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Louise Akers elevates women's issues at CTA meeting

by Thomas C. Fox



Photos by David Gawlik

Milwaukee

Charity Sr. Louise Akers, telling the story of how she was dismissed after 40 years of teaching in the Cincinnati archdiocese for not retracting her support for women's ordination, held more than 2,000 Call to Action conference delegates spellbound here, and in the process united two women's issues precious to many Catholics: the ban on women's ordination and the Vatican's secretive investigation of U.S. women religious.

Both, Akers explained, relegated women to lesser roles in the church, and are affronts to human dignity and grave injustices that all Catholic need to confront.

Akers filled in for Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, who was tending to his ailing father. For more than one hour Nov. 6, on the opening evening of the three-day Call to Action gathering, Akers spoke of the difficult experiences that women commonly face in society and the sexism they face in the Catholic church. She shared how dispiriting it is for women religious to be investigated by their hierarchy.

At one point she quoted a woman religious who had written her about the fear she now lived with, a fear generated by the investigation, a fear she could never have imagined she would ever have to feel as a nun facing new uncertainties.

Akers gained national notoriety last August after Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk told her she had to disassociate herself from the Women's Ordination Conference. She said she told Pilarczyk she would be willing to leave the conference's advisory board, and have her picture removed from its Web site. She was not willing, she said, to be forced to retract her support for the continued discussion and study of women's ordination.

"To do so would go against my conscience," said Akers at the time. She entered the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in 1960, and holds a doctorate in feminist theology from the Episcopal Divinity School,



Cambridge, Mass.

In her talk, Akers quoted Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane, who when receiving the 2004 Outstanding Leadership Award from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious said: "We know and identify ourselves as women in solidarity with other women. We experience this solidarity as we acknowledge the painful realization that all women in church and in society are colonized, that all women are patronized, that all women are viewed as objects, that all women are conditioned and expected to be complementary."

Akers told the Call to Action audience that when a friend once asked about her vision of church, she replied: "I hope for a greater realization of how Vatican II described the church as 'people of God.' This vision of church challenges the patriarchal and hierarchal model of church that we experience today."

The church, Akers said, needs to be more inclusive not just in outreach, but also within its internal structures. "A church that is universal in cultures and inclusive in gender would project a renewed presence. There is also a need for persistence in raising questions or objections to such abuses as the pedophile scandal. The lack of accountability is more and more evident and cries out for a new model of leadership."

Akers spoke about the peace and calm that came over her when she and another friend attended a women's ordination rite. And she spoke about her conversation with her archbishop when he told her to rescind her support for women's ordination.

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Said Akers: "Women's ordination is a justice issue. Its basis is the value, dignity and equality of women. I believe this to my very core. To publicly state otherwise would be a lie and against my conscience."

Before she finished her remarks, Akers also read from the many letters of support she had received from people both known and unknown to her. She quoted from church documents, including Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, "Peace on Earth": "Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim both in domestic and public life the rights and duties that befit a human person."

And she argued that it was she, not her archbishop, who had Catholic teaching in her corner in their dispute over whether she had the right to be supportive of women's ordination in her private dealings. Akers cited the Vatican II document on Religious Freedom, which reads: "The Vatican council declares that the human person has the right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all people should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against their convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others."

She said in her private conversation with Pilarczyk she emphasized that she always upheld official church teachings in her public ministry, separating these from her personal convictions.

By the time she had finished to a standing ovation and a deluge of hugs from admirers who came to the front of the large conference hall, Akers had made what many conference attendees said was a simple and compelling case that women in general and women religious in particular are suffering at the hands of an increasingly closed and isolated male hierarchy.

Several women noted an irony. Fifteen years have passed since Pope John Paul II issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, declaring the Catholic church does not have the authority to ordain women, in the hopes of ending further discussion on the subject. But now the topic is being propelled forward by another Vatican action, the investigation of women religious, which is raising questions about the fairness by which the hierarchy sees and treats women.

In her Call to Action talk, Akers seemed to become the embodiment of that irony.

"The issue of the denial of women's ordination by the Vatican has taken on a whole new life as a result of the investigation of the women religious," said Sister of St. Joseph Christine Schenk, executive director of FutureChurch. "It's the injustice of both that's becoming increasingly clear to many."

