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When the Petitions Stop -- What Then?

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NCR Today

Since the Reform School division of the Vatican pronounced its sentence on the LCWR, a cascade of tributes has showered on American sisters and protest petitions have harvested tens of thousands of names.

The abundance of testimonies and signatures signal outrage. Tributes help prepare the ground for petitions. They are initial reactions and surely make a difference.

How much difference depends on what, if anything, comes next. After the heat of the moment subsides and the sense of threat to sisters fades in public memory, will a movement emerge which will adopt a tougher, more committed strategy aimed at real change?

Right now most supporters of the LCWR sisters seem to be waiting for a cue from the organization's meeting at the end of the month to decide how to respond to the indictment. Should the sisters choose protracted resistance, supporters might be called upon to raise the ante.

In post-9/11 frightened America, even signing a petition can be considered risky but it rarely does in reality. It's generally an easy way of backing a cause from the sidelines. Far harder is volunteering for the long haul in an effort to accomplish stated objectives.

What would Catholic laity have to do in order to make the Vatican either relent or suffer consequences? Would significant numbers go to bat for the sisters at some sacrifice to their own well-being? Is the protest mainly a thank-you and good luck to the sisters or the first act of an uprising that would require much time and effort?

Who knows? Is the sisters' cause serious enough to impell Catholics to make it into something more than a short-term chorus of admiration for nuns and momentary objections to the Vatican?

Occupy Wall Street offers some inexact comparisons. Swarms of people have shown up to decry the financial atrocities but the question of where the loosely defined initiative will go continues to dog it. The encampments have raised the issues but the placards and chants aren't likely to produce major changes in Wall St.

Where might Catholic laity do? What might cause the Vatican to have second thoughts?

Money comes first to mind. If Catholics stopped giving while finding ways to specify contributions to charitable functions of the church, it might catch Rome's attention in a big way. But it would be difficult to choreograph.

A boycott of this kind would need a solid rationale. Shouting down the Vatican's punitive action against sisters also requires something more than shouting objections or commending sisters for their gifts. It would entail an astute refutation of the theology in the indictment. The doctrinal issues used to accuse the sisters need to be answered competently and convincingly.

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Unlike Occupy Wall St., the protest in favor of the sisters hasn't so far taken to the streets or called for a particular goal. It may never. Those appalled by Rome's condemnation will perhaps leave the church in growing numbers or be content to make their opposition known in the simplest manner available.

But perhaps this relative passivity is nearing an end -- refusal to leave church authority unruffled -- and we will see the widespread dismay at the sisters' fate enter a new, more substantive stage .

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