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Following the money

Phyllis Zagano | May. 23, 2012 Just Catholic

You can be sure whenever they say it's not about the money, it's about the money. Those pesky LCWR types always seem to want to give it away. To the poor. Whatever will they think of next?

That's what the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said, isn't it? The women religious of the United States were spending too much time on social issues and not enough on defending doctrine. Just about every reliable media outlet picked it up, reporting that the US Catholic bishops, who have no moral credibility (and therefore no moral authority), can't get their own job done and so are taking the sisters into receivership.

Somehow, their latest initiative is supposed to enhance the teaching of Catholic doctrine throughout the country and the world.

Hello? As head-shaking spreads around the globe, the bishops seem more and more like the schoolyard thugs who own the ball and name the game. But no one wants to play with them anymore, so they retreat, sulk and come up with yet another strategy: Control the nuns and thereby control their money.

News flash: The world is onto you, guys.

It's fairly obvious that money has been on their minds from the very start. The first tip-off came with the January 2009 announcement of the apostolic visitation, sponsored by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and run by the American Mother Mary Clare Millea. The visitation's sixth question demanded all manner of financial and demographic information, including sections asking about alienation of property. Then there was Part C of the questionnaire, requiring a report of every sister's name and birth year, a list of properties owned and/or co-sponsored, and a complete financial statement. Somewhere along the line, no doubt with the advice of canonical and civil legal counsel, the presidents, provincials, prioresses and other general superiors of many of the 400 or so women's institutes then under the congregation's microscope pushed back. By November 2009, the Vatican's principal inquisitor rescinded the demands for what is demonstrably privileged information.

Next came the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith affair, which began in March 2009. The congregation's doctrinal investigation seemed at first to be just that. But dollar signs are buried in the eight pages of findings. Among a few misrepresentations and misstatements, the congregation indicates it has a problem with The Resource Center for Religious Institutes, the 2-year-old descendant of the National Association of Treasurers of Religious Institutes, and the Legal Resource Center for Religious, each of which was founded with the help of -- you guessed it -- LCWR. In fact, the organizations' headquarters share the same building in Silver Spring, Md. The Resource Center for Religious Institutes says it provides "one-stop shopping" regarding financial and legal issues facing its membership, mainly US institutes of men and women religious.

So what's at stake? Well, there's big money out there. Yes, the dioceses have huge holdings. But they have equally huge legal bills with more to come as the courts increasingly find bishops negligent in oversight. Many women's institutes have substantial cash, equities and property in their own names, and their members hold

directorships in multiple institutions, which in turn have giant assets.

Much of that money is managed by the Christian Brothers Investment Services -- about $4 billion. And here's the kicker: The USCCB's receivership team leader, Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, is listed as a trustee of the Christian Brothers Investment Services' Catholic United Investment Trust. It would seem to the uninformed onlooker that his trusteeship, combined with the fact that his own sister belongs to the conservative Nashville Dominicans, would cause Sartain to recuse himself from holding the looking glass over LCWR.

Then there is the marathon-running, hockey-playing canon lawyer, Springfield Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki, who is in the process of adding an MBA to his academic accomplishments. Toledo's Bishop Leonard Blair, who conducted the initial review of LCWR, rounds out the three-member episcopal squad.

It really does seem to be about the money. Many, many institutes of women religious have carefully guarded their property and funds. In addition, their self-initiated, self-sponsored works of Christian charity retain both competence and cash, even as dioceses are strapped to pay judgments and lawyers, court costs and fees.

So the women are bent on works of charity and social issues. The men want them to spend time, and therefore money, on doctrinal discussion. No matter how hard the Vatican tries to spin this one, the world's view is of a confrontation between the law and the prophets.

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