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Vatican could learn a thing or two about renewal from women religious

by Joan Chittister

From Where I Stand
Conclave 2013

Like most people in the Catholic community -- and far beyond that, I'm sure -- I am following the transition from one papacy to another with great interest. Which in itself is something to be considered. After all, there have been six papacies in my lifetime, so you would think that by this seventh one, the fascination may have faded. On the contrary: The sense of fascination this time is even more heightened than in the past.

We are about to elect a new pope who will face serious 21st-century issues using 19th-century structures to resolve them. The cognitive dissonance of a situation like that cries to heaven for resolution. And this one may take heaven to resolve.

For instance, symbol systems are very important. But when they lose their meaning to the people with whom they are meant to communicate, they can become both meaningless and impotent. In fact, they can blur the impact of the message itself. Case in point: I heard three different commentators on three different stations, each of them attempting to communicate to a contemporary public exactly what is going on in this process at this time.

One of them called the time between the resignation of one pope and the election of another pope an "interregnum" -- as in, "The king is dead, long live the king." The second commentator was more interested in knowing the meaning of the pope's red shoes. The third described Castel Gandolfo as the place where the pope met with his "court." I winced. So much for St. Peter and the Jesus story.

The messages were clear: To a vast population of the world, the papacy of the Roman Catholic church is

some kind of meaningless monarchy, colorful, intriguing and irrelevant. It is a fantasy game played by Catholics. How seriously is something like that to be taken when the issues to be dealt with are so contemporary, so important, not only to Catholics and their idea of church and faith and the spiritual life but to the world at large? How can we believe that the answers arrived at in a medieval setting have anything to do with the real world?

And so, when the pope waved goodbye from the balcony at Castel Gandolfo, I felt a twinge of sadness -- for him, for us and for the world at large. Because of his presence of mind, because of his willingness to step out of a position that has been surrounded by fairy-tale expectations, the church has been brought to a new point in its own conversion and development. And those points are not easy for anyone. In fact, women religious have themselves known them in a very special way.

For that reason, women religious may have something to teach the church about the process of conversion and development at this very important moment.

Religious life, too, had been encased in another world. Women religious lived separately from the world around them, they dressed in clothes that had been designed centuries before, they gave up a sense of personal or individual identity. As a result, they got further away from the people they served by the day, further away from their needs, further away from their feelings.

The renewal process of religious life required three major changes before they could possibly pursue anything else of a particular nature, like future planning or ministry decisions. Renewal, they discovered, was a matter of demystification, integration and relevance.

Religious life had its own kind of monarchies to be deconstructed before anything creative could possibly happen or the gifts of its members be released for the sake of the world at large.

The first step was to take the Second Vatican Council's direction about collegiality and subsidiarity, the concepts of shared responsibility and personal decision-making. That meant that the kind of absolute authority that had built up around religious superiors had to be relinquished. Major decisions began to be shared with the community at large. Personal decisions began to be entrusted to the sisters themselves, all adult and educated women who had been deprived of the minutest decision-making: for example, the hour at which they would go to bed; the right to make a doctor's appointment; the structure of their lives between prayer times. Major superiors began to be expected -- and allowed -- to be Jesus-figures in the community, spiritual leaders not lawgivers, not monitors, not queen bees.

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In the second place, religious had to learn to integrate themselves into the society they were attempting to serve. That did not necessarily mean eliminating a kind of symbolic dress, but it did mean updating it in a way designed to simplify rather than to separate. Most women religious chose, like Jesus, to set out to be the sign rather than do it the easy way and wear the sign.

Grave and sober voices everywhere warned women religious that to do something like that would eliminate generations of respect from the people around them. I can only speak personally for my own community, of course, but I can promise you that separated from the people, locked away from the world like specters from another planet, and dressed to prove how special we were in relationship to everyone else around us generated nowhere near the mutual respect the community feels now from those who come to the community to seek spiritual support, to search out individual sisters for compassion and guidance,

and to take their rightful places with us in ministry and spiritual reflection.

Finally, addressing the questions of the time that plague the world -- peace, justice, women's issues, sustainability -- and admitting the questions undermining the current credibility of the church, as well -- clericalism, sexism, sexuality, the implications of interfaith societies -- make sisters honest and caring members of a pilgrim church.

From where I stand, the church hierarchy itself could well take the opportunity, the crossroad, that Benedict provides us now and themselves do a little demystifying, a large bit of collegiality and a serious amount of communal discernment with the people of God on the great issues of the time.

It means being willing to learn something from women, of course. But then, if they could do that they would be almost a third of the way to the goal already, wouldn't they? Now there's a thought.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is on the *NCR* website at NCRonline.org/blogs/where-i-stand.]

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