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Should Sisters Take A Page From Northwestern's Play Book?

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NCR Today

Scoffers were out in force when Northwestern University's football team petitioned to form a union. How dare these upstarts kick sand in the faces of their benefactors! And how ridiculous of them to presume they had a claim on the university's corporate enterprise? But the players convinced the court that they did have a case for considering themselves "employees" of the university who raked in tons of money which they may be entitled to more than the subsistence living they were receiving. To those weighing their plea, it was right of them to seek a formal voice in their own destiny though the immense legal and political force of the university will likely crush it as anti-union forces did recently at Volkswagen in Tennessee.

Catholic sisters may shudder by the comparison, but their plight isn't so different. They produced good will and bona fides far beyond their numbers and resources for Mother Church yet they have no final authority over their own status in the church. Only ordained males are vested with decisions over Catholic policies and teachings. For ages, sisters have existed by sufferance of male clerics and responsible for their own financial well being. Like the football players, they give everything and get little in return.

The majority of American sisters have gone in a more independent direction since Vatican II because of opportunities they saw authorized by the Council itself. They took more initiative in deciding how they would live and how they would follow their community's special mission. To much of the clerical order, the reforms the sisters undertook spelled "uppity." Clerics still held all the ruling power but the sisters were testing the scope of that authority under a "people of God" church that was increasing critical of that strict chain of command.

The latest episode in the tensions that emerged from this testing has involved yet another effort to stem

the tide of renewal. Having failed to deter the sisters from their renewed missions by a series of scoldings and warning, the Vatican launched two investigations of American sisters in 2008 in hopes of finally putting them in their place. It didn't quite work, even after Rome thundered its verdict that the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was in serious violation of church teaching and practice. The sisters didn't bend but insisted on negotiations. Technically speaking, Rome doesn't negotiate its divinely inspired judgments but talks did take place, largely because the sisters held out what some believed a naive hope that the top brass of the church would at least mellow.

Days ago, the talks failed, even as Middle Eastern talks nearly always fail, with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dispatching the sisters by accusing them of refusing to shape up. To the sisters this means an end to trying to find a solution but their history of loyalty to their vision of the church may move them beyond this impasse to go back to the table if even the thinnest crack in the CDF and/or Pope Francis wall appears. But once again the sisters are put on the defensive, required to do the heavy lifting if they want anything to happen. Their accusers simply await consent.

Meanwhile, how about forming a union? Unions have been in bad odor in America for most of its history, notably now, but Catholic Social Teaching totally supports workers organizing to protect themselves from abuse and to have leverage in deciding the terms of their labor. Sisters deliver the most essential services to the church yet remain at the mercy of the company executives. Baseball players were in a similar position until only a few decades ago. They were treated arbitrarily until the elimination of [thanks reader] of the "reserve" clause gave them some say over their own lives. Their larger goal was money, of course, whereas the sisters justifiably seek respect and a voice that counts. Like the Northwestern players who have shone a light on an exploitative situation by taking steps to organize, the sisters might consider at least doing the same. It may be laughable, or unimaginable, but it points to a method -- whether union or other declaration of autonomy -- that has both the legitimacy of church teaching and a history of improving the conditions of those who are trodden upon. Sisters aren't steel workers, of course (am I overlooking someone?), and would be unwilling to suspend their vital services as social organizers, medical personnel and teachers, etc, to stand on picket lines, but they'd figure out alternative actions that would interfere with vital church interests.

If that seems too strident, there's another option: the equivalent or worker owned and operated institutions free or outside interference.

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