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Religion: Shutting the Door on Dissent

By Janice Castro

Pope John Paul II's position on abortion is firm and uncompromising: it is morally wrong and equivalent to infanticide. That papal teaching, along with its corollary that Roman Catholics should actively seek to overturn legislation that allows the taking of prenatal life, has put the Vatican in a confrontation with 24 American nuns that could lead to their expulsion from religious life. The nuns are among 97 Catholics, including three men who belong to religious orders, who signed "A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and + Abortion," an advertisement published in the New York Times last October.

The ad was a response to mid-campaign suggestions by members of the U.S. hierarchy, notably Archbishops John O'Connor of New York and Bernard Law of Boston, that Catholics should not vote for politicians who favored free choice on abortion. Although it noted that all abortions are tragedies, the ad challenged "statements of recent Popes and of the Catholic hierarchy (that) have condemned the direct termination of prenatal life as morally wrong in all instances. There is the mistaken belief in American society that this is the only legitimate Catholic position. In fact, a diversity of opinions regarding abortion exists among committed Catholics."

Rome clearly did not agree. Last month the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes commanded the heads of the religious orders whose members had signed the ad to get public retractions from the offenders. The superiors were told to dismiss those who refused to recant.

According to Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' doctrinal committee, the Vatican had no choice but to defend "the clear and constant teaching of the church that deliberately chosen abortion is objectively immoral." Under the disciplinary provisions of the church, the nuns who have been admonished will have to decide in the coming weeks whether to disavow their statement or face dismissal. Some nuns have already indicated that they will not back down, even though they oppose abortion. Says Sister Donna Quinn of Chicago, executive director of Chicago Catholic Women and past president of the National Coalition of American Nuns: "We believe we have the right to speak out when we have a differing opinion, and this is something European men do not understand."

In an effort to devise a response to the tough Vatican measures, 35 of those who signed the declaration, including many of the dissident nuns, met in Washington just before Christmas. A new statement released

by the group was no less a challenge to the Vatican than the first. Said the group: "We are appalled by the recent action of the Vatican against women who are members of religious orders. We believe that this Vatican action is a cause for scandal to Catholics everywhere. It seeks to stifle freedom of speech and public discussion in the Roman Catholic Church and create the appearance of a consensus where none exists."

Then, taking a page from political action groups, the signers of the October declaration called upon their fellow Catholics to write on their behalf to the Sacred Congregation "stating your support for women and men who have been threatened, and stating your belief in diversity, pluralism and honest discussion of church issues." Concluded the group: "A consensus on any issue in the church cannot be imposed." Once again, it was not likely that Rome would agree.

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