

Former nuns write open letter to the USCCB

Alice Popovici | May. 9, 2012

The following letter was sent to the *National Catholic Reporter* by a former Sister of Mercy, and it is signed by 14 other women who were once members of religious communities. In a cover letter to Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, Helen Urbain-Majzler writes: "We would be grateful if you shared the contents of our letter with other member bishops."

The "Open letter to the U.S. Catholic Bishops" letter reads:

The Vatican crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) sends this message for religious women and average Catholics: there is no room for dissent; no opportunity for differing perspectives; no way to engage in dialogue about traditional, often narrowly-held, Catholic views. In a word, women religious leaders need to keep their ideas to themselves and simply follow the dictates and directions of Rome. Anything less than this position will be met with censure, public embarrassment, heavy-handedness, and even potential expulsion.

The LCWR leadership may have expressed surprise and confusion at the report from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) but, frankly, women like us were not surprised. All of us (now former members) have lived many years in religious communities and have witnessed cruel and punitive treatment of women religious who have taken courageous public stands to defend the poor, medically vulnerable, and the targeted victims of society, including homosexuals. As you know and may not fully appreciate, religious communities of women have been the central providers of charitable services, including hospitals, schools and parish ministries, and have been in the forefront of social justice causes including efforts at world peace and an end to oppression in all its many forms. For these selfless and tireless efforts, their faith and integrity is called into question.

The Vatican has failed to recognize the changes that have gone on in the church at large and American society in general for the past 40 to 50 years. Catholic institutions that were once a major force in American society in the 1950s have slowly given way to a more pluralistic and diverse cultural milieu. Catholics who once graciously and unquestioning submitted to Church authority, obedience and order have left the church in great numbers. In our lifetime, we have seen that the church no longer holds center stage; people in Western society question authority and realize that our broader understanding of the universe and its institutions are evolving to better respond to the world around us.

For many adult Catholics, the reforms of Vatican II, as well as the church's ruling against contraception, sexual abuse scandals, and hierarchy cover-ups, began to unravel the blind obedience that many adults felt for the church. Surely, American bishops are aware that 87 percent of Catholics oppose the papal prohibition of artificial birth control. Perhaps the Vatican has not realized that Western culture places more emphasis on personal responsibility and urges individuals to make personal decisions that affect their own lives. Adults have insisted on using reasoning to reexamine their religious worldview and on being treated as adults capable of accepting responsibility. During the post-Vatican II era, adult Catholics walked away from the established Catholic rituals and practices if they ceased to be relevant to their life's

journey. While these facts may sound harsh and critical, they merely portray the erosion of the church's fading influence in modern times in the U. S.

Currently, religious women leaders find themselves in this changing world and having to navigate through a maze of the often conflicting and competing needs of their members, the public whom they serve, and the institutions within which they expect to find support and assistance. The missions of service, education, healthcare, and spiritual ministry are alive through these women even when their approaches to ministry may change to meet the needs of the people they serve. Spiritual orientation and faith in God are not in doubt even when ministerial approaches and priorities shift. Doctrine and ministry are separate issues. Religious women are not questioning core Catholic doctrine. Their spiritualities, ministries, and services are shaped and are changed by the ever evolving challenges of culture and history.

Why is it so difficult for the Vatican to allow open and frank discussions and dialogue about the future of their church, spirituality, and ministerial priorities within the context of their own organizational community, without fear of punitive action? Where was the Vatican when real abuse and scandal, perpetrated by its very own clergy (all male), remained undetected or ignored for decades? That's where the crackdown should have been and perhaps still should be. Instead, in a diversion that can only be suspect, women religious are questioned. Only the most repressive and autocratic organizations fear the frank and honest input of its members. What does this say about church authority and its relationship to the women who have provided thousands of years of dedicated, consistent, and faithful service?

For us, the decision to silence women religious impacts our lives profoundly and directly. At a personal level, these are women whom we have known and admired for decades as they courageously and graciously live out their call to be faithful to the gospel message of Jesus. They lead their members to stand up to injustice and intolerance within the complex and varied institutions of our society. We all benefit from their fearless opposition to human cruelty and violence. The church is poorer when women's insights, ideas and presence are silenced.

We do not presume to speak for the LCWR or its representative members. We have confidence that they will represent their own perspective as time permits. We hope that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) will keep an open mind and heart toward women religious leaders, and will continue to appreciate and foster their many gifts rather than to quietly and obediently side with the Vatican in silencing this voice of the spirit in the church today. We hope that you will have the courage to do the right thing for women, though we are not at all confident that that will occur. Many of us left religious communities because of the church's treatment of women. The church, sadly, still appears to be fearful and defensive in the face of our potency. How will the church ever survive, continuing to ignore or subjugate half the world's population? What will it become?

We urge all women and men of good faith to join our efforts in affirming and supporting the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Sincerely,

Helen Urbain-Majzler, M.S.N., Clinical Director, Boulder County Public Health

Jane M. Sweeney, Ph. D., Clinical Psychologist/Jungian Analyst

Mary Kay Sweeney, Ph. D., Executive Director, Homeward Bound of Marin

Linda Valli, Ph. D., Professor, University of Maryland

Mary Lou Watkins, M. Ed., Senior Vice-President & Chief of Staff, Council of Better Business Bureaus

Kathleen McCormick-McLean, M.S.N., M.P.H., Maternal Child Health Program, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

E. Ann Walsh, M.S.W., Owner & Director, Healing Connection
Suzanne Lareau, EdMA, Reading and Curriculum Resource Teacher, Royal Oak Schools
Nancy Corrigan, L.C.S.W.C., Director of Admissions, Good Shepherd Center
Janice Davin, M.Ed., M.A. in Oral Traditions/Educator in Catholic Schools
Elayne Hollen , M.Ed., Assistant Vice President and Bank Manager (Sun Trust Bank)
Kathy Menger, B.A., M.A., Education, Southern States Catholic Schools
Ruth Bell Fulger, B.S., M.A., Director of Nursing
Helen Grady, PMHCNS-BC, Adjunct Professor, Towson University
Cris Lonnstrom, M.A., Education, Elementary School Teacher

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