personhood, sure of their cause, convinced of its right.

The salt boycott -- the boycott that began with thousands of defenseless peasants risking beatings, imprisonment and even death -- led, in the end, to the Indian declaration of independence from England.

Gandhi was clear about the purpose of nonviolent resistance. It would expose the injustice of the oppressor and claim the conscience of the world.

The lesson is a sobering one: Suppression does not end revolution; it breeds it. It solves nothing.

The kind of animal resistance the world saw directed at the voiceless in Gandhi's Salt March is, in most of

the world, over. At the same time, women -- and those who support the pursuits of women for recognition as full human beings -- are getting a taste of the same kind of opposition. It is equally implacable. It is at least as powerful. It is universal. Fundamentalist extremists of all ilk and their interpretations of religion everywhere claim one way or another that God is sexist. With orthodoxy as an excuse and God as an argument, women are denied Torah study and rabbinates in some strains of Judaism. They are denied public access and made captives of their husbands in other places in the name of the Koran. They are condemned as lesser beings in behalf of the Hindu Vedas. They are forbidden ordination -- with everything that implies, including karma and financial support -- in defense of Buddhism. They are made consumers of the faith rather than ministers of the faith in various Christian denominations.

Most of all they, too, are silenced so that the rest of the community can not hear their concerns, examine their suppositions.

But rather than discouraging those -- men as well as women -- who argue for the rights and presence of women everywhere, suppression is simply alerting people everywhere that there is no possible justification, on the grounds of femaleness alone, for the elimination of women from public service, from public participation, from adult agency, from the holy halls of religious discipleship.

And that's where concern for Cincinnati Sister of Charity Louise Akers comes in. But that's where concern for the church comes in, too.

Sr. Louise has been dismissed by Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk from all diocesan positions and/or conferences on Catholic soil in the archdiocese of Cincinnati due to her support for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic church. She was willing, she says, to leave the advisory board of the Women's Ordination Conference and to have her picture removed from their Web site. She was not willing to be forced to retract her support for the continued study of the theological foundation upon which the exclusion of women from Catholic ordination is based -- a clearly intellectually honest position.

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As a result, Sr. Louise, recently recognized by the city of Cincinnati as one of its outstanding civic leaders and, ironically, coordinator of Cincinnati's Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center, will be denied access to the idea development arena of the Catholic community where she is obviously needed most.

Comments that followed the news story detailing the dismissal lamented "the loss of a voice like this" to the church.

But they're wrong. The church faces precisely the opposite problem, whether it realizes it or not.

Voices like this, voices that cry for justice, voices that point out the lacunae in the thinking of the theological community and are punished for their continuing pursuit of truth are not "lost." On the contrary. Those voices ring loud and clear around the globe for all the world to hear. One after another after another. And little by little, one silenced voice recruits ten, a hundred, a thousand, a society worth of others. All of them talking. All of them refusing to be silent.

If you think not, think Martin Luther or Ulrich Zwingli or John Calvin or Mary Ward or Mary MacKillop or John Cardinal Henry Newman or Teilhard de Chardin or Hans Kung. Think of any number of others without whom we would still be selling relics or teaching merit theology or refusing to allow women religious on the streets or rejecting the concept of the *sensus fidelium* or refusing to attend the weddings

of our children in Protestant churches or disdaining to deny science, scientists, the movement of the sun and evolution.

The continued suppression of thinkers who call for the discussion and study of the role of women in church and society is not suppressing anything. In fact, more and more men and women are beginning to speak out about it. Which is where Sr. Louise and Archbishop Pilarczyk come in: Like the English, he has the power of the past on his side; like Gandhi, she has the power of the present and the promise of the future on hers.

The truth is that suppression of thought is more dangerous to the church than any sin the church has ever committed. It has not only driven people away, it has stunted its own development, diminished its credibility.

From where I stand, it may be time to forget power and theology, magisteriums and inquisitions for a while. Maybe we should just all sit down and, if history is not convincing enough, read the New Testament. Read the parables, in fact, in which Jesus talks about how to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, true and false. Matthew 13:30 may give us a clue. It reads, "Let both wheat and weeds grow up together till the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters 'First, collect the weeds and tie them together to be burned. Then, gather the wheat and bring it to my barn.' "

Point: Let them all talk until, as a church searching under the impulse of the Spirit, we hear clearly where truth lies for us.

Not a bad idea, perhaps, for times such as these.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a best-selling author and international lecturer on topics of justice, peace, human rights, women's issues, and contemporary spirituality in the church and in society.

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