

## CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

SCHISM?

The 1970 book, Future Shock, by Alvin Toffler taught us that it was always better to anticipate and plan for the future rather than letting it happen to us. At least, as much as we can.

The latest vicious attack on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) by the Vatican disrupts any plans for the future of the Church in the USA. In case you are not aware of the basic story, here's one link:

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/lcwr-radical-obedience-voice-god-our-time>

Is this the last straw in a steady stream of moldy hay strewn across the world by the Vatican? Is this the challenge that eventually ends up in a formal schism? How will over 45,000 sisters respond to this test? And how will the rest of us respond?

This assault is not like the condemnation of Fr. Tony Flannery or Fr. Roy Bourgeois or countless others. This public confrontation is with a large group of dedicated religious women, honored by most Catholics of diverse opinions. Bullies who pick on individuals often get away with it. These same thugs who pick on an organized group of intelligent, service minded, holy, courageous sisters have a different and more dangerous fight on their hands.

My advice to the Vatican bullies: duck!

One of my reactions to this foolhardy attempt to control the thoughts of all these nuns is to revisit the wisdom of Toffler. So, here are three scenarios for the Catholic Church of the future:

1. After some give and take (give by the LCWR and take by the Vatican), the LCWR agrees to "modify" its official positions enough (even if the positions are not currently official) to call off the Vatican bloodhounds. Individual sisters continue to express their personal opinions on the doctrinal issues in dispute (mostly sex related topics, as usual). Some religious communities withdraw from LCWR and some sisters leave the church. But the Vatican achieves its main goal of controlling and weakening the organization. After some vocal protests by progressives in the Church, things settle down and the Conservative stranglehold on the Church gets tighter. More people are

scandalized by the attack, connect with other denominations or, bitterly, forget the whole church thing completely.

2. The LCWR fights back aggressively, refuses to accept the condemnation, and forces the Vatican to take more punitive steps. The semi-polite meetings with Archbishop Peter Sartain end in a stalemate. The Vatican threatens to excommunicate all the nuns but with the public support of millions of lay Catholics, thousands of priests and even a few bishops, the threat goes no further. By this time, a new Pope tries to bury the conflict and eventually, there is a permanent standoff, with suspicion and distrust on both sides. Like it is now, but with the heat turned up very high.
3. After initial forays, threats, and veil twisting (but there are no veils anymore!), after volumes of outrage from around the world, after pledges of support in private and in public, after all options are thoroughly discussed, the LCWR aligns with other progressive organizations around the world and formally leaves the institutional Church. This combined community declares themselves the Reformed Catholic Church and uses Vatican II as its guiding principles. Schism. This RCC begins with some bishops, thousands of priests, multiple thousands of nuns, and millions of lay people. The current Catholic Church becomes even more conservative and gets their wish of being “leaner and meaner.”

While I am at it, here's another prediction: the Vatican response to the “visitation” they forced on the nuns last year will be equally condemnatory. They want the “good sisters” back in their convents, back in their veils, and smiling demurely under their obese thumbs.

Ain't gonna' happen!

The value of this projecting process is not to say “See, I told you so” five years from now. Or, to admit that you missed the prediction. The value is to articulate more clearly what is now semi-conscious, to separate wishes from realistic expectations, and to plan accordingly.

Futurizing is clearly not an exact science. What will the Church be like five years from now? Do any of the three scenarios above get close to what you see? If not, try to do one yourself. Not so much what you wish would happen, but what do you honestly think will happen?

Pent up resentment to centuries of chauvinistic arrogance and institutional domination will not go unchallenged.

Schism?