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Quoted priest to bishop on LCWR: I stand by what I said

Michael H. Crosby | Jul. 24, 2012

Bishop Leonard P. Blair of Toledo, Ohio, gives the final blessing during a Feb. 3 Mass at the tomb of Blessed John Paul II in St. Peter's Basilica. (CNS/Paul Haring)

COMMENTARY

In early June, Bishop Leonard Blair of Toledo, Ohio, posted a video on the Toledo diocesan website quoting me. He also wrote virtually the same comments in his June 8 Bishop's Corner column [1] in the *Catholic Chronicle*, the diocesan newspaper. The video went viral and his print comments were reported in diocesan papers throughout the country, including my own Archdiocese of Milwaukee. However, after extended reflection, given the widespread but unilateral way his references have been disseminated, I came to believe I needed to respond.

I tried going to the *Catholic Chronicle* with my response. However, Bishop Blair informed the editor of the *Catholic Chronicle* it could not be published, arguing that it was too long and "unsolicited." Instead, I was told by the editor that I could submit a letter to the editor of 250 words. I warned her that any letter would include a link to my website so readers could access my full response. She agreed, saying this would be understandable.

A week after receiving my letter and after the newspaper consulted with the bishop, I was told the letter would not be published because of the website reference. Having tried to practice what I preach by going to the one with whom I was conflicted (see Mt. 18:15), I see no reason now why I should not have my side of the story made clear. Thus my response to Bishop Blair for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

The thrust of Bishop Blair's overall comments involved his efforts to influence the recent decree by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that it reform its ways.

As part of his rationale for pursuing the purging of LCWR, he questioned the theology of three Catholic speakers who had given input at previous LCWR annual assemblies: Dominican Sr. Laurie Brink, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, and me. Although he was technically wrong in saying I had given a keynote address -- I actually gave a workshop that was repeated twice to a joint assembly of LCWR and its parallel group of men, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men -- he quoted me as saying: "Fr. Michael H. Crosby, OFMCap, a keynote speaker at the joint LCWR-CMSM assembly in 2004, lamented the fact that 'we still have to worship a God that the Vatican says 'wills that women not be ordained.' That god is literally 'unbelievable.' It is a false god; it cannot be worshiped. And the prophet must speak truth to that power and be willing to accept the consequence of calling for justice, stopping the violence and bringing about the reign of God."

Often, when someone quotes another to justify why one is right and the other is wrong, the latter might be tempted to argue, "But my quote has been taken out of context." On the contrary, not only did Bishop Blair quote me correctly, but I believe a deeper, unbiased investigation of my full remarks at that assembly actually provides even greater theological and biblical support for the quotation he took from my talk.

Before discussing this fuller context, however, I think it is important to address Bishop Blair's selective interpretation of my remarks. Anyone reading my whole talk [2] will realize the bishop approached it from what communicators call "confirmation bias": He failed to mention another part of my talk where I actually supported a key element of his concern and that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the LCWR. This refers to my fraternal challenge to the assembly participants that they become more visibly active in opposing abortion, one of the four reasons the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith offered as justification for its clampdown on LCWR.

Another example of Bishop Blair's selective use of quotations involves the fact that he made no mention of how I took the U.S. bishops' 2002 definition of violence regarding domestic households and applied it to the systemic violence to women in our ecclesiastical household. The bishops defined any form of violence as any way one uses "to control" another "through fear and intimidation." (See: "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence against Women," [3] Nov. 12, 2002.) They also said violence against women inside the home or outside is sinful. Thus, following their own definition of violence, I believe that what they are insisting regarding the role of women in our church is sinful.

Furthermore, when it gets to the control that is at the heart of such violence, to deny that the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are operating from control dynamics that create fear and intimidation would be delusional. Indeed, since Bishop Blair publicized his comments about me, because of the fear and intimidation that pervades official Catholicism at all levels, I already have been "disinvited" from giving a keynote talk at a national gathering of church people next year because the group inviting me was afraid of experiencing episcopal repercussions.

