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When did nuns become the bad guys?

Joe Ferullo | Apr. 23, 2012 NCR Today

About twice a month, my wife meets up with a Vietnamese-American nun in a rough part of town, and together they roam in a beat-up white van, scouring the streets for homeless women. It never takes long. The sister knows just where to look: dirty alleys, dark underpasses -- they are there.

Many of them are regulars, seeking out the van from their hidden places. The sister and my wife offer to bring them back to a church shelter; if the person refuses, they hand out bags of food and essentials then head on their way.

This slender, slight but fierce nun is apparently a clear and present danger to the Catholic church.

I'm talking, of course, about the now-infamous Vatican report that says the real trouble with the church in America is that our nuns here just can't seem to toe the line of the bishops, "who are the church's authentic teachers of faith and morals."

Funny statement, that -- as noted by *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez [1]. He points out that, at the very moment the report was being issued, a child abuse trial in Philadelphia involving the clergy also revealed that a West Virginia bishop was accused of abuse. In Kansas City, Mo., another bishop goes on trial in September for failing to report abuse. And, Lopez writes, last year church officials paid $144 million to settle abuse allegation and cover legal fees -- more than a decade after the scandal first broke.

"So who's in trouble with the Vatican?" he writes. "Nuns."

He goes on:

> When I first heard about this "doctrinal assessment" of the nuns, I thought it might be someone's idea of satire. You know, a parody of the out-of-touch Vatican patriarchy.
>
> But holy jumping Jehoshaphat, they're dead serious, which would be funny except for the effect it's having on American nuns. The ones I spoke to were shaken. They felt insulted and demoralized, too, even though the Vatican briefly acknowledged their good works before rapping them hard on the knuckles with a ruler.

To the nuns Lopez spoke to, the report is little more than a backlash against the independence of American religious. The sisters say the divide comes because bishops live in the ivory towers of doctrine while nuns work in the streets, gutters and alleyways, like the Vietnamese sister my wife helps out. Sometimes -- just sometimes -- doctrinal purity is a luxury they can't afford as they struggle to relieve suffering and offer hope.

Here's some comfort I can offer American nuns: It's not just you. If there is any theme that has formed around the statements and behavior of the Vatican and bishops in recent years, it's this: Doctrinal purity is valued above all else. It doesn't matter if lives are at stake or if doctrine flies in the face of tragic realities. It doesn't matter if

dark measures must be taken to sweep disquieting contradictions under the rug, tucked away in places that only courtrooms and lawyers can pull out into the light. Purity -- or the appearance of it -- is prime.

There is no purity -- or its appearance -- in much of life as we live it. My wife and her compatriot see that week in and week out. But it doesn't scare them; instead, they draw strength from it.

This would be a great lesson for the Vatican to learn.

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-lopez-nuns-20120422,0,7617042.column