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Rome's checkbook strategy on women religious

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Seems the Vatican heard how Catholics are incensed over its inquisition of U.S. women religious. Some say Pope Benedict personally asked Archbishop Joseph Tobin, the new Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, to undo the mess caused by his Congregation's Apostolic Visitation of U.S. women's institutes.

Make no mistake; it's not only 59,000 or so women religious watching this movie. It's more like 69 million Catholics hanging on to their checkbooks, wondering what in the name of God is going on.

Now, taking direct aim at his foot, Tobin, a Redemptorist from Detroit, is quoted by *NCR* senior correspondent John Allen as saying there is "need for a strategy of reconciliation."

A "strategy"? Now church officials use words owned by salesmen and the military?

As teenagers say (or text), OMG!

Now, I am sure Tobin is a fine man. Provincials and presidents of women's institutes breathed a sigh of semi-relief when he became Cardinal Francis Rode's number two.

Recall, within days of the January 2009 surprise drop of Shoe One in the widely-perceived game of "Get-the-Nuns," photos of Rode in flowing robes with princely trains and surrounded by nubile boys raced around the Internet. The tag line: "And he is investigating us?"

Rode's Apostolic Visitation left its chief investigator, Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Mother Mary Clare Millea, holding an empty bag. Go do it. By the way, get your own funding. She apparently pushed back.

The Knights of Columbus set up her website and her Facebook page, but Rode had to ask U.S. bishops to fund a study they did not ask for. Amazingly, one dicastery simultaneously insulted U.S. women religious, their bishops, and just about every Catholic who does not read *The Wanderer*.

So now there's a "strategy of reconciliation"? Let's not forget, later in 2009 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dropped Shoe Two: a doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

I think most Americans are wildly insulted by the Vatican's implied criticism and perceived (if not real) threatening behavior toward women in general and women religious in particular. You have to wonder if the Vatican is now waking up to the fact that American women control the bulk of those millions of checkbooks.

And American women know what the women religious have done.

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Well before the ink dried on the Constitution, European women religious were crossing the ocean, bringing their lives of prayer and service to Native Americans and the rag-tag bunch of settlers trying to carve a country out of the wilderness.

Nearly a quarter-million women religious have ministered here since then. They nursed both sides in the Civil War. They founded over 100 colleges and universities. They built the U.S. hospitals now treating one of every six patients.

U.S. women religious invented the incubator, advocated against restrictive braces for polio patients, and started the Mayo Clinic. Now they're tired, and many are poor, but they still find huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

What does it all look like now? The world is beginning to see two Catholic Churches: one for bishops and priests and another for the rest of us. The one for clerics collects the money and controls the sacraments.

The church for the rest of us looks to women religious (and, now, male deacons) to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, shelter the homeless, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. These ministers of prayer and service slake the deep thirst of all of us for the Living Word. They do so largely without access to the collection basket.

Do priests and bishops get involved in all this Christian charity? Of course they do, but not so well that they're the first ones you think of when it comes to works of mercy.

Now there's a "strategy of reconciliation", apparently between the men's church and the women's church. Yes, reconciliation is needed. We must all and always be open to it. But a "strategy" is a plan, method, or series of maneuvers for obtaining a specific goal or result.

It is no secret the strained relations between women religious and clerics on the local level are echoed by the lack of understanding in the cassock-filled halls of the Vatican. What does Rome want from its "strategy"? What's the goal?

It's not too cynical to answer: money. The U.S. church potentially plows millions into the Vatican, but

American Catholics are just plain angry. U.S. women religious control huge properties and, in many cases, significant amounts of cash and securities. They're not that thrilled with how they've been treated either.

Is this the clerical church's plan: reconcile with the nuns and you also calm down U.S. Catholics?

A "strategy of reconciliation"? Sure. Make nice. Gain trust. Take the money. Run.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. Her book *Women & Catholicism* will be published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2011.]

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