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Where the Congregation may be right about LCWR

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As the cause of women's rights gained support among American Catholic sisters in the 1970s, a divisive question arose: Was it possible to be a nun and a feminist?

Although the issue has remained mostly internal and often unspoken, it has continued to trouble and motivate those sisters who felt enlivened by feminist thought but constrained by a system of male dominance.

The dilemma is reflected in the current demands for conformity by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Leadership Conference for Women Religious. At the center of that crackdown is the accusation that "radical feminism" has led the LCWR astray.

It seems to me that the Congregation is essentially correct. What else could account for the awakening among women religious that got its spur from Vatican II and added momentum from the women's movement that was rising at the same time?

That led sisters to a greater sense of autonomy and a flowering of their ministries, prayer life and work choices, much to the consternation of bishops who saw the development as contesting their male authority (though couched in terms of "individualism" and "secularism"). Such tensions were evident across society, though they have lingered far longer in the church hierarchy than in most sectors.

The "radical" tag was an effort to demonize that challenge (and they did so with striking effectiveness), but in fact, there was nothing more radical about it than there was about the whole cause of gaining equality for women. As a radio host put it recently to young skeptics of feminism: "What elements of feminism would you want to reject?"

Oh, yes, the vaunted "man-hating" canard that many bishops clutch to justify the "radicalism" of the movement, but that shibboleth aside, what exactly would you do away with?

The tragedy is that Catholic sisters appear to be unable to claim their feminist gifts because they remain tethered to the official structures enough to fear retribution.

Sisters have generally been unwilling to identify themselves for other reasons, too. Their history is different and their specific aims are distinct from the largely economic and domestic rights sought by mainstream feminists. But the spirit seems to have been warmly embraced by a wide variety of LCWR communities.

How tragic, therefore, that in the continuing contretemps between the Vatican and the sisters, the LCWR cannot forthrightly acknowledge its debt to feminism. Instead, the strategy relies on code talk and euphemism. Its admirable ministries and activities seem steeped in the very themes of dignity and equal treatment that could be proudly celebrated were it not for the anxiety over uttering the word.

The Congregation couldn't be clearer. Feminism is its designated culprit. But sisters who have benefited from an historic movement feel compelled to keep mum.

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Otherwise, of course, the LCWR has aligned itself with the course of American Catholic history, dissenting without confrontation, assured that in the long run, the U.S. Catholic allegiance to a more democratic, tolerant, morally nuanced expression of the church will win out. An open admission of feminism might further that end by being up front. Easier said than done, however. That frayed tether still poses a significant restraint.

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