Workshops and caucuses dealing with the "inquisition," as some referred to it here, of the U.S. women religious gathered large attendance and considerable anger. A number of Call to Action delegates said they would pin their bishops down to see if they planned to contribute to the investigation, which started last January and which, by Vatican figures, is to cost at least \$1.1 million. Others said they would work to spread the word about the investigation in their local media.

By the time the Call to Action gathering entered its final day, delegates in a plenary session unanimously approved a statement that was issued Nov. 8 in their name. It reads:

"Since January of 2009, the Vatican has investigated and sought to silence Catholic sisters in the United

States. They have set a deadline of Nov. 20 for the women religious' communities to respond to its probing questionnaire. Now more than ever we must speak out against the few bishops who continue to wield the sword of division, rather than extend the hand of unity.

?To our fellow Catholics in the United States and around the globe, women religious have taught us how to live the Gospel and open our arms until they embraced all of God's people. It is now our responsibility to put into action the lessons we have learned and ensure that our sisters in faith are not ripped from the church's embrace.

?To our courageous sisters, you who have been the bedrock of our church and country, know that the people you have faithfully served stand beside you as you have stood with us.

?To those who are doing the investigation, your actions do not reflect the welcoming and embracing love that Jesus demonstrated in the Gospels. We invite you to have a conversion of heart and join us in standing with the women religious.

?In every generation God raises up prophets to point the way toward the Gospel vision of inclusion. Women religious are these prophets. Today we stand not with those who cling to the gates of exclusion but with the prophets who open the gates and call us to live as one."

Meanwhile, interviews with Call to Action board members and others associated with its leadership echoed a common refrain that Call to Action, a movement that originally grew out of a 1976 bicentennial celebration held in the Detroit archdiocese, has gone through a number of phases of transformation and is going through its latest at this time.

These leaders generally agree that their organization, which over the years has moved first to a regional and then to a local level, has not succeeded in engaging the U.S. bishops as members would have liked. To the contrary, the organization is viewed as a threat to current church structures and is generally banned



from using church properties when it meets.

The group's new refrain, echoed by its new executive director, Jim FitzGerald, and other Call to Action leaders, is to focus on ?modeling the Catholic communities? they want for the institutional church to one day foster. How this happens is not yet clear. Some think it might involve being more visible in sharing experiences of their noncanonical Catholic life. For many members, the message, ?We are the church,? has become deeply ingrained in their spiritual psyche. What appears to be new is their active desire to move forward in building what they describe as an ?inclusive? church in the hopes of setting examples for other Catholics.

This was the first national gathering for Call to Action's FitzGerald, who took over this year from Dan and Sheila Daley, who had led Call to Action since its earliest days. FitzGerald explained his vision for the organization in a plenary session:

- ?We believe in a church that instead of investigating one another, we hold honest, transparent and

- open dialogue, especially when we disagree;
- ?A church that not only advocates for the poor and oppressed but does so from a place of love, peace, and nonviolence;
 - ?A church that not only works for equal opportunity for women in church leadership, but also recognizes the holy feminine that dwells within us all ? in men as well as women;
 - ?A church that not only addresses racism in our communities and organizational structures, but also honestly confronts white privilege and racism in ourselves;
 - ?A church that not only values its youth, but invites every generation to fully participate so that the wisdom generation can learn from youth just as much as youth can learn from those most experienced in life;
 - ?A church that not only affirms and celebrates LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people], but believes these sisters and brothers should be welcomed to all sacraments, not just some of them.

?This vision of church will happen, but it has to come from us. Never before has Call to Action been so needed! The kin-dom of God is near and we are being called to co-create with God an inclusive church where everyone is celebrated for being the person they were created to be.?

The three-day conference, featured, as always, more workshops than any single person could attend, lively liturgies and plenary sessions. It drew together old activists and a growing numbers of ?NextGen? Catholics. The gathering, meanwhile, awarded its 2009 Call to Action Leadership Award to Barbara Blaine and David Clohessy, president and national director, respectively, of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) ?for giving voice to the survivors? and working to hold the church accountable on this issue.

Thomas C. Fox is NCR editor and can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org.

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