With this as background, returning to Bishop Blair's actual quotation of me, I have been sharing the same thoughts privately for years with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and, now, Pope Benedict XVI. For example, when he first oversaw the release of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Nov. 18, 1995, declaration by

Pope John Paul II regarding the non-ordination of women, I sent Cardinal Ratzinger a letter outlining some of the reasons why I did not believe his rationale about God's will and women's non-ordination. I wrote:

> I find it illogical, inconsistent and ill-conceived to argue that because Jesus didn't choose women to be his apostles that anyone can thus conclude that, in that given milieu, he *intended* this in a way *to exclude* them from full leadership in the future. Also, to argue that such a "non-choice" represents not only the will of the Jesus of history but of the Christ of our faith in whom there is neither male nor female appears to me even less convincing. Finally, somehow to make a conclusion that this is the actual will of our God (in whom there is no exclusiveness) is beyond my comprehension.

I never received a response.

Afterward, when Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI and reiterated virtually the same statement about God's will being that women not be ordained, I again privately wrote him my disagreement. I explained respectfully why I could not believe in such a God, especially when the God of my belief has been revealed to be a Trinity of equals who has made male and female to be Trinitarian in the way God is Trinitarian (see Mt. 5:48). I also summarized in that letter my theological rationale for my nonacceptance of his declaration that it is God's will that women not be ordained, even though I think right now might not be the time for women's ordination because of some significant local churches' cultural bias against women in such a role.

I wrote:

> Such a teaching overlooks the role of the context (wherein women and children "did not count") that influenced [the historical] Jesus' actions; it demeans the power of the Risen Christ (the basis of all sacramental life in the church) as the one in whom there can be no Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, woman nor man, and belies the nature of the non-exclusive Trinitarian God, the source of all grace bestowed equally to all. Our church teaches the Trinity must ground all human relationships, including our church, but the Trinity is a community of full equals sharing power, roles and functions equally.

Next, I addressed the argument he made as a cardinal in 1997 that he reiterated as pope:

> ... the teaching that "the church has not been given the power" to ordain women. This seems to belie Matthew 28:16-20 as well as the fact that "the church" was never given the power to limit priesthood in the Latin Church to celibates in a way that restricts the pool of sincere men and women for priesthood and the laity for capable and equipped ministers.

Although my letter described my deeply held faith concerns about his teaching, I received not even as much as a note acknowledging receipt of my letter, much less its contents.

Because of such a nonresponse to these and other communications I have sent to the Vatican in the last 15 years, I decided to make some of them public in my recent book, *Repair My House: Becoming a "Kindom" Catholic* (Orbis, 2012). Furthermore, given the recent actions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Bishop Blair, I believe my private dissent on the issue of women's full equality in our patriarchal, clerical church should be made public lest any perceived silence on the matter by clerics like me might be construed as consent.

Thus, I reiterate here what I wrote in those letters above, as well as the statement attributed to me by Bishop Blair at the 2004 LCWR/CMSM assembly: I simply cannot believe in a god who discriminates against women. To do so would be sinful because this would reflect violence against women as equal members of the Body of Christ. Furthermore, I have come to be theologically convinced that the worship of any such god who wills that women not be ordained either reflects clearly debatable teaching or sinful ideological idolatry. The role of

prophecy in our church (the special charism of those of us in religious life) is, above all, to try to keep the people, and especially the priests, from promoting the worship of false gods.

While I will continue to endeavor to practice the truth in love in order to build up our church (see Eph. 4:15) and will continue to seek genuine on any theological and disciplinary differences in our church, I cannot, in my informed conscience, retract the words Bishop Blair quoted from me. I deeply believe that the governance model of the Trinitarian God must be replicated in the structures of the church of Jesus Christ if it is to be perfected in the way God is Perfect Trinity. This demands nondiscrimination among persons at every level, nondomination in all our relationships, including the way authority is exercised in our church structures, and nondeprivation of women from having full access to all the sacraments in our church, just as men. Fidelity to the Gospel of the reign or rule of God -- whose governance reveals it to be a triune community of equals sharing all in common -- demands no less. The integrity of this Trinitarian God is at stake.

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