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All roads may lead to Rome; all doors may not be open

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NCR Today

My argument in a book about the tribulations of U.S. Catholic sisters was that the hierarchy reneged on the promise made by Vatican II that allowed them new freedom to decide the forms and functions of their communities.

There were those, including sisters, who didn't accept that bishops were the major factor in the ensuing sisters' struggles to rewrite and implement their constitutions and widespread community decline. Critics favored other explanations such as feminism and the 60s cultural revolution. Making the hierarchy the "heavy" seemed too simple. To those devoted to renewal, the impression that the bishops had slowed or blunted it could understandably seem demeaning.

For better or worse, however, I stand by my own research that convinced me that the Vatican and the bishops in general never got over the "uppityness" of the sisters caught up in renewal and have vowed since to put the rebels back in their prior circumstances of near total subservience. That, I still maintain, was the principal and chronic source of persistent opposition to the sisters' mission of changing ministries, worship and lifestyles.

The latest and most pointed attack, the indictment by the Holy Office of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, has again forced sisters to cope with sweeping charges and put them on the defensive. It's happened before and each time the sisters protest what they see as injustice and troop to Rome to try to get heard. It's humiliating because it means they weren't heard in the first place. Rome plays the traditional power game. Officials there attack and accuse and the accused, of lesser rank -- or no rank beyond lay people as in the case of sisters -- strive to overcome their lack of standing by pleading their case in person.

Since the sisters have no "right" to be heard, they may be admitted to Vatican chambers to meet with their accusers, shunted aside to underlings or shut out entirely. Even if sisters do get a hearing, history shows the Vatican doesn't believe in budging.

The board of the LCWR has, in effect, declared that the blast against them in the recent report was the result of a mistrial. The "discovery" phase was grossly deficient, they say, and even the rules of simple justice violated. They say they will go to Rome to give their account to the principal judge, Cardinal William Levada.

Maybe they'll get in; maybe they won't. In procedural terms, it's the powerless against the powerful with the chief prerogatives under the control of the powerful. The public outcry against the Vatican's intention to take over LCWR for the purpose of making it conform may make a difference. But it doesn't seem to have made any difference so far. The anger by Catholic laity against the investigation of the sisters itself was loud and overwhelmingly negative. Knowing the extent and depth of support for the sister, "common sense" said the Vatican couldn't just treat the sisters punitively and summarily. But that's exactly what happened.

The sisters have asserted that the decree against them isn't acceptable but have no means, save perhaps their swelling ranks of backers, to reverse the course. Even at this point, their pursuit of a better solution within the court of church law, is at the mercy of the men in Rome.

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