

Two sisters who resisted -- and won

Robert McClory | Apr. 30, 2012 NCR Today

Problems with official church authority have plagued women religious for centuries. I offer here two vivid examples I wrote about in my book, *Faithful Dissenters: Men and Women Who Loved and Changed the Church*.

Mother Théodore Guérin and five other members of the Sisters of Providence sailed from France in the early 1840s and arrived in southwest Indiana to start a school for girls. The wilderness of the area was a challenge, as was learning a new language. But those were minor compared to the interference and antagonism they encountered in the person of the Vincennes bishop, Célestine de la Hailandière. Nevertheless, she and her community were able to open a boarding school near St. Mary-of-the-Woods. From the start, the bishop refused to approve the sisters religious rule and on one occasion called for the election of a new superior to replace Guérin, but the community re-elected her anyway.

The conflict came to a head in 1847, when Guérin confronted Hailandière in his residence. He locked her in a room and told the sisters Guérin was no longer their superior. He dismissed her from her vows and ordered her to leave Indiana immediately. While everyone was reeling from his proclamation, a providential letter arrived from Rome. It seems that the bishop had offered to resign two years before when he was in a depressed mood; but Rome hadn't accepted it -- until the present moment. A new, more cooperative bishop was appointed. Free at last, Guérin and the Sisters of Providence were able to expand their ministry throughout southern Indiana and beyond.

On Oct. 15, 2006, St. Theodore Guérin was canonized at the Vatican by Pope Benedict XVI.

Thirty-five years after Guérin's struggle and half a world away, Mary MacKillop, founder of the Institute of St. Joseph, found herself in even a deeper struggle with the bishop of Adelaide, Australia. As with Mother Guérin, the issue was the right of the sisters to self-govern. Bishop Laurence Sheil insisted that he alone draw up the religious rule for the order, and he placed every convent of the rapidly spreading institute under the control of local pastors. MacKillop refused to cooperate, leading to numerous run-ins with Sheil.

In September 1871, the bishop, fully vested, with miter on his head and crosier in his hand and accompanied by four priests, arrived at the sisters' house in Adelaide. He called the community members together, ordered MacKillop to kneel at his feet and pronounced sentence: "Sister Mary, superior of the Institute of St. Joseph, on account of your disobedience and rebellion, I pronounce on you the awful sentence of excommunication. You are now Mary MacKillop, free to return to the world, a large portion of the wickedness of which you have, I fear, brought with you into this institute."

One of the sisters reportedly screamed; others wept or fell on their knees. MacKillop later wrote of her reaction: "I do not know how to describe the feeling but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before. ... I cannot describe the calm beautiful something that was near." She stood up and walked out of the house. The other members of the order joined her in exchanging their habits for lay clothes and continuing to work in their schools. Meanwhile, Sheil's health declined, and on his deathbed six months after his

pronouncement, he revoked the excommunication. MacKillop and her sisters donned their habits and went back to work. She spent the next two years in Europe raising funds and finally obtaining Vatican approbation of her institute, which continued to prosper.

On Oct. 17, 2010, St. Mary MacKillop was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI during ceremonies at the Vatican.

Any resemblance between the experiences of these two saintly women and the current situation with the LCWR can be viewed as either highly relevant or merely coincidental.

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