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Repair my Curia

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

The world still blinks twice every time Pope Francis does something unabashedly Christian. He certainly is a hit. First he got rid of the cufflinks. Next he'll fix the bureaucracy.

Digital archives will forever hold images of Francis' upraised arm as he first stepped out on the loggia. He was not weighed down with kingly red and gold. He wore his own simple iron cross. We later learned he kept his black shoes. But where did he get those cufflinks?

To be clear, the sight of Jesuit in French cuffs with cufflinks is a little confusing. But there he was, surrounded by men overdressed with yards of red satin and lace. That didn't last long. The satin and the lace and the cufflinks disappeared over night.

Can Francis do the same with the Curia? Can he uproot corruption and drive scandal from the storied offices of the church's bureaucracy? He's already gone to the Franciscans for help: José Rodríguez Carballo, their superior general, is the new secretary in the congregation for religious. Of course, most of the world's religious are women, and there is nothing about Rodríguez's job a woman could not do. But the man who was already president of the Union of Superiors General and minister general of his order would have more clout inside the Vatican sashway. He also understands religious life.

Make no mistake, U.S. women religious are still under the microscope. The million-dollar "apostolic visitation" report coordinated by an American sister went to Rodríguez's new offices over a year ago, in January 2012. Then the secretary spot fell vacant when Joseph Tobin, himself a former head of the Redemptorists, became archbishop of Indianapolis in the fall. No one knows what was in the study, which seemed aimed more at finding out how much land and cash the women controlled than whether they used the right liturgy translations. Their push-back scotched the financial inquiries, and even after three requests from visitation headquarters, the inquisitors received only copies of approved constitutions

instead of questionnaire answers from many institutes.

Of course, the other shoe is still out there, waiting to drop. The attempted hostile takeover of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious announced a year ago in what can only be termed an ambush at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is headed by three bishops with no experience of religious life. (Well, the head of their team, Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain has a sister who is a nun.) However, ever since the now-retired head of the doctrinal congregation, Cardinal William Levada, managed to simultaneously insult every woman on the planet as well as the entire deaf community by saying that talking with LCWR was like having a "dialogue with the deaf," that effort seems doomed as well.

Whatever is happening, neither side is talking much, although true colors were very much on display in a recent CBS "60 Minutes" episode where LCWR past-president Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell was charmingly firm while Sartain came across as insultingly condescending.

Despite the change of style at the very top -- and nothing has changed yet within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the church's doctrinal office -- tensions will percolate until diffused by a different cast of characters. Levada and Sartain are of a type. One hopes Francis -- directly and through Rodríguez -- will see their type for what it is and get some people not so apparently hostile to women religious -- and all women -- to go over the report and maybe even admit its errors. Trust me, I've read pounds of LCWR materials. Some are a little too different for me. But there are such errors of fact and nuance in the doctrinal congregation's report that I would fail any student who handed it in as a term paper.

Francis has a lot of work ahead to get officialdom out of the hole with women.

St. Francis of Assisi said the Lord asked him to repair his church. Francis needs to do that, beginning with the Curia. As more appointments pop up, folks will look for tips on who the bad guys are -- or were -- in the curial labyrinth. So far, no one seems to have been promoted up and out to a lovely post in Afghanistan or Somalia. You can be sure every tea leaf will be turned over and over in search of hints of juicy tidbits from Benedict's papal-eyes-only report. One wonders if that secret shenanigans paper includes newly reported information about downloads from porn sites to Holy See computers. No kidding. Who would make that up?

The church needs a top-to-bottom housecleaning, and it is pinning its hopes on a 76-year-old with sciatica. He can't do it all, but he will do a lot. The sooner the better.

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And outside the Curia, we can only hope Francis' simplicity spreads. You can be sure that if you see a 60-something-year-old man in a black polo shirt fishing through iron chains and crosses in a pawn shop, he's probably a bishop.

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