

Reflections

September, 2012

On April 18, 2012, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued a doctrinal assessment that was highly critical of the Leadership Conference of Woman Religious (LCWR), the officially recognized umbrella organization that represents about 80% of the 57,000 Catholic sisters in the United States. The assessment, completed after a three-year study, accused the organization of “corporate dissent” on sexual issues and a “prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith,” as well as failing to speak out more vigorously against abortion and gay marriage. Furthermore, the CDF appointed Archbishop James Peter Sartain of Seattle to oversee a reform of LCWR so that its statutes, statements and programs adhere more closely to “the teachings and discipline of the Church.”

After receiving this decree, the leaders of LCWR instituted a process of discussion and discernment to determine their response. They invited input from the approximately 400 orders they represent, held regional meetings, and consulted with past presidents of their organization. More than 900 sisters continued the discernment process at their annual meeting in St. Louis from August 7-10, “listening to the Holy Spirit” so they could “respond with integrity.”

During their meeting, LCWR presented Sister Sandra Schneiders with their most prestigious leadership award. In her acceptance presentation, Schneiders addressed the topic of church leadership in the context of Vatican II, for her the theological issue at the heart of the dispute with the Vatican. She noted that the church founded by Jesus has a unique nature and mission unlike any other social organization. It is a community gathered around Christ in which “there is no slave or master, no national or ethnic superiorities, no gender domination, no

inequality that is theologically or spiritually significant except holiness, and in which even distinctions of role and function are not titles to power but differences which must serve the unity of the whole. It is a community in which all vie for the lowest place, wash one another's feet, lift rather than impose burdens, and dwell among their sisters and brothers as those who serve."

Schneiders argued that Christian leadership works best when the leaders emerge from the community and are able to articulate the faith, hopes and commitments of the group. She contrasted clerical leaders who are regularly imposed on faith communities without consultation with the leaders of Religious Congregations who are freely elected because they represent the best hopes and commitments of the community. Applying this point, she suggested an inconsistency in the position of the bishops who say they love and admire the sisters, but have problems with the LCWR, an organization composed of leaders elected by those beloved sisters. For her, Christian leaders today are called not merely to preserve the status quo, but to foster a discernment process that anticipates the new challenges of the contemporary world. Schneiders concluded by lauding the style of leadership developed by the religious communities in the United States, a style that fosters community interests and a life of service while challenging all forms of dominative power in the church and society. The address given by Sr. Sandra Schneiders invites further reflection on how leadership in the church today can best further the mission of Jesus to spread the reign of God in the world.

In her presidential address to the LCWR assembly, Sr. Pat Farrell gave another important talk that sheds light on the controversy with the Vatican. She recognized that LCWR was facing an historical moment with much at stake for the whole church, but cautioned her colleagues not to allow the doctrinal assessment to distract them from their real mission as disciples of Christ. Focusing on the big picture, they should remember that there is "an inherent existential tension between the complimentary roles of hierarchy and religious which is not likely to change."

After putting the whole matter in this larger perspective, Farrell went on to suggest some “tools” for navigating this current impasse and preparing for “a fresh inbreaking of the Reign of God.” She suggested that these tools or resources are already available to the sisters “within our own spiritual DNA.” The primary tool, not surprisingly, “is a deep, contemplative prayer life so that our collective wisdom can be gathered and God can carve out a deeper knowing in us.” Drawing on their experience as prophetic witnesses to countercultural Gospel values, their response to the Vatican mandate “should be “humble but not submissive; rooted in a solid sense of ourselves but not self-righteous; truthful but gentle and absolutely fearless.” Another resource is the wisdom gleaned from ministering to those on the margins, persons who know “the truth of our limited and messy human condition” marked by fragility and inevitable struggle. Following the example of Jesus, their response should be non-violent “It entails resisting rather than colluding with abusive power,” and should refuse “to accept ultimatums and dead-end definitions without imaginative attempts to reframe them.” Non-violence “refuses to shame, blame, threaten or demonize,” it rather calls us “to befriend our own darkness and brokenness rather than projecting it onto another.” Farrell concluded by proposing joyful hope, a “hallmark of genuine discipleship,” as an important tool for navigating the current impasse. In dealing with all the tensions in the church today, Sr. Pat Farrell reminds us of the importance of contemplative prayer, humble courage, and non-violent approaches.

