



It is pretty hard for any Catholic news to be as disgusting as the accounts of the annual meetings of the National Federation of Priests' Councils. But the stories about the gathering this summer of the National Association of Women Religious prove that as in most other things the women religious are ahead of the men in their ability to produce intense nausea.

In the New York Times article on the meeting we are told that the sisters spent their time discussing "clothes, sex, men and their careers," that they talked about the hardship of living on an average \$40 a month personal budget and "spoke of dreary treks through the thrift shop trying to find second-hand skirts and pants suits that fit." In the National Catholic Reporter we read that sisters are dedicated to the use of "organized power" and that they have become the "conscience of the church."

One of the sisters told the Times reporter that she had entered the convent because the church provided "greater potential for women to be powerful" than other organizations (doubtless the truth, but a strange sort of vocation). One gathers that there was not a single radical-left shallow cliché, not a single feminist slogan that was not mindlessly repeated at the meetings.

The assembly decamped from the University of San Francisco because it was serving Teamster lettuce (even though the Teamsters since then have shown a remarkable ability to win free collective-bargaining elections). And Sister Shawn Copeland, who can always be counted on to provide at least one mad caricature per meeting, pushed everything to its ultimate absurdity by warning that blacks faced extinction in the United States. I trust that my record on the subject of the oppression of sisters in the Church is clear enough that I do not have to defend myself against charges of being an agent of the Congregation of Religious. When most of the activist nuns were holding their peace, I denounced the crucifixion by Cardinal McIntyre of the Immaculate Heart Order in Los Angeles. Women religious are not cheap help; they should not have to live on starvation wages; and they should not have to buy dowdy and shabby clothes.

Still, one must wonder if the sisters are doing themselves justice by such public events as the San Francisco meeting (and I am unaware of any protests against the press coverage, so I must assume that the Times and the NCR were accurately reporting the spirit of the assembly). By accident I was reading Sister Kathleen Healy's superb life of Frances Wardé, the founder of the American Mercy Sisters, at the same time the NAWR was meeting. The contrast was striking.

The brave young Irish women who founded Catholic hospitals in Pittsburgh and Catholic schools in Chicago when those were very dangerous places to be were not much concerned about

power but greatly concerned about service. The four who died (three within one day) in the Chicago cholera epidemic of 1854 would have doubtless been surprised to hear that "nowadays you are relying on the hope of things unseen" as Sister Keating, the new head of the NAWR put it. Did the young women who died a painful death thousands of miles from home and family in 1854 have a hope of things seen?

Times change and the religious life must change with the times. There is still intense dedication within the sisterhood as in the priesthood. Priests and sisters must battle for their rights against oppression in the church (an oppression with which I am not totally unfamiliar). But it does not seem too much to ask that when they meet in national gatherings that they devote most of their time to the question of unselfish and generous service of others (All others and not just the current radical-chic others) and rather less time to making themselves look like self-indulgent romantic narcissists.

Christianity deals more with service than with power.

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