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Sister Acts

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF AUG. 16, 2014

IN an age of villainy, war and inequality, it makes sense that we need superheroes. And after trying Superman, Batman and Spider-Man, we may have found the best superheroes yet: Nuns.

“I may not believe in God, but I do believe in nuns,” writes Jo Piazza, in her forthcoming book, “If Nuns Ruled the World.” Piazza is an agnostic living in New York City who began interviewing nuns and found herself utterly charmed and inspired.

“They eschew the spotlight by their very nature, and yet they’re out there in the world every day, living the Gospel and caring for the poor,” Piazza writes. “They don’t hide behind fancy and expensive vestments, a pulpit, or a sermon. I have never met a nun who rides a Mercedes-Benz or a Cadillac. They walk a lot; they ride bikes.”

One of the most erroneous caricatures of nuns is that they are prim, Victorian figures cloistered in convents. On the contrary, I’ve become a huge fan of nuns because I see them so often risking their lives around the world, confronting warlords, pimps and thugs, while speaking the local languages fluently. In a selfish world, they epitomize selflessness and compassion.

There are also plenty of formidable nuns whom even warlords don’t want to mess with, who

combine reverence with ferocity, who defy the Roman Catholic Church by handing out condoms to prostitutes to protect them from H.I.V. (They surely don't mention that to the bishops.)

One of the nuns whom Piazza profiles is Sister Megan Rice. She earned a graduate degree at Boston College and then moved to Nigeria in 1962 to run a school for girls she had helped establish in a remote area with no electricity or running water. After eventually returning to the United States, she began campaigning against nuclear weapons.

In 2012, at the age of 82, she masterminded a break-in of a nuclear complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., to call attention to the nuclear threat. As she was handcuffed by armed security guards, she sang "This Little Light of Mine." She is now serving a prison sentence of almost three years.

I don't approve of breaking into national security compounds, and I think nuclear doctrine is more complex than Sister Megan probably does. Nonetheless, I admire someone with such guts and commitment to principles.

Another remarkable nun is Sister Jeannine Gramick, who, while working toward a doctorate in mathematics, met a gay Catholic man who asked for religious help. She organized a home service for him that grew into a regular liturgy for gay Catholics in private homes.

In 1977, she helped found New Ways Ministry to support gay and lesbian Catholics. The Vatican tried to suppress her, and her order, the Loretto Sisters, was instructed at least nine times to dismiss her. It passively resisted.

"The Vatican tried to silence me," Sister Jeannine told Piazza, "and it just didn't work."

At a time when much of Christianity denounced gays and lesbians, Sister Jeannine was a beacon of compassion and struggled to educate the church she loved.

"People always emphasize sex, sex, sex," Sister Jeannine told Piazza. "And it isn't about sex. It is about love. It is who you fall in love with that makes you lesbian and gay. Love is the important thing

here, not sex.”

All this has led the Vatican to investigate and clamp down on American nuns in a harsh crackdown that has been referred to as the Great Nunquisition. In 2012, the Vatican reprimanded a group of American nuns for promoting “radical feminist themes.”

Piazza quotes a nun who said a friend put it to her this way: “Let me get this straight. Some priests committed sex abuse. Bishops covered it up. And so they’re investigating nuns?”

Pope Francis, so far, has continued the crackdown, but he seems more enlightened than his predecessors and maybe he’ll understand that battling nuns is hopeless. Nuns are iron women — and sometimes that’s more than a metaphor.

Sister Madonna Buder, nicknamed “the iron nun,” took up running at age 47 and has completed 366 triathlons. She set her personal best at age 62, and, at age 82, she became the oldest person, male or female, to complete an Ironman triathlon.

In the course of her races, she has broken her arms eight times, her hip twice, her ribs countless times. She runs five miles to and from church, in long pants suitable for Mass, and foregoes a coach. “My coach,” she explains, “is the Man Upstairs.”

Forgive us for having sinned and thought of nuns as backward, when, in fact, they were among the first feminists. And, in a world of narcissism and cynicism, they constitute an inspiring contingent of moral leaders who actually walk the walk.

So a suggestion: How about if the Vatican spends less time investigating nuns and the public spends less time mocking nuns — and we all spend more time emulating nuns?

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