At the end of their annual assembly, the LCWR issued a press release indicating that the more than 900 participants charged the officers to begin a conversation with Archbishop Sartain with the expectation that “open and honest dialogue may lead not only to increased understanding between the church leadership and women religious, but also to create more possibilities for the laity, and particularly for women, to have a voice in the church.” This conversation should proceed “from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue.” The press release noted: “The officers will proceed with these discussions as long as possible, but will reconsider if LCWR is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission.” The assembly expressed its disappointment with the CDF report and insisted that religious life as lived by LCWR members is an authentic

expression of the theology and spirituality of the Second Vatican Council. LCWR should maintain its role as “a voice for justice in the world” and its officers should not allow the CDF mandate to detract from this mission. In commenting on the coming dialogue, Pat Farrell said it will begin not with a discussion of doctrine but with “our understanding of religious life” and the “misrepresentation” of that life in the Vatican assessment. She added that we will see how the discussion unfolds from there.

In looking for ways to deal with this conflict and others in the church, we can find wisdom in the work of the great American Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904-1968). In a 1967 article published in *America* magazine under the title “Freedom, Authority, Community,” Murray pointed out that Vatican II dealt with political freedom but left unanswered the question of freedom within the church, resulting in what some have called “a crisis of authority” and others “a crisis of freedom.” In addressing this problem, Murray preferred to frame the issue in terms of “a crisis of community” which is rooted in diverse perceptions of the nature of human communities, including the church. He used Pope Leo XIII as representative of the classic view of authority and freedom. Influenced by modern attacks on political and church authority, Leo saw the church through the lens of Vatican I that put great emphasis on the Petrine office and tended to identify the church with the Pope. Leo taught that church leaders make the doctrinal and pastoral decisions while the faithful are called to submit to these decisions and execute them. From this perspective, the task of lay persons is to do the will of the hierarchy, leaving little room for lay freedom, creativity and initiative. In this model of the church, authority tends to trump freedom and rule out lay initiative.

According to Murray, Vatican II did set a foundation for a discussion of freedom in the church by describing the faith community as the people of God; the interpersonal community of the baptized united in love through Christ and the Holy Spirit; the witness to the world of divine love; and as a visible society with a structure of authority designed to further its mission. While Vatican I emphasized the institutional structures of authority, Vatican II began with the church as a community and understood the institutional aspects as serving the whole people of God. This

shift put more emphasis on the freedom of all the faithful and suggested new functions of church authorities. The first function of authority is to promote the unity of the church through loving service and open dialogue. Authority elicits the insights of all the baptized and “stirs their love” for the good of the whole community and its service to the world. Murray argued that the political principle which states that there should be as much freedom as possible, and only as much restriction as necessary, applies analogously to the church as well. He recognized that the church needed new structures so that the hierarchy could exercise their unitive role through genuine dialogue. At the same time the hierarchy must also exercise both a directive and corrective function to ensure that the Body of Christ stay faithful to the apostolic tradition and function in a unified way in its service to the world. Directives work best when they are a product of doctrinal and pastoral dialogue between the faithful and their pastors. Corrective actions must be subject to due process that respects the Christian dignity and freedom of all the members of the church.

Murray also offers guidelines for exercising freedom within the church, viewed as an ordered community with a mission. The Spirit is given to all the baptized so that they can participate confidently in the dialogue with authority and contribute to the growth of the church. Christian freedom involves the capacity to love, to give of self, and to achieve communion with others. Participating in “the dialogue of salvation,” continually going on in the church, is not only “the first exercise in Christian freedom,” it is also an exercise in obedience seen in its horizontal dimension as essentially related to authority within a community of mutual love and trust.

For Murray, Christian freedom involves the secondary function of duty and obligation, doing what we ought to do. This may call for self-sacrifice, freely joined to the Paschal Mystery of Christ, which is, in its deepest reality, an act of self-fulfillment. Obedience to church authority, exercised within the context of mutual dialogue, allows for a collaborative effort to carry out the mission of the church.

Freedom as choice is always threatened by what Paul called “the flesh,” all the elements in our world that draw us away from God. True Christian freedom involves a “self-corrective” function that refuses “to submit again to a yolk of slavery” (Gal 5:1). All the baptized, including the leaders, need to be self-critical, exercising the “mortifying act of Christian freedom.” This is the unique modality of the freedom taught by Christ who freed us for a life of service.

In concluding his essay, Murray insists that the classic vertical relationship of authority and freedom in the church needs “to assume a more Christian and therefore more human form by standing forth in the living flesh and blood that is the Christian community.” There will always be a tension between freedom and authority in the Christian community, but the challenge and opportunity is “to make the tension healthy and creative, releasing the energies radiant from both poles for their one common task, which is to build the beloved community.”

This balanced and elegantly expressed analysis by John Courtney Murray provides a great framework for reflecting on all the freedom and authority issues of the church today, including the current dispute between the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the LCWR. Following Murray, the crucial first step is to create a trusting atmosphere within the faith community that fosters genuine dialogue on behalf of the unity and mission of the church. This is the common task of all the baptized, including the ordained leaders.

