

7-17-08 - Why them and not us?

By Joan Chittister, OSB, From Where I Stand, National Catholic Reporter Conversation Cafe

The church world got a really good piece of advice this week. The pope, we're told, warned the Anglicans not to split over their internal controversies about homosexuality and the ordination of women bishops. He warned, quite wisely, about the dangers and the destructiveness of schism. (See Pope rides to Rowan's rescue [1]) As easy as it sounds to simply go away and play in your own ecclesiastical sandbox, the fact is that divisions are never neat -- if for no other reason than that they not only fail to resolve the present problem but they model how not to resolve the next problem, too. After all, if we can fix one issue by simply leaving it, we can do the same with the next one -- and there will be a next one -- until what was intended to be a nice, clean division becomes one fracture after another, more a splintering and a slivering, than a surgically healing separation of unlike tissues.

Now if the Catholic church could only get to the same clear point about the question of "excommunication" and/or "interdict" -- the process of splintering a church within a church, of putting people outside the pale of the sacraments, of separating ourselves from contentious questions one person, one diocese, at a time. While we're getting better at holding both ends against the middle at times -- we managed to deal with the Feenyites and the Lefevbrites, for instance -- we clearly have some serious problems about how to deal with individuals who dare to raise new questions in the midst of a shifting body politic. Like how to be personally moral in a pluralistic state if you're a politician or, worse, a candidate for political office, for instance. Like how to maintain past liturgical forms in the face of the development of more contemporary ones.

Nevertheless, more important than the question of excommunication is the unevenness with which it is applied. We excommunicate women who support the ordination of women, for instance, but we don't excommunicate either military officers or military chaplains who support the use of nuclear weapons. We excommunicate people who belong to groups of which we don't approve. In the past, for instance, YMCAs and YWCAs were forbidden to Catholics. In the present, in some places, it's membership in Call to Action. But we didn't excommunicate bishops or priests who said nothing about Adolph Hitler in Germany or Augusto Pinochet in Chile, nor did the church excommunicate those who belonged to their organizations.

Now we are watching while Sister of Charity Louise Lears is denied the sacraments and the opportunity to minister in the archdiocese of St. Louis for her support of the role of women in the church, though women religious have always worked on behalf of the role of women in church and society when the rest of the world stood aghast at the thought of even educating women, let alone training them for independence. Yet, at the same time, executioners in prisons -- who do their public work secretly! -- will not be excommunicated for executing prisoners. Whatever we think of the essential morality of state executions, the number of errors we now know to be the norm in the public practice of capital punishment ought surely be enough to make the practice morally reprehensible.

We are, in other words, dangerously close to being more punitive of women who raise theological questions about women's role in the church than we are of any other facet of moral confusion or contention in society. And the situation is not a new one. In the 1600s, the church excommunicated Mary Ward for wanting to start a religious order of non-cloistered women. In our own era, in Indiana, they excommunicated M. Theodore Guerin, foundress of the Sisters of Providence, for starting new schools without the bishop's permission. She was canonized in 2006. In 1871, they excommunicated Mary MacKillop in Australia for trying to do the same and then beatified her in 1995. Church officials excommunicated Joan of Arc -- and burned her at the stake -- because she wouldn't agree to obey the church voices around her over the voice of God she heard in her heart. But they don't excommunicate pedophile priests who prey on children or military dictators who use genocide or ethnic cleansing as a political tool against others and massacre against their own. No, we just excommunicate those who question the practices of the church itself.

There will be a great deal written about Lears' situation, of course, -- and it should be -- while we all try to sort out both the question and the so-called spiritual cure.

But the issue, not the system, is the issue. Instead of a difference of opinion about the role of women in religion, a subject that is at this moment of history a topic in every tradition, every religion, every part of the globe, we now have a full-blown ecclesiastical shoot-out. An "excommunication." A casting out even of those who do not break the canon laws on the subject but who do broach the forbidden discussion. What should be seen as part of the spiritual discipline of living in hope and faith and openness to the Holy Spirit in "the-already-but-not-yet" is labeled instead as infidelity.

Finding ourselves in a time of social turmoil when all the answers of the past are being brought into question has become for many a Galileo moment. Non-thinking, euphemistically called "obedience" in such situations, has become more important than the search for light in darkness. The last time such things happened we made it a mortal sin to go to the marriage of a loved one in a Protestant church. We turned a blind eye and deaf ear on wife-beating while forbidding divorce and remarriage. We declared slavery the will of God and made one human color the color of intelligence, ordination and the fullness of humanity. As a church, we forgot the Gospel on some issues and condemned whatever was the present brand of heretics.

But the scripture is there and won't go away. In the face of all that, Jesus tells us a parable: "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" the laborers in the story ask the farmer about the bad seed "an enemy had sown." The answer, at a time of great change and deep reflection, ought perhaps to give us great pause: "No," the scripture answers, "because as you gather the weeds you might pull up some of the wheat along with them." We pulled up a lot of wheat with the excommunication of Martin Luther and the reformers, for instance, and have been trying to repair those exclusions ever since. Surely this is no time to start doing the same kind of thing again. Surely we have learned better by this time. Surely we don't want to do it to one nun whose only crime is a question and in whom the people see a minister of uncommon quality. Maybe we ought to "leave some chaff and grain to grow up together" for a while longer until we can see clearly which is which.

From where I stand, Pope Benedict XVI is dead right about urging the Anglicans to sit down together and work things out. He's right about calling us to remember that we're all in a time of new beginnings. He's surely right, history shows us, about making community a more demanding factor than law with all its cultural vagaries and historic changes. Now if we ourselves would only take the call to heart and sit down together and do the same.