

Rally in Solidarity with Catholic Sisters

Joan Conway

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My name is Joan Conway. I am a cradle Catholic and I worship at a parish in Silver Spring MD. I am here today as a witness to the work of the religious sisters in America and to show my support for them in this time of great challenge and discernment. As a spiritual director, a retired nutrition scientist, and the coordinator of a large Food Pantry ministry, I can truly say I owe much of who I am today to the sisters I have encountered in my life.

I was educated from first grade through college by three orders of sisters – the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Dominican Sisters of Amityville, NY, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, NY. Upon reviewing their history one common thread emerges – the sisters all came in small groups from Germany and France during the 1850's at the request of American bishops to work with immigrant women and their children. Those pioneer sisters worked in the ghettos and slums of New York City. In Brooklyn, where I was born, they established elementary schools, hospitals, and colleges. Like their foremothers, the sisters today follow the Gospel, walk in the footsteps of Jesus and go where HE would go -- – among the poor, the needy, the oppressed, all those whose voices and opinions are ignored and marginalized by society. In the 1850's this was among the immigrant women and children of New York City. Today the sisters still serve among immigrants, the imprisoned, those dying of HIV/ AIDS, the illiterate, the rejected, the homeless, the mentally ill, and oh yes, they still educate in elementary schools: in other words, they still preach the Gospel of the Love of Jesus Christ for ALL by their actions.

While reflecting on my experiences with the sisters, I remember most clearly the days of the Second Vatican Council. I was a very young woman then, and like other Catholics, the way I experienced my religion and its rituals was dramatically changed. I was opened to the possibility of a direct relationship with God, one less mediated by Latin and by memorized prayers. But the image that remains most strongly is the change in the dress of the sisters and the courage it must have taken to put away their old-fashioned habits and change to the new, modest, modernized habits. But this change in the external sign of their vows before God and their willingness to follow the decrees of Vatican II is only one small part of what happened within their communities. Years of careful discernment led to the expansion of ministries and broadened their presence in society as they witness to God's love and bring the good news to all of us. I am thinking of ministries to women, to gays and lesbians, the imprisoned, the dying, the mentally ill, the drop-out, the immigrant, and those in universities and social justice organizations – and that is only the beginning of the list.

In my experience, the sisters have always been on the cutting edge because they listen deeply to the flow of life in the community, which is the flow of the Spirit of God, whose feast – Pentecost-- we celebrated on Sunday. This kind of deep listening cannot be accomplished alone, but rather “en media res” or in the midst of those who express all aspects of the fullness of the Life of God’s people.

“In the middle” is where we find the sisters today as they continue to discern how the Spirit of God is leading them to live their call to follow the Incarnation of God’s love for all – Jesus Christ. This means they are *listening* to many voices from across the spectrum of society, but their actions demonstrate clearly that they are *following* the one voice – the voice of the Spirit. The same Spirit of God that is available to all of us who make up the church, the Body of Christ.

This, in brief, is why I am here today with my sisters and brothers in Christ, to say loudly and clearly that we support the work, the lives, and the future of the Catholic sisters in America. This is why I ask with all of you that the members of the hierarchy who delivered the harsh pronouncement in April reflect, reconsider, and revise their stance.