

The Vatican is going after the nuns: Regina Brett

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REGINA BRETT

Look out. The Vatican is going after the nuns.

Catholic nuns have been called "America's first feminists." They ran hospitals and schools, educated and healed the masses, mothered orphans and salvaged prostitutes.

Yes, nuns have always been a wild, crazy bunch of radicals.

What else can you call women who gave up their entire lives for others, from the clothing they wore to the paychecks they earned?

Actually, most of them never received a paycheck.

All those nuns who taught classrooms of 40 first-graders? They didn't get a dime. They took home a small stipend that they turned over to their order. They didn't get Social Security, pensions or 401(k)s.

So why is the Vatican conducting two investigations into the lives of American religious women?

Rome says the plan is to look at the quality of their lives, learn about how religious women contribute to the welfare of the church and society and help the church strengthen, enhance and support the growth of the 400-plus congregations. There are about 59,000 women religious in the United States.

It made sense when the Vatican investigated priests and seminarians after the sexual-abuse scandals that cost the church millions.

But the nuns?

Chicago Sun-Times columnist Carol Marin called the investigations "Law and Order: The Convent." Why are the guys in Rome being so hard on the sisters? "Because bishops don't investigate the faithfulness of bishops," she wrote.

I hope the investigation turns up something big, like the price tag for how much the church owes these women for their decades of priceless service.

Why investigate nuns? Because a few of them walked softly and carried a big yardstick?
What dastardly deeds could they be up to now?

Not keeping quiet? Not keeping their place?

Here's the thing, their place is everywhere. There is no way to stop their reach. It's way too late for that.

They've infiltrated America. They taught millions how to read, how to think, how to discern right from wrong, how to err on the side of loving the poor.

Sister Susan Durkin told me, "We have nothing to hide. We stand on the shoulders of women who have been there serving on the front lines."

The front lines, that's where Sisters Dorothy Kazel, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke died defending the rights of the poor in El Salvador in 1980.

It's where Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered as she fought to save Brazilian rain forests. Where Sister Helen Prejean brings the face of God to broken men on Death Row.

It's where Sister Mary Ignatia, patron saint of A.A., sneaked alcoholics into an Akron hospital for detox so they wouldn't die in gutters and alleys.

Sister Mary Ann Flannery, who runs the Jesuit Retreat House in Parma, told me the exciting thing about being a nun is this: "You go where the grace leads you. You let the street be your chapel. Let your love of others be your vow."

The hardest part of being a nun isn't the vow of chastity. You don't hear scandals about nuns running amok and having affairs right and left.

The hardest part is letting go of all they have loved about their sisterhood as convents merge and close.

Sister Mary Jane Masterson, of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Cleveland, just sent me her memoir, "One Nun's Story Then and Now." It's the story of her love affair with God.

She's not worried about the decline in nuns and priests. She believes the Holy Spirit is driving the change. She believes in a theology of hope. She doubts religious life will survive much longer, but that doesn't make her sad.

"Our dying is other peoples' rising," she writes.

How radical.

How nunlike.