

Editorial: Consolation on LCWR rings hollow in unhealthy church

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The headlines of recent days understandably announce that it's all about the sisters.

The tragic reality, however, is that this is far more about the bishops than it is about women religious.

This is the latest episode of episcopal flailing about in a search for enemies anywhere and everywhere to explain how so much has escaped their control. This isn't about authentic teaching and orthodoxy. This is about thought control and censorship.

One doesn't have to be uncritical of nuns -- they have their own stories of abuse and their own histories of a kind of female clericalism, not all of it resolved -- to recognize several important points:

- A severe imbalance exists in the relationship between bishops and women religious. It is enshrined in church law and ancient practice (a law and practice that often overrode the will and better instincts of women leaders through history) that men possess the power and authority, the sole right to fashion the rules, to approve constitutions and to determine who is in and who is out.
- A clash of distinctively different cultures further hinders the possibility of dialogue between the two groups. This is more than a Mars-and-Venus split, although that is certainly part of it, and it is not just the fault of the men. The deeper split involves the evolution in thinking, and approach to church and world, as well as the comfort with questioning that has become part of the women's vocation since they undertook the serious work of renewal following the Second Vatican Council, a step many of the men have resisted.
- More than a hint of hypocrisy pervades this latest campaign to force the women into some mold of orthodoxy. To many, it is utterly confounding that the layer of the institutional church that has caused more scandal and damage to the church than any individual or group could hope to inflict is intent on badgering and finding fault with the one group within the church for whom there is still nearly universal respect and affection. If this were a healthy relationship, if the men actually knew how to apologize for the thousands of priests worldwide who were hidden while abusing tens of thousands of youngsters, they might at least approach the sisters with a thank you for sustaining some integrity inside the church.

But it's not healthy. Consider the well-intentioned words of Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., who tried to calm the fears of sisters in his diocese after the announcement of the Vatican's takeover of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

He explained in a blog posting that the Holy See "from time to time" investigates entities within the church and that in the past one that Rome targeted was the former U.S. Catholic Conference itself. Lynch said Rome at the time (the mid-1980s) had become concerned "about the growing influence" of the conference, which had approved significant letters on war and peace, and on the economy. Also "not lost on certain people in Rome was the fact that a picture of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago ... appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine before that of Pope John Paul II."

The result of that Vatican initiative, Lynch said, was a document "defining the limits of the teaching authority of episcopal conferences and who could vote and not vote among the bishops on matters. At the time it seemed like the sun was crashing down on post-conciliar collegiality but in the end, little changed."

Most longtime church observers would disagree with Lynch's conclusion that little changed. A great deal changed. The diversity of lay voices within conference committees became severely restricted; the conference itself was discouraged from developing significant pastoral letters involving a range of experts and consultations; the tone of meetings became inward-looking and fractured, reflecting an episcopacy with weak leadership. The conference's scholarship suffered at the hands of the need for ideological purity, and the political savvy and tactical skill that once marked the conference was banished.

Of much greater concern than Lynch's benign reading of a thoroughly reorganized national conference was his depiction -- mind you, this is from a conservative bishop -- of a petty and jealousy-prone Vatican bureaucracy, accommodated by a pope, that was willing to take off even after fellow bishops if they seemed to be gaining too much attention in the public square.

While it might appear, "to someone who does not understand the praxis of the Holy See," that the "Holy Father dislikes American women," that isn't the case, Lynch wrote. Such an impression is the work of "liberal, freethinking and secularist thought."

What most don't understand, he writes, is "the way things work over there." The congregations don't talk to one another, he explained, and "there is 'turf' protection and a pecking order of significance and competencies among the various Congregations and Councils."

That's wonderful to know -- and of course, the way things work, that is, the way they *really* work, is known only to those insiders, the guys who make the rules, written and otherwise, and who know what all the winks and the nods mean and whose turf is being invaded and whose is expanding and so on.

And if there was any doubt that these spasms of hierarchical initiatives is about drawing all things to themselves and regaining absolute control over every phase of Catholic activity, there's the news that the Vatican has imposed severe new controls over Caritas, the international aid agency that was one of the remaining inspiring bright spots in the Catholic universe. Last year, the Vatican removed a woman from the helm of the agency. This year it gets new rules.

What Lynch describes -- and what the Vatican continues to demonstrate -- is a dysfunctional, secretive palace culture of another age. But he seeks to console. "So my words to my sisters in this diocese would be to relax somewhat. You are still loved and appreciated by your church."

Lynch obviously means well, but his language is that of the older brother in an abusive family where everyone knows Dad is beating up Mom and a few of the kids regularly. But older brother wants to assure everyone that it will work out all right in the end, because it always does, because Mom stays on for the sake of harmony despite Dad's quirks and flare-ups. Besides, he always ends up apologizing the next day, saying he loves us.

It is in some ways unfair to always refer to bishops in the plural. We know that many can only groan about this latest attack on women religious. We know that many think the latest campaign to save religious liberty is often hyperbolic and counterproductive. We know that the majority wince when one of their culture-warrior brothers decides to deliver war whoops in the public square, comparing the president to Hitler and Stalin, as one recently did.

But that majority remains silent while so much is done in their name, in the plural. It is, perhaps, an

understandable part of the culture. Bishops don't criticize other bishops in public. To do so, they believe, would sow disunity. Consequently, so much valuable thought, so many informed questions, so much authoritative critique of the church and "the praxis of the Holy See" goes unsaid by the bishops.

We're left with consolation that rings hollow, conversation that can never be frank because one side possesses all the threats, and a Catholic narrative fashioned in public solely by men and, among them, too often by the most extreme voices.

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