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Are American nuns still on the ropes?

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

I was raised in the Bronx, in a tough Italian neighborhood filled with suspicion and conflict. So I never thought I'd be the most optimistic person in the room -- especially when the room was filled with nuns.

But that's exactly what happened several days ago. I attended at fundraiser at a local convent and found myself surrounded with the best the church has to offer: tough, committed nuns working some of the toughest jobs in the roughest areas of Los Angeles.

As I sat down for lunch, a buzz went through the group. Word had reached them that Pope Francis had appointed a new head of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. What's more, the pope had tapped a Franciscan for the post -- someone who emphasized social justice and help for the poor.

There was a moment of hope among the nuns, who were among the targets of Vatican inquiries into American women religious -- reprimanded for advocating social justice over other issues like abortion and contraception. "It has been an inquisition," one sister said to me, plainly and flatly, with no drama or embellishment.

But cynicism set in quickly. Another nun said nothing would change -- Francis would shift cosmetics in Rome, but the Curia was too firmly in control. And, she noted, all the American bishops had been appointed by either Blessed John Paul II or Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. "They're a bunch of C students chosen because they toe the line," she said. "We've got a bunch of C students running the show."

I told her to give Francis a chance, that he seemed to be taking small but real steps toward change, all without fanfare. On Holy Thursday, he went to a detention center, where he washed the feet of two women and two Muslim people -- that was clearly sending a message.

The nuns looked at me with pity directed at my naive nature. I was the poor, deluded optimist, grasping at symbols and sayings rather than digging deeper.

And, perhaps, they were right.

Now comes word that the pope has "reaffirmed" the Vatican's critique of American nuns, letting stand a ruling that requires oversight of the sisters, lest they do more harm to themselves and the church. The Curia and the C students, it seems, have prevailed.

Or maybe not. The Vatican press release doesn't quote Francis -- but instead names Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Muller, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who met with the nuns earlier this week. His fingerprints are all over the statement, but the pope's are not.

Still -- am I being the crazy optimist again? Would the nuns just roll their eyes at me and whisper "I told you so?"

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As I wrote this column, I made several decisions: I did not name any of the sisters who spoke out to me, did not name their order, nor where we met, and in what part of town. When a sister in her 70s tells you she's been facing an "inquisition," it sinks in. You don't forget it.

Looks like I am not such an optimist after all. My pals from the Bronx would approve, told me I got smart finally, saw the world for what it was. If even a group of nuns could smell that the fix was in, I should just go with it and stop thinking otherwise.

But I'd like to wait a bit longer. I'd like to give Francis a little more time.

After all, as my buddies would also say: Rome wasn't built in a day.

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