

HOME



Above and beyond the call

By [Bryan Cones](#) | 0 Comments | [Print](#) | [Share](#)

ARTICLE

U.S. women religious deserve better than the nonsense of a Vatican investigation.

It must be hard being a Sister in America. You spend a century creating a hospital system from scratch and educating generations of Catholic children of every race and class on a shoestring. Not only are you barely paid for your efforts, you occupy a decidedly second-class position on the Catholic totem pole.

When invited by the Second Vatican Council to rediscover your roots, you charge forth in service to the poor and marginalized, explore new ways of thinking about God, and reach out to people of other faiths. Even as the number of those joining your way of life shrinks and some question your new directions, you persevere. Your reward for a lifetime of service? A Vatican investigation.

Such were my thoughts when I heard in January that the Vatican, on its own initiative, had begun a study of the "quality of life" of U.S. women religious and then in February announced a "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which represents about 95 percent of the country's nearly 60,000 sisters and nuns.

To say that there was a certain negative tone to the dual probes isn't unreasonable. The other ongoing Vatican investigation is of the Legionaries of Christ, whose recently deceased founder, Father Marcial Maciel, was removed from ministry because of inappropriate sexual contact with the students of his order and was later discovered to have fathered a child. Poor company, indeed.

Some received the news of LCWR's fate with glee. "Great news: Vatican to investigate America's bossy feminist nuns" announced a [British blogger for the U.K. Telegraph](#). [Beliefnet.com](#) blogger [Amy Welborn](#) "explained" the investigation with quotes from a single keynote address at LCWR's 2007 convention and a personal anecdote about a sister who rejected a manuscript because it was too "pre-Vatican II."

Welborn's gross generalization concluded by accusing "too many communities of religious women" of seeking "to remake [religious life] according to their own agenda-in a way that would probably horrify the women on whose laurels they rest and whose historical memory they are exploiting." So much for the canonical right to one's good name.

The good name of religious women in this country is indeed what is at stake here. A blanket investigation of both the "quality of life" of religious women and of the doctrinal fidelity of their leadership is hardly a just response to the breadth of their contributions.

To be sure, religious women in this country have frequently been on the ministerial and theological edge when it comes to interreligious dialogue, ministry to gay and lesbian people, and issues surrounding the role of women in the church-the stated reasons for the investigation. But that does not mean their loyalty or orthodoxy on the whole should be impugned.

I, for one, am the Catholic-and human being-I am today largely because of religious women, and not just the Sisters of Mercy who were at my grammar school.

Among them is Joyce, a Precious Blood Sister who taught me in college to love and pray the liturgy. Most of what I know about the Bible is thanks to two Sister Barbaras, a Dominican and a Religious of the Sacred Heart. Another Dominican has over many years helped me deepen my relationship with God in spiritual direction. Then there's Sister Thérèse, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, who opened my eyes to the realities of homelessness.

These are just the ones I know personally. If I had to add the women whose example and writing have inspired and changed me I would quickly run out of room.

Religious women are not perfect, of course, but if I had to pick the group that most challenged me to think more broadly, love more completely, and serve more generously as a Christian, it would be those "bossy nuns." It is precisely because they have been such creative risk-takers-more daring on the whole than their male counterparts or our ordained leadership-that they have inspired me. Where would we Catholics be without such women?

The sisters' response to the "assessment" has been sanguine. "LCWR faces this process with confidence, believing that the conference has remained faithful to its mission of service to leaders of congregations of women religious as they seek to further the mission of Christ in today's world" was LCWR's measured reply to news of the investigation.

Fair enough, but for my part let me be clear: Sisters, you don't deserve an investigation. You deserve a medal.

This article appears in the July 2009 issue of U.S. Catholic (Vol. 74, No 7, page 8).

Bryan Cones is a writer living in Chicago.

[SEE MORE POSTS BY BRYAN CONES](#)

SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

ENTER YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS [GO](#)

SUBSCRIBE NOW FOR EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

[f](#) [t](#) [p](#)

RELATED CONTENT

The Vatican vs. the nuns: Three takeaways from the final report on the investigation of women religious

By [David Gibson](#) | 0 Comments

NEWS

The investigation of women religious

| 0 Comments

Pope Francis affirms critique of LCWR: What does the future hold for women religious and the church?

By [Elizabeth Lefebvre](#) | 9 Comments

BLOG

LCWR responds to the Vatican in the true spirit of religious sisters

By [Scott Alessi](#) | 4 Comments

BLOG

Religious women resisting...

By [Bryan Cones](#) | 0 Comments

BLOG

Do we really need a post-Mass coffee hour?

Online Editor | 2 Comments

SURVEY YOUR FAITH



An enchanted faith

By [Emily Sanna](#) | 6 Comments

BLOG YOUR FAITH

Lead the Church of tomorrow. Study at CTU today.

On campus in Chicago and online. Now accepting applications for fall 2016.

Catholic Theological Union



Organic habits: Why nuns are pioneering the green movement

By [Jessica Mesman Griffith](#) | 2 Comments

ARTICLE JUSTICE

Introducing **Alive in the WORD**

A NEW GENERATION OF Bible resources for Catholics

[LEARN MORE >](#)