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Can we all get along?

Phyllis Zagano | Jun. 20, 2012 Just Catholic

As the stories spin and positions harden, the very real male-female divide in the Catholic church grows and grows. It's bishops v. nuns. As Rodney King asked during the 1992 Los Angeles riots*, "Can we all get along, can we call get along, can we stop making it horrible ... we'll get our justice ... let's try to work it out."

The poison in the stew now is the same as 20** years ago, when Los Angeles erupted into flames, enveloping the lives of real people. Then, media riot coverage incited more riots, thereby inciting more media coverage.

It's not much different in the church today. Public perceptions of internal church issues fill the public eye. The male-female teams and their issues line up. Bishops: anti-health care, anti social service, anti-intellectual; sisters: pro-health care, pro social service, pro-intellectual.

So the bishops are beginning to notice the chinks in their vestments. One says they need help with "messaging;" another wants someone to "strategize." They broadcast their meetings -- a study in black.

Meanwhile, the sisters keep their cool, offering occasional statements but few interviews. They hold board meetings by conference call. Their other meetings are relatively closed.

The bishops are losing, big time. Do they have any idea how much anger there is or how ridiculous the U.S. church looks to the world? Ordinary church-going folks, including (and especially) the grandmothers, are literally screaming in support of the church's women religious while passing more than disrespectful comments about bishops, especially their own.

Why?

Some facts: People still wonder why the touted Dallas Charter exempts bishops. Whole lists of offending bishops -- both perpetrators and enablers -- appeared in 2002 and are still around on websites. You know the litany: BishopAccountability.org [1] is a scary and upsetting place.

More facts: No matter how loudly the bishops talk during their Fortnight for Freedom, people are not listening. Take a look at their videos -- "talking heads" wearing clerical attire, dismissible because of their dress. The public has been "educated" to the perception that the man wearing a clerical collar is a liar. Only one of them, New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan, appears sincere in his office talk made from notes.

Even more facts: Folks genuinely wonder where the money goes. What diocese has total transparency about finances? What are "stole fees" for sacraments used for, other than golf club memberships and restaurant meals? Activists are recommending donations go to sisters' institutes and works instead of diocesan collections and Peter's Pence.

The church's sole message -- all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and all deserve respect and protection -- is derailed by criticisms, many justified, from within and without.

In addition, the internal wars continue. Over at National Review, pundit George Weigel criticized [2] events at the Catholic Theological Society of America's recent St. Louis meeting, which he did not attend. Weigel calls the society's board of directors' resolution supporting member Margaret Farley's scholarship "feckless" and "predictable." He does not seem to have read her work.

Weigel then indicts the 200 theologians who tabled a resolution that used the flashpoint terms "religious liberty" and "mandate." Voting for or voting against that wording was more a political than theological decision. Either vote would drag the society into a public debate with admitted moral theological considerations. But full floor debate was impossible at the end of the Friday evening business meeting. I am certain of this. I was there.

Without question, the problem of forcing objecting employers to directly or indirectly pay for contraceptives, abortifacients and sterilizations is a stone in the eye of the Catholic church and its affiliated ministries. But exacerbating the current church situation with half-truths and name-calling is not helping.

In fact, name-calling cancels potential coverage of the later, more restrained request of the Catholic Health Association, which asks exemption for "not only churches, but also Catholic hospitals, health care organizations and other ministries of the Church."

The health care debate is real, but as media mine the church's male-female divide and professional public relations groups twist the story to their own advantage, Catholics would best take Rodney King's advice to heart. And if the bishops want help with "messaging" and "strategizing," they might first take a look at what the women of the church have been doing.

** An earlier version of this column misidentified the riots.*
***An earlier version of this column had the wrong number of years.*

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