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'Tainted by radical feminism'? More like 'living the Gospel'

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

The BBC just called, an incident that in itself may well be a measure of the larger import of the situation. It's a strange moment in history: Suddenly everyone in the world, it seems, wants to know what is happening to the nuns and what they can do next. "Next," of course, means what they can do now that the Vatican is back to questioning both their intelligence and their faith.

In fact, what self-respecting journalist could possibly skip the story? After thousands of years of life-giving service to the church at poverty level -- building its schools, its orphanages, its hospitals, its missionary outposts, its soup kitchens, its homes for the indigent, its catechetical centers -- the nuns are told the problem with their work is that it has been "tainted by radical feminism"? And that by a group of men whose chance of knowing what the term "radical feminism" even means is obviously close to zero.

So what is going on? Especially at what seems to be a moment of the great change in the church of the autocrats and monarchs to the church of the Jesus who walked among the people and loved them?

Well, for one thing, what's going on is the same thing that's been going on for more than 1,500 years: Nuns everywhere are working with the people, hearing their stories, attempting to meet their needs, having a presence in their lives, simply intent on being the caring face of a merciful church -- their ministers in the midst of confusion. Not their dogmatizers, not their judges, only witnesses to the Gospel of unconditional love.

At another level, what is going on now is a mysterious work in progress. This so-called "evaluation" of the life of women religious and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States is a process begun long before this papacy and so, perhaps, difficult to stop midstream.

It may be difficult to halt the process for reasons of personal papal politics. Or perhaps it's difficult by reason of the amount of work already expended. Or maybe it's difficult to stop without resolution for fear of leaving festering sores likely to erupt again, by whim and fancy, without either cause or warning. In which case, the whole renewal of these efforts may well be benign and without issue, strengthened by increased understanding, and the first sign of a "These-are-my-beloved-daughters-in-whom-I-am-well-pleased" verdict the sisters have not heard since the Second Vatican Council.

On the other hand, the announcement has some very worrisome dimensions. Instead of planning to "complete the evaluation" or "continue the dialogue," the report says this new pope has reviewed and condoned the present "plan of reform." So it seems the plan is for the church to set up a dummy receivership that leaves a woman's organization of 57,000 women being run by three men. Case closed. Spiritual criminality determined. Hostile takeover complete. The membership disenfranchised. The body merely another extension of Rome. Its creativity suppressed; its blinders secured; its study of new issues and ideas monitored; its voice for the poor muted by the personal agendas of three men.

So why bother to have an *avant-garde* among the people if the church does not really want to know the needs of the people to begin with? If the sisters have been anything in these post-Vatican II years, they have been, at very least, a bridge between the people on the streets and the people in the sacristies.

And what is the reason given for continuing the external control of the LCWR? Because, they say, the work of the nuns has been "tainted by radical feminism." Well, if working to elevate the role and status of women around the world is tainted work, then we are obviously guilty as charged. After all, nuns were the first people in the church to set up schools to educate Catholic girls. The only difference is that we don't do it because we're "tainted by radical feminism"; we do it because it is at the center of the Gospel.

It is modeled by the Jesus who walked with women and saved the woman taken in adultery and cured the Canaanite woman and raised a little girl from the dead. He brought back to life a little girl who by very reason of her femaleness was considered worthless in that society -- and in many societies now, and in all of them to some extent. How better to demonstrate the real value of a woman than to raise her, despite the despise around her, to life again? And when that kind of Gospel work becomes unacceptable in the church, why bother with any of it?

"Do you have any hope for any of this?" the BBC reporter asked me. And I answered without hesitation: "Absolutely, I do." But how can you? the reporter went on. "Easy," I said. "The church now has as its model, it seems, a man who is committed to the poor."

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And what does that have to do with this issue? Everything, I think. After all, who are the poor?

It is impossible to say you are committed to the poor and not know that two-thirds of the hungry of the world are women who get only the leftovers after their husband and children have eaten; two-thirds of the illiterate of the world are women enslaved by their lack of education as the chattel of men; two-thirds of the poorest of the poor, according to UN statistics, are women. And all of them ignored, rejected and

omitted even from the language and the official theological development of the church. So much for life; so much for baptism.

It is simply impossible to be really committed to the poor and not devote yourself to doing something to change the role and status of women in the world.

As the developing The Shriver Report on women, to be released in January 2014, demonstrates with sobering clarity that to invest in women is to strengthen their husbands and children, their families and nations, their economic level and social status, their institutions and their intellectual contributions to the world at large.

From where I stand, if that's what it is to be "tainted by radical feminism," then finally, finally, let the Gospel begin in this entire church.

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