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Evolution of consciousness

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

LCWR-CDF 2014

Whac-A-Nun season opened with a bang in Rome as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) again excoriated the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Rapped knuckles belonged to LCWR, to Fordham theologian Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, and to any other American woman walking around with letters after her name.

Even Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, charged with keeping LCWR in order, took a hit for not controlling those uppity females.

To be sure, the main target of CDF's latest document is Barbara Marx Hubbard and her "conscious evolution," which admittedly has spread its bubbles across the websites and newsletters of many institutes of women religious. Hubbard, a Jewish agnostic, is the 84-year-old "futurist" who was the featured speaker at LCWR's 2012 assembly. She was, to put it kindly, rather different. (She told me at the assembly she did not like all that sin and redemption business in Christianity.)

However, to lump the serious theological work of Elizabeth Johnson in with obviously gnostic claptrap is not only intellectually dishonest -- it is a huge public relations mistake. That is what CDF did. Has CDF ever heard of the Internet? How about television? Statements like this always backfire.

Score: LCWR 2, CDF 0. When will they ever learn?

The world is entering a new Dark Ages, where everybody says something and nobody knows anything. Media of communication -- social and otherwise -- bypass any vetting by any authority. Real is what is in print or on the screen. Facts have nothing to do with it. In the oxymoronic turn of the day, the greater the access to information, the poorer the intellect. Such poverty is real, and it takes a tremendous emotional,

even spiritual, toll. An old saying, "Garbage in, garbage out," comes to mind, as the Gospel is displaced by screwball ideas and worse.

But the world does not hear Rome's CDF as presenting the Gospel in opposition to some objectively questionable LCWR presentations and publications. The world -- that would include Catholic women with money to donate -- hears the CDF's latest complaints as the wheezing whines of old men.

In this "he said, she said" electronic and print contest, LCWR complains about "unsubstantiated accusations" and "disproportionate" actions by CDF, while CDF uses the same patronizing tone and methods to sweep every female thought -- brilliant or not -- behind the altar rail. OK, some LCWR presentations and publications skirt Catholic teachings. But Elizabeth Johnson?

Johnson's work was challenged by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, which did not speak with her. She was supported and defended by the two major academic theological societies in the United States, the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society. Johnson is a hard-working professional theologian who presents complex ideas within scholarly fora. Some of her work has been popularized, helped along primarily by the USCCB and, now, by CDF. It is not always very easy to read.

In no way should Johnson's work be in the same briefcase as Barbara Marx Hubbard's.

It's a baby-and-bathwater mistake. The world now thinks CDF's cassocked judges should have listened to their grandmothers: It's not what you say, but how you say it. No matter the smiles instead of scowls above their collars, it is men attacking women. It is "Roman" men attacking American women. It is bureaucrats attacking the very women religious who taught them how to read. That may not be precisely true, but it is what the media -- that would be Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as well as newspapers, magazines and television -- present.

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CDF wants "more substantive signs of collaboration" but seems to take every opportunity to blindside women. The pope has said he wants a "more incisive female presence in the church," yet the Vatican's website retains the long-discredited English translation omitting that request. These combined -- perception and reality -- underscore the world's view of anything coming from Rome. Say one thing, let it evaporate into forgotten history, and hammer anyone who dares to remind you that your entire organization is all male, all the time.

Hello, Rome: It is a time for an evolution of consciousness. It is a time to become conscious of the fact that the female half of the church is increasingly well educated, forthright, and serious. Women are now more in control of their lives and -- don't drop your collection plates -- their money. Think about it.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and winner of the 2014 Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice. She will speak June 9 at Holy Family Church, South Pasadena, Calif. From June 9 to July 8, she will conduct a free online seminar about women in the diaconate based on the books *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* and *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches*. Seminar registration is now open at http://people.hofstra.edu/phyllis_zagano/MOOS.html]

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