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Praising Sisters May Not Provide a Shield

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As Tom Fox reports on this blog, Loyola Marymount and Mt. St. Mary's college have joined the procession celebrating the example and service of American sisters.

Similar tributes have been forthcoming in the face of the Vatican's investigation of religious communities and the beliefs of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. LCWR earlier contributed its own in the form of an exhibition of the history of U.S. sisters now showing in Washington.

These honors are well deserved and often overdue. Do they also constitute a conscious effort to combat the Vatican's attempt to find fault with them? I don't know how much, if any, coordination has prompted the tributes, but it seems plausible that it does represent at least a loose coalition of desires to display a collective "character witness."

The strategy of open protest against the "visitation" has, by comparison, been used rarely. For a variety of reasons, most sisters have refrained from publicly rejecting the initiative. The most striking example has been indirect as many communities refused to comply with sections of the investigation's questionnaire.

On the other hand, appealing to lay Catholics to recall their gratitude and respect for sisters can build sympathy and support.

Good publicity can blunt efforts to defame or belittle. American Catholics see and hear stories of sisters doing works of charity with courage and diligence and that mental image can be enough to make accusations against them seem illogical, even absurd.

Can the evocation of good will toward sisters be sufficient to persuade Rome either to modify its detective work or subtly abandoning it? Can rallies and displays and conferences convince the Vatican that it has

much more to lose than gain?

I'd like to think so but don't. Popular support for policies and teachings opposed by Rome hasn't made much of a dent thusfar. While the highlighting of sisters' gifts and contributons is welcome, it doesn't seem nearly enough to back down from its exercise in "realpolitik," church style.

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