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2012 has truly been the year of the nuns

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

A professional relationship already exists, writes Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Ann Oestreich, congregation justice coordinator for the Sisters of the Holy Cross, between shareholders and corporate executives, but a personal relationship develops and grows between equal parties in a dialogue.

According to Oestreich in the liturgical bulletin of the Church of Our Lady of Loretto at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Ind., in 2012, the Congregation of the Holy Cross engaged in four corporate dialogues. Two dialogues were with oil and gas companies -- Chevron and Halliburton -- on reviewing and implementing human rights policies across their global operations.

Both companies are working with religious shareholders to update their human rights policies referring to the statute set forth in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They are also adding human rights language to future supplier contracts to ensure negotiations for just wages and a repudiation of labor trafficking practices. Shareholders and corporate representatives have quarterly conference calls to ensure that progress on these issues is being made.

As a result of the work against sex trafficking at the 2012 Super Bowl in Indianapolis, the congregation purchased stock in Choice Hotels International and joined a dialogue with its corporate executives.

Shareholders urged Choice to sign the industry's The Tourism Child-Protection Code of Conduct and to train its employees to recognize and safely report any suspected incidences of trafficking they observe.

Finally, the Congregation of Holy Cross joined other religious communities in dialogue with The Hershey Company regarding child labor trafficking in the cocoa fields of West Africa, especially Ivory Coast and Ghana.

Shareholders have been urging Hershey and other chocolatiers to recognize the kidnapping of children and the abusive working and health conditions workers endure while harvesting cocoa pods used to produce chocolates sold around the world.

Hershey is a United States-based chocolate company that imports 70 percent of its cocoa from West Africa and holds 43 percent of the U.S. chocolate market.

In a surprise move on Oct. 3, Hershey agreed to certify 100 percent of its chocolate by 2020. Shareholders are praising this move by Hershey and will work with the company to determine a consistent certification process in the next five to seven years.

The Holy Cross nuns are obviously in good hands with Oestreich acting as justice coordinator for the congregation. The church, too, is in good hands with sisters like Oestreich doing this important ministry.

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If only the Vatican and conservative U.S. bishops, whether working in the Vatican or not, understood what American nuns understand: Abortion and same-sex marriage aren't the only social justice issues that should concern us.

You can see how much good qualified nuns like Oestreich can accomplish by engaging in this difficult ministry. The Vatican and conservative U.S. bishops should simply say "thank you" and then get out of the way and let the nuns do their work on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case in recent years. First, there was the "visitation" of religious communities of women, causing many of them to put their ministries aside to prepare the paperwork required by the Vatican.

Then there was the harassment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as if their orthodoxy were in question.

The Vatican, responding to complaints from various right-wing voices in the U.S. hierarchy, religious and laity, was unimpressed with American nuns' commitment to the poor and to various justice issues, like the concerns described above. The doctrinal congregation felt there should be greater emphasis on abortion and same-sex marriage and not a trace of advocacy for the ordination of women.

The U.S. bishops lost even more of their own magisterial credibility with the re-election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. After so many of them expressed opposition to Obama's candidacy, at least half of the Catholics, and probably more, paid no attention to them when they voted. However, in large numbers, Catholics continue to support and appreciate the ministry of the nuns.

2012 was truly the year of the nuns.

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