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Speaking by, for, and with \"the help\"

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

It's August. The close of this year's round of conventions has freed hotels for vacationers seeking respite from the every day. Folks at home on rainy summer afternoons are off to the movies. Both hotels and movies may bring up issues we'd rather not recall.

"The Help," a feature film based on Kathryn Stockett's first novel of the same name, snaps into Technicolor focus the fuzzy black and white memories of 1960s racism in the United States. The theme is difficult -- it took Stockett around 61 attempts before she landed a book agent -- but it is as true today as it was 50 years ago.

In this movie it is black women working as house maids -- "the help" of Jackson, Miss. -- who are maltreated and abused. Their children face the same fate.

The few among them who risked speaking out rescued the others and brought them a sense of dignity they well deserved.

Think things have changed? Think again. There may be no more "white" and "colored" water fountains, at least in the United States, but there are residual attitudes here and elsewhere. Too many people see "different" as license to discriminate and exploit. Hotel workers, as world news reports, are particularly vulnerable.

In the global context, abusers can be found among the powerful men of means, and those most vulnerable to abuse are women and children of any color, ethnicity, or nationality.

Abuse comes in many forms, and the Internet is an abuser's playpen where weirdness combines with commerce. The back page of the *Village Voice* newspaper has morphed into the Web site

www.backpage.com, offering a smorgasboard of "services" in the U.S., Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Mexico.

There are lots of "escort" Web sites. Many of the young people in the electronic meat market are really children -- young teenagers who ran away from home, looking for a better life but ended up raped and beaten by pimps into submission. They are sold and resold in the hotel rooms conventioners vacated for those vacationers.

Want numbers? The California non-profit Children of the Night says international relief organizations estimate there are 300,000 child prostitutes in the United States. No one doubts it is a multi-billion dollar industry.

What to do?

In the most perfect of worlds anyone with any leverage at all will sit up and take notice of the 6,000-member U.S. Federation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, whose delegates met at St. Louis' Millennium Hotel in July. At their request the hotel's management signed the six-point "Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism."

There are 1,030 Code of Conduct signers in 42 countries, but only six -- including Delta Airlines, Amazon Tours, the Carlson and Hilton Hotels, and the American Society of Travel Agents -- are in the United States. It is not easy to move a corporation, but women religious managed to add the St. Louis Millennium Hotel to the list. The "help" gave the Josephite planning committee a round of applause when they visited them in the basement. (See the story here.)

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When the Leadership Conference of Women Religious met in the Garden Grove, Calif., Hyatt-Regency in August, they asked management to consider signing on as well. (See that story here.)

The fact is, women religious are more sensitive than most in recognizing abuse, perhaps because in other contexts they have been undervalued, vilified, and exploited themselves. Over the past 50 years or so however, those who risked speaking out rescued others, bringing them the sense of dignity they deserve.

Now the tide has permanently turned. Women religious, increasingly unafraid to speak on behalf of others, now defend themselves as well. At that convention in that hotel, the Federation of Sisters of Saint Joseph unanimously stood in support of Josephite Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, whose academic work has suffered calumny.

Child trafficking? Misrepresentation and no dialogue? Same cloth, different cut: an underlying lack of respect for the person.

Few among their angry critics will argue against the sisters' call for sanity regarding child prostitution.

Many will say they've lost their minds in supporting Johnson. (You know the chant: they are a bunch of feminists, let them die out. They have gotten rather uppity. Who are they to speak this way? Who, in fact, are they to even think?)

When you place these three stories side by side, they are remarkably similar.

The maids of Jackson, Miss., were powerless against the disrespect and exploitation of their employers. The trafficked children and the women of the church -- especially the women religious -- were powerless as well.

Until they chose to speak.

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