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We Are All Nuns

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

CATHOLIC nuns are not the prissy traditionalists of caricature. No, nuns rock!

They were the first feminists, earning Ph.D.'s or working as surgeons long before it was fashionable for women to hold jobs. As managers of hospitals, schools and complex bureaucracies, they were the first female C.E.O.'s.

They are also among the bravest, toughest and most admirable people in the world. In my travels, I've seen heroic nuns defy warlords, pimps and bandits. Even as bishops have disgraced the church by covering up the rape of children, nuns have redeemed it with their humble work on behalf of the neediest.

So, Pope Benedict, all I can say is: You are crazy to mess with nuns.

The Vatican issued a stinging reprimand of American nuns this month and ordered a bishop to oversee a makeover of the organization that represents 80 percent of them. In effect, the Vatican accused the nuns of worrying too much about the poor and not enough about abortion and gay marriage.

What Bible did that come from? Jesus in the Gospels repeatedly talks about poverty and social justice, yet never explicitly mentions either abortion or homosexuality. If you look at who has more closely emulated Jesus's life, Pope Benedict or your average nun, it's the nun hands down.

Since the papal crackdown on nuns, they have received an outpouring of support. "Nuns were approached by Catholics at Sunday liturgies across the country with a simple question: 'What can we do to help?'" The National Catholic Reporter recounted. It cited one parish where a declaration of support for nuns from the pulpit drew loud applause, and another that was filled with shouts like, "You go, girl!"

At least four petition drives are under way to support the nuns. One on Change.org has gathered 15,000 signatures. The headline for this column comes from an essay by Mary E. Hunt, a Catholic theologian who is developing a proposal for Catholics to redirect some contributions from local parishes to nuns.

"How dare they go after 57,000 dedicated women whose median age is well over 70 and who work tirelessly for a more just world?" Hunt wrote. "How dare the very men who preside over a church in utter disgrace due to sexual misconduct and cover-ups by bishops try to distract from their own problems by creating new ones for women religious?"

Sister Joan Chittister, a prominent Benedictine nun, said she had worried at first that nuns spend so much time with the poor that they would have no allies. She added that the flood of support had left her breathless.

“It’s stunningly wonderful,” she said. “You see generations of laypeople who know where the sisters are — in the streets, in the soup kitchens, anywhere where there’s pain. They’re with the dying, with the sick, and people know it.”

Sister Joan spoke to me from a ghetto in Erie, Pa., where her order of 120 nuns runs a soup kitchen, a huge food pantry, an afterschool program, and one of the largest education programs for the unemployed in the state.

I have a soft spot for nuns because I’ve seen firsthand that they sacrifice ego, safety and comfort to serve some of the neediest people on earth. Remember the “Kony 2012” video that was an Internet hit earlier this year, about an African warlord named Joseph Kony? One of the few heroes in the long Kony debacle was a Comboni nun, Sister Rachele Fassera.

In 1996, Kony’s army attacked a Ugandan girls’ school and kidnapped 139 students. Sister Rachele hiked through the jungle in pursuit of the kidnappers — some of the most menacing men imaginable, notorious for raping and torturing their victims to death. Eventually, she caught up with the 200 gunmen and demanded that they release the girls. Somehow, she browbeat the warlord in charge into releasing the great majority of the girls.

I’m betting on the nuns to win this one as well. After all, the sisters may be saintly, but they’re also crafty. Elias Chacour, a prominent Palestinian archbishop in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, recounts in a memoir that he once asked a convent if it could supply two nuns for a community literacy project. The mother superior said she would have to check with her bishop.

“The bishop was very clear in his refusal to allow two nuns,” the mother superior told him later. “I cannot disobey him in that.” She added: “I will send you three nuns!”

Nuns have triumphed over an errant hierarchy before. In the 19th century, the Catholic Church excommunicated an Australian nun named Mary MacKillop after her order exposed a pedophile priest. Sister Mary was eventually invited back to the church and became renowned for her work with the poor. In 2010, Pope Benedict canonized her as Australia’s first saint.

“Let us be guided” by Sister Mary’s teachings, the pope declared then.

Amen to that.