

Following the money, part 2

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 12, 2014 Just Catholic

Pope Francis seems to be doing everything he can to remind Catholics that they are buried holding rosary beads, not checkbooks. The spring cleanup has begun in Rome.

There is a new Secretariat for the Economy to oversee how the Vatican handles money. There is a new Council for the Economy to analyze internal controls and governance. Francis even recently called for [a meeting of religious orders' money managers](#) [1].

Will any of this make any difference? And whose money is it anyhow?

In September, [Francis famously chided religious orders and institutes](#) [2] about their holdings, saying, "Empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ, who are the refugees" and "Empty convents do not serve the church so that they can be turned into hotels for earning money." Of course he is correct, sort of. Women religious' business enterprises support their lives of prayer and service. The overwhelming majority of those business enterprises are genuinely ministries to "the flesh of Christ."

Women religious support themselves. In fact, women religious rarely, if ever, participate in parish or diocesan financial structures. There is always a pastor between the collection plate and the nuns.

That, to me, is the big wrinkle in every Vatican comment about money and women religious. That, and the fact that [none of the 15 members of the Council for the Economy is female](#) [3], and the Vatican bank lists only one woman of 15 people in its governance. Are there no female money managers in Christendom? Only men can control Vatican money?

Parish, diocesan and Vatican money comes from collections. Priests earn salaries and, in addition, receive stipends for the Masses they celebrate. The practice of stipends for private Masses, solidified around the 11th century, cut out women's convents and monasteries. Folks found Masses a better value than simple prayers by women. As people increasingly fulfilled the Sunday obligation at diocesan churches rather than at women's convents and monasteries, collection plate cash flowed more freely toward masculine coffers.

So what are the nuns and sisters to do? Quite plainly: work.

Some of [the approximately 776,000 sisters, nuns and brothers](#) [4] minister within diocesan structures, receiving diocesan stipends and/or housing. I would venture a guess, however, that the balance tips more toward religious' self-created ministries: schools, hospitals, social service agencies, retreat centers, nursing homes, and the like as means of a) ministry and b) support. They run businesses.

Sometimes, these businesses fail. The religious order or institute ends up with property that can, and actually must, be turned into a profit-making enterprise, or at least into a profit. So they start up something else or they sell their holdings.

Enter the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies for Apostolic Life (SCRIS), which Francis asked to call a meeting to tell religious what to do with their money. That's the basic story. When the same congregation mounted an intrusive three-year apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious in 2009, it got such pushback on its financial questions it dropped them. (If truth be told, the responses, submitted in early 2012, are now probably packed away in a Roman basement.)

Some women's orders and institutes are poor, and some are rich. Some have their holdings in property. Some keep their money in the Vatican bank. Some keep their money with other professional advisers, such as the \$5 billion [Christian Brothers Investment Services](#) [5]. There are huge waves of Catholic money sloshing around the world. Francis wants it used for the poor.

Yes, of course. A constant drumbeat of the SCRIS symposium was criticism of capitalism, especially U.S. capitalism. Rapacious capitalism is inhuman, even sinful, but it is work conditions outside the United States that are often outrageously bad. Sometimes U.S. companies support those conditions, but not always. Americans do care about the world's poor. Slapping the hands that feed the poor only hurts the poor.

I wonder if the real SCRIS symposium targets are U.S. women religious, who have poured their money into educating themselves, the better to minister, and into supporting their poorer sisters around the globe. U.S. women religious are well-prepared to manage their affairs. Their vows of poverty bind them to God and to each other. Urging them to invest or to live so as to diminish their abilities to work denies both communal and human realities.

Besides, isn't the Catholic world more interested in how the Vatican handles the world's collection plate than in the bank accounts of nuns? Women religious typically maintain themselves and support their own projects without creating scandal. And they got their money the old-fashioned way.

They earned it.

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