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What LCWR teaches us about church leadership

Jamie Manson | Aug. 6, 2012 Grace on the Margins

As we move toward the eve of what is undoubtedly the most important general assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the organization?s history, it?s remarkable to take note of how many articles, commentaries, blogs, and cartoons have been dedicated to the Vatican?s scrutiny of women religious.

Though much of this writing about LCWR affirms and supports the sisters, often the comment sections that follow are laced with a few persistent criticisms. They typically go something like this, ?It doesn?t matter what happens to these women. Their average age is 70, their numbers are dying out, and no one will care a generation from now. The error of their ways has caused their decline,? and so forth.

Comments like this are mean-spirited in many ways, but for me, the real ugliness comes in how profoundly ageist these sentiments are. Yes, it is true, LCWR is an aging group and the number of women making vows has diminished significantly over the past several decades. (The same, of course, can be said of the Roman Catholic clergy in this country, but traditionalists conveniently overlook that parallel.)

However, just because the majority of women religious are over sixty, does not make them unworthy of attention. The fact that they are an aging organization does not mean that what they are doing is of no value or consequence. The fact that their numbers are shrinking does not mean that they haven?t made significant contributions to the life of the church and that their work and witness are not of crucial importance to the future of the church.

Much of the positive commentary on LCWR has focused on what the sisters have done on behalf of those facing sickness, poverty, and other forms of injustice. Less attention has been paid to the ?L? in LCWR: that is, the sisters? remarkable style of leadership.

Faith-based groups and secular organizations alike can learn volumes from the ways in which women religious have allowed their communities to evolve, and the creative impact that this evolution has had on the way in which they lead their communities.

I recently interviewed a sister for an article unrelated to the LCWR story. In the course of our conversation, she talked about entering the convent in 1959 at the age of twenty. She recounted how ?tough? the formation process was in those days.

?They told us what to do. We didn?t have to think for ourselves,? she told me. In that kind of system, she said, ?we didn?t have to take any responsibility.?

That was what obedience meant to the sisters back then, and if hierarchy were to have its way, it is the form of obedience to which women religious would return.

But as the sisters began to implement the changes of Vatican II, their notions of leadership and obedience expanded. As LCWR president Sister Pat Farrell told Terry Gross in an interview with NPR last month [1]:

?The word obedience comes from the Latin root meaning to hear, to listen. And so as I have come to understand that vow, what it means to me is that we listen to what God is calling us to in the signs of our times.?

Within a generation, women religious allowed their organization to evolve from a system of rigid obedience, to a leadership structure that is non-hierarchical and collaborative. And they demonstrated that this type of community and leadership is not only rooted in the gospel values, it is deeply Catholic in spirit, mission, and belief.

For decades the sisters have been doing all of this transformative work while those who live outside religious communities were still caught up in the caricatures of nuns peddled by everyone from Hollywood to the makers of gag gifts like nunzilla or the boxing nun puppet.

Women religious evolved so rapidly and radically, that most of us didn?t catch up with them until earlier this year, when the Vatican?s Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith inadvertently cast a spotlight on their extraordinary lives.

It is true that a small minority of young Roman Catholics are attracted to the counter-cultural ways of the hierarchy, which are marked by patriarchal control, absolute obedience, and the conviction that they are the keepers of unquestionable and unchangeable truths.

But there is more than one way of being counter-cultural in our society. My sense is that more young people are interested in learning from the counter-cultural model exhibited by women religious, which is marked by non-authoritarian leadership, collaborative decision-making, and missions that are driven by actively listen to the needs of the larger community.

The LCWR?s general assembly is a testimony to the nature of the sisters? leadership style. As is the case with previous assemblies, hours have been set-aside for information-sharing, communal contemplation, and executive sessions where members will exchange ideas about next steps.

Of course, given the weight of the issues they will discern at this year?s gathering, more hours than usual will be devoted to these kinds of meetings.

Women religious have taught us how to be church not simply in the work they do with the marginalized, but in the way in which they organize and lead themselves.

They have set an important precedent, especially for new generations who are exploring ways to develop forms of leadership that are trustworthy, who want to do faith-based, social justice organizing that is free of an evangelical agenda, and who are looking for a tradition that will ground their beliefs and deepen their spiritualties.

Anyone who has seen or read about the traveling exhibit ?Women & Sisters: Catholic Sisters in America,? [2] knows that for three hundred years women religious have blazed many trails in the U.S.

They taught young girls and African American children because they knew they would not get an education otherwise. They tended to wounded Confederate and Union soldiers, because, unlike the armies, they had the experience of running over a dozen hospitals. Their unyielding commitment to the poor and the sick also helped mitigate the anti-Catholic sentiment that existed in the U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

But all along, they have been laboring on another frontier as well. They have been at forming a vision of what inclusive, collaborative, engaged leadership might look like in the Catholic church.

The way in which women religious work -- from their formation process to their engagement with the modern world to their leadership style -- is decades, if not centuries, ahead of the hierarchy that is now attempting to control them.

They have created among themselves a form of church that so many restless Catholics long for: small, supportive, non-hierarchical, intimate communities that are deeply rooted in tradition, devoted to sacramental life, and grounded in outreach to the poor and marginalized.

If we look closely, we might find that they have created and continue to create a model of that church that many of us dream about.

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NCR will be reporting on the LCWR assembly all week. Previous reports:

- **Outside LCWR meeting, victims allege abuse by sisters** [4], Aug. 9
- **Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century** [5], Aug. 8
- **LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps** [6], Aug. 8
- **LCWR past presidents reflect on Vatican mandate** [7], Aug. 7
- **LCWR to determine course at next week's annual meeting** [8], July 31

For related commentary see:

- **The Vatican, LCWR, and Definitions of Dialogue** [9] By Kevin Aschenbrenner
- **What LCWR teaches us about church leadership** [10] By Jamie L. Manson
- **Are these sisters dangerous women?** [11] By Patrick T. Reardon
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