

The nun and Glenn Beck: a standoff

By Joan Chittister

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I got an invitation today. It wasn't to me. It was to Glenn Beck.

Let me give you a little background so you can understand how it happened.

There is a nun in the country this week, a Sister of the Good Shepherd, from Syria. Now, that may not seem much like international news to you but it is. And not only to me.

Infact, Sr. Marie Claude Naddaf is here to receive the U.S. State Department's "International Women of Courage Award." Given to 10 women around the globe who have shown "exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and advancement," the awards purpose is to support women who are working for the equality of women everywhere. And any woman who has ever spoken up for women's equality in any arena that counts -- in politics, in business, in law, in the home, in the church -- know exactly how much courage that requires. Even now. Even here.

This woman has done it more than most. A Syrian citizen, a Christian in a Muslim country, Marie Claude entered her community at the age of 17. As a Sister of the Good Shepherd, a community founded almost 200 years ago to work for the reintegration into society of marginalized women, she has been struggling for the advancement of women for over 50 years now. That's longer than most people even knew there was a problem, let alone thought about trying to solve it.

Trained to be a social worker, she and her sisters are also trained to see the special needs of women and then do something about them. So, though she began her community's ministry in a center for adolescent girls -- teaching life skills, self-esteem and personal development -- she was also beginning to see the needs under their needs. She began to see that the self-esteem and personal development that her community tried to build up in women were being systematically destroyed, even in the home.

The domestic abuse of women made women domestic property everywhere. Not just in Syria, we know, but with a special twist there: In an 'honor culture,' the nerve of a woman to complain about the situation -- to be a bad wife--"dishonors" her family as much as the beatings dishonor her. This means there's no support for her from her family either. Marie Claude's work was cut out for her -- for anyone "with eyes to see and ears to hear," in fact. But few did.

So she opened the first shelters for beaten women in all of Syria and stood alone in that work for years. She began the first "Oasis Listening Center Hotline" to provide support for women in danger. She began programs in the shelter not simply to protect women physically but to provide psychological counseling, personal development courses, legal help and child care for them, as well.

She served one kind of woman and, at the same time, modeled another kind of woman for women everywhere.

Women staff and volunteers, both Christian and Muslim, flocked to the center to help. Everyone who came was served. No one was turned away for reason of race or religion or nationality.

Then, in 1996, she took a step that changed things again. This time for everyone.

She began, with the permission of the government, to visit women's prisons. She discovered there what few, if anyone, had ever bothered to notice before. Most of the women in prison for 'prostitution' or 'illegal entry' into the country were not prostitutes or border breakers at all. They were 'trafficked women.' They were women and girls who had been sold across national borders into the sex slave trade or seduced into it on the promise of a job or simply abducted into it off

the streets as children.

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that every year anywhere from two to four million women or girls are sold across borders for the sake of commercial sex, abused laborers or servants. Of that number, 50,000 of them are brought to the United States where they are exploited, enslaved or physically violated. All of them without medical care or legal help.

Marie Claude won the right to have trafficked women in police custody released to a shelter rather than kept in prison. One month ago, thanks to the work of Marie Claude, Syria enacted its first law against the trafficking of human beings.

"What's the most difficult part of your work?" I asked her.

"The long time it takes for a woman to feel like a human being again, to be reconciled to her family," she said. "The time it takes for the family to take her in again," after dishonoring them.

"What makes you feel good about this work?" I asked.

"When a woman smiles, or begins to dress up, to take care of herself, to feel good about herself," she said. "When the woman says, 'Now I can do something in life.' "

And Marie Claude knows it happens, because she and her center follow the woman's progress for months -- just to make sure.

"Yes but ..." I asked finally. "Should you be doing these things as a nun, as a religious? A commentator here advised his television audience last week against 'social justice programs in the church.' "

"I beg you," he said, "look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words (for socialism.) Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"

I heard Marie Claude Naddaf, a Sister of the Good Shepherd, gasp on the other end of the phone. "Nooooooooo," she squealed. "This is the work of God. The spiritual life gives us the energy we need to do justice. There is no contradiction! It's a circle!"

Then she said, "Invite this man to come and see me in Syria. I will show him." And one more thing. "Tell your government that it must do something to help the Iraqi refugees in Syria. They need resettlement programs and financial support for widows and children." Her meaning was clear: The United States started the war that put millions of people adrift "but Syria has borne the whole expense of it."

From where I stand, it's clear why the Glenn Becks of the world would not want to hear anything about 'social justice' from a church. Certainly not about women and war. Or about Sister Marie Claude either. Let's hope he takes the invitation.

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