

When A Stranger Comes to Call

Ken Briggs | Sep. 15, 2009 NCR Today

In her erudite piece on the [history of apostolic religious life](#) [1], Sister Sandra Schneiders notes at the outset that she is writing to correct those who write "dogmatically" about the subject but have "no lived experience of or academic competence" to back up what they say.

Nothing she says points to me, who has written quite a bit about that topic, but I certainly fit the description. Obviously I've never been a sister in apostolic life nor do I consider myself a scholar of it.

On the other hand, it's perfectly legitimate to debate whether or not what I or anyone else writing about the current crisis is dogmatic, which I assume means rigid conviction untempered by reason or knowledge. That's fair game.

But her comment indirectly raises another issue: the role of the outsider.

For decades I've written about religion and often have found myself suspect because I don't belong to the religious group I'm writing about. During most of American history, religion was protected from journalistic scrutiny, except for the most explosive scandals or curious phenomena. When that began to change in the 1960s, and religion was beginning to be covered like other subjects, many religious groups bristled.

As a non-Catholic, I've encountered a mix of responses from Catholics I've covered. Some have been open and cooperative; others dismissive, even hostile. Sometimes Catholics assume I couldn't possibly get it right because I haven't grown up in it (though I was raised in a thoroughly Catholic working class culture) and others consider my presence an intrusion into an area I should regard as foreign and off-limits.

That all goes with the territory. Sisters have had many good reasons for protecting their privacy. I respect those motivations. The price of even appearing to voice dissent can be considerable and they share a common trait with most tight-knit religious communities: wariness of accepting an outsider's views as valid.

Written work should indeed be judged as to its soundness. Nothing protects any outsider from tough scrutiny and if something is empty dogmatism it should be labeled as such.

But I'd also maintain that Catholics and every religious group need outsiders with a detached, objective look at their own practices and beliefs in order to keep them honest. It doesn't make those writings all right, but it does offer some balance in institutions that have survived forever on their own unchecked mythologies.

Outsiders are essential, I believe, but they shouldn't expect to hear much from those they write about. Either the subjects think the accounts go against, dare I say, their own dogmatic interpretations, or they say they're in agreement but must remain silent.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/discerning-ministerial-religious-life-today>