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Does Pope Francis know Cardinal Müller uses the sex abuse playbook against LCWR?

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side
LCWR-CDF 2014

With the apparent relish associated with autocratic triumph, Cardinal Gerhard Müller of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith has "accused U.S. women religious leaders of not abiding by a reform agenda the Vatican imposed on their leadership organization following a doctrinal assessment of the group."

The self-righteousness that rose like mist from Müller's torrent of accusations makes one wonder if he has a Bismarck hiding in the high branches of his family tree. *NCR* described his rant as "the most direct and confrontational language since the Vatican began to rein in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious two years ago."

You might think that a world bearing the stigmata of war, poverty, plagues, and immeasurable, uncomforted suffering might trouble a high religious leader, but what upsets Cardinal Müller? Why, the speakers these women religious invite to their annual assemblies; the failure to have counterpoint views when the women are, as he intimates, preaching heresy; and, specifically, their bestowing their 2014 Outstanding Leadership Award to a Fordham theologian, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, who (and you can't make this up) was "criticized by the Bishops of the United States because of the gravity of the doctrinal errors in that theologian's writings." Müller seems unaware of how fully and professionally Johnson defended her work while some of the bishops most critical of her got indigestion from trying to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Wondering aloud if the leadership conference has "the ability truly to *sentire cum ecclesia*," a classic bureaucratic phrase that, like snow, covers everything when officious Vatican investigators indict theologians without any real evidence, means, "to feel with the church." The problem the Leadership

Conference of Women Religious is addressing is, of course, how to feel with the suffering world, the beat of whose breaking heart cannot be heard in the vaulted tunnels of heresy hunters.

So Cardinal Müller has told the leadership that, starting in August, they must have their "annual conference programs approved by a Vatican-appointed overseer before the conference agendas and speakers are finalized."

Why August? those as easily distracted as I am might ask. Does it have a particularly full moon at which to bay? The answer is clear when one investigates its meanings. The Oxford English dictionary tells us not only that August is a noun meaning the eighth month, but that it is also an adjective that matches the career ambitions and self-satisfaction of heresy hunters. It means "inspiring mingled reverence and admiration, impressing the emotions or imagination as magnificent, majestic, stately, sublime, solemnly good." Why, August is the month dedicated to hierarchical princes and all they demand of us; August is their month. As May is to the Kentucky Derby, so August is to the ambitious clerics who, whinnying and pawing for attention, are now entering the starting gate for the run for the roses that will be piled atop the official who catches the most heretics before they reach the finish line.

What these heresy hunters, including Cardinal Müller, do not realize is how much they reveal of the dynamics, or inner governing elements, of the sex abuse scandal in the way that they have proceeded against the women religious.

One may have to appreciate that in the original Latin version of canon law, the authority of church leaders (the pope, bishops, etc.) was described as "*vis dominativa*," or, to give a loose translation to a tight concept, "dominating power or strength." "Dominative" is one of a family of words that have been used by church officials that branch off the same root.

In Latin, "*dominare*" refers to the one who organizes a household, hence the notion of "majordomo," and means "to constrain or force." It means "to occupy a commanding position," from which one "bears sway, exercises control, prevail, or lord over." "Dominative," as in "*vis dominativa*," means "ruling or dominating, of lordly authority."

This concept was, of course, one of the building blocks of hierarchical structure in which the one on top dominated all those in the classes below its summit. It was within and largely because of hierarchical claims of superiority and exemption from other authority, a critical constituent of clerical culture, that the class of the priesthood who accepted the presumption of superiority exercised authority while expecting exemption from the demands made on most men.

Cardinal Müller is only following up on the *dominative* distortion of real authority that led previous investigations of American religious to proceed along the lines of traditional hierarchical authority. The American religious were surprised, not to say startled, when they learned that the investigation had begun and conclusions were reached before they even arrived in Rome to present their response.

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Who could then be surprised that Cardinal Müller clearly takes a commanding position, second nature to an inveterate cleric who has climbed to a high position on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as he employs a style through which he "lords it over" the women religious? "I apologize if this seems blunt," Müller declared, "but what I must say is too important to dress up in flowery language."

Müller dominates the LCWR by saying of Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle, who quickly declared his "full agreement" with the cardinal: "Following the August Assembly, it will be the expectation of the Holy See that Archbishop Sartain have an active role in the discussion about invited speakers and honorees." In short, men have seized control of the LCWR and intend to dominate its members and activities in detail. All this, of course, is in line with Müller's version of the all-purpose clerical justification, "for the good of the church."

A sexual predator seeks to dominate another person, to lord it over them by prevailing from a commanding height. Up until comparatively recently, priest sex abusers felt that they were safe in the privileged position afforded to clerics in the vast pyramid of hierarchical authority to which the world would defer.

These terrible transactions of the use of power by one possessing it over one not possessing it lie at the core of the sex abuse scandal. The victims were given little attention for the urgent obligation felt by many hierarchs to defend the system, even at the high price of denying that these errant clerics sought "to dominate" the other, and to use the tattered semblance of their authority to get them to remain silent, passive and compliant to their will.

Cardinal Müller may, like many self-satisfied authoritarians, never suspect that the way he dominates religious women -- using his power over their powerlessness, insisting that they be silent, passive and compliant to his will -- is in any way comparable to the way sex offenders dominate and try to extend their control over their victims. He would be understandably upset if he were to allow himself to think about the dynamics of domination and how they are, hidden under faded pieties and the compromised presumptions of clerical culture, the fuel for exercising control and prevailing over the women religious who have built and maintained the church throughout the world.

The fact that he does not see these parallels makes it all the more urgent for Pope Francis to involve himself as quickly as possible in ridding the church of this will to dominate that is incompatible with his call for bishops to pastoral service. Maybe it is time for the pope to move out of his humble lodgings and get back inside the great decaying and deadly bureaucratic structures so that he will "feel with the church," that is, grasp firsthand the suffering that church officials are imposing through their domineering and dominating responses to the American nuns.

It is time for Francis to give up the random phone calls and the many other things that have endeared him to us. The LCWR matter is a severe test of whether his ideal of a church that is a servant can really prevail over those whose ideal is to rule by domination, to control by humiliation and, as they continue to lord it over people, to implement the techniques and drives that lie beneath the still-unresolved sex abuse scandal.

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