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Vatican misses the point again

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

As leaked documents cast doubt upon the Vatican Bank and the Swiss guards say the butler did it, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith continues playing "Whack-A-Nun." Vatican congregations have scrutinized women religious, put their major leadership organization into receivership and attacked the writings of individual sisters.

So anyway, do they read the newspapers? Don't they get it?

You know the story: Two major American scholars, both women religious, have been under scrutiny for four years. What Rome does not seem to realize is every time you try to beat one down, four or five other women pop up. And the next generation of theologians and ethicists does not belong to religious institutes.

All those women -- especially the American women -- standing behind the scholars and the 57,000 other members of LCWR religious institutes were educated by the sisters. Their first rank, the female majority of the US's 35,000 lay ecclesial ministers, have managed by hook and/or crook to get theological training -- despite being barred from most diocesan seminaries -- and have jobs in Catholic ministry. They are chaplains in hospitals, prisons, colleges and schools; they are pastoral associates, many in charge of parish religious education; they run soup kitchens and after-school programs. Then there are the high school religion teachers and university theology professors; the editors and journalists; the newscasters and politicians. Not to mention all the other Catholic women at home and in the workplace who quite often disagree with the canon lawmakers.

While Rome has tenuous jurisdiction over women religious and bishops can fire their lay employees, there is no way to threaten sanction of almost 39 million female US Catholics, or half a billion women around the world.

Hierarchical complaints about some newer scholarship by American women religious appear to disagree with two key concepts: Women have independent minds, especially when it comes to thinking about God (Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ); and women have sacred bodies, often the subject of scorn and violence, worthy of respect (Margaret Farley, RSM).

That is what it is about, isn't it?

Have those new evangelists in Rome taken time off from their scotch and cigars to consider how this all looks to millions around the world? Who among the curial insiders is standing up to talk about anti-female violence, some of it indirectly supported by official Catholic teachings?

A little mysogony goes a long way. While the staff of the USCCB and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were doing a close reading of Johnson and Farley (by the way, who taught the staffs to read?), did they have time to read the papers? What do they think of Intisar Sharif Abdallah?

Didn't catch the name? Perhaps they didn't, either.

Reuters reports Intisar Sharif Abdallah is sitting, shackled, in a Khartoum jail cell judged guilty of adultery. The evidence? She has a baby son with her in that cell. She does not speak Arabic, and had neither a lawyer nor an interpreter in her "trial." According to reports, she now appears to be in shock. Does she know what will befall her if the government carries out her death sentence? The method? Well, they usually tie women up, cover their heads with hoods, then force them into holes up to their shoulders. Then they stone them to death.

Reuters says Abdallah may be 20. She may be younger. No one knows where she comes from -- perhaps from one of the many refugee families of the '70s or '80s, or from a newer refugee migration to this modern city in North Africa, where the Blue Nile meets the White Nile. In Khartoum, where the average June temperature reaches 106 degrees, 5 million people find shariah law increasingly applied now that the north-south Sudanese split is complete. Khartoum is in predominantly Muslim North Sudan; the first president of South Sudan is Catholic Salva Kiir Mayardit.

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What Vatican voice is raised to help Abdallah?

Women scholars write about many issues; they often approach questions about how the world understands God and how it fosters violence against women. When will the Holy See stop looking at jots and tittles and begin to talk about the larger picture in plain unvarnished English, or French, or Spanish, or Portuguese, or Italian, or even German, or any other language known to the millions of men who find women a source of sin and an object of disdain? When will Rome lead with the Gospel and not with the law?

We know the arguments about the work of Johnson and of Farley. We know the Vatican is looking at other women's works. We also know what will probably happen to Abdallah.

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