

ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS

I can find no words to adequately express my appreciation to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for their choice to associate me in this special way with their extraordinary ministry of leadership not only to women Religious, but to the whole Church, and to the world to which the Church is missioned. Wonderful as this occasion is, however, it would be disingenuous to pretend that this year's meeting of LCWR is simply an "annual event." As its president, Sister Pat Farrell, said in opening the meeting, "this is a meeting like no other."

It was only a couple weeks after I received the call from Janet Mock telling me of this award that the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith launched a staggering assault on LCWR that stunned its leaders and members and shocked many in the larger Church and beyond.

I do not want to minimize the seriousness and even danger of the distressing situation with which our leaders have been dealing over these past days, much less whitewash the genuine scandal it has caused. But in the context of this evening's gathering which, despite everything, is meant to celebrate the remarkable history, the current life and vigor, and the free and hopeful future of this wonderful organization, I want to focus on something that I think is both more important for our present and our future, and infinitely more worthy of our attention. Without negating the very real sociological, psychological, and political issues involved, to which our attention has been called over these past months by the analyses of various professionals, I would like to focus, in this golden jubilee year of Vatican II, on the theological issue at the heart of this struggle and of others that are stressing our Church at this time: that of *ecclesial leadership in the context of the theology of Vatican II*.

The leitmotif of the Council was the nature and mission of the Church. The Council recognized that if the Church was to be for the modern world what it is called to be, the Body

of Christ at the service of the world that God so loved as to give God's only Son for its salvation, the Church's self-understanding, structures, procedures, and relationships required thoroughgoing *aggiornamento*, both reform and renewal. The most important documents that emerged from the Council concerned divine revelation [*Dei Verbum*] which is the ground of the Church and its life and whose mediation into the world is the Church's primary vocation and responsibility; the nature of the Church [*Lumen Gentium*] expressed and celebrated in the liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*] and lived in its mission to the modern world [*Gaudium et Spes*]; freedom of conscience [*Dignitatis Humanae*] which enables people to personally engage revelation, to participate in the Church's internal life, and to take responsibility for its mission as adult human beings called to share in God's life; and the promoting of the Church's relationship in mutuality with all people including non-Catholic Christians, people of other spiritual traditions [*Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate*], and even non-believers. I want to concentrate for a moment, then, on the theology of the Church, its identity and mission, in order to raise the issue of what kind of leadership the Church needs in this time of crisis.

The Council took us back to the roots of ecclesiology in the Old Testament, to the theology of the Church as the Pilgrim -- that is, the not-yet-arrived -- People of God, created in God's own image as male and female who are equal partners with each other participating in God's own responsibility for creation itself, including the human family, on its historical way through this world to the New Jerusalem. In the New Testament that Chosen People was called deeper into the mystery of God, called to become not only a "light to the nations" (see, Is. 42:1-9; Lk. 2:29-32; Mt. 12:15-21; Acts 26:18-23) but the very Body of Christ, the presence of the Risen Jesus, acting in the world for its salvation (see, Eph. 4 and Rom. 12:3-8).

God, in the person of Jesus, acted out for us what that salvific work should look like. In Jesus we contemplate the paradoxical relationship of God, the all powerful Creator, to power. Jesus did not come to exercise coercive power over recalcitrant sinners, to forcibly mold them

according to some abstract divine plan of moral perfection. Jesus did not even found a family of which he would have been, in his culture, the patriarchal head and absolute authority. He neither sought nor accepted any office or position of authority or power in his religious community of Israel. He was called to be a prophet (see Lk. 4:16-21), to exercise a spiritual ministry that was not guaranteed by any official appointment, conferred no office, and gave him no institutional leverage. As a prophet he exerted only the influence of truth and love, the authority of his own integrity in witnessing to the God who sent him. Jesus never resorted to violence, thought-control or loyalty oaths, intimidation through shaming or threats of rejection, expulsion from the covenant community, execution, or eternal damnation. Rather, Jesus taught by world-subverting parables, challenging questions, insistent dialogue, by patient persuasion, repeated invitation, probing argument, and especially by his original and arresting interpretations of Scripture which were sometimes startling in their radicality because Jesus favored people and their needs over the requirements of even the most sacred laws (see, e.g., Mt. 12:1-8). He questioned and challenged both the ordinary people he dealt with and the authorities of his religious tradition. He, though divine by nature, refused to be made complicit in anyone's program of playing God in relation to others (see Jn. 8:1-11). But he also allowed himself to be challenged, for example, in regard to his sense of the exclusivity of Israel's vocation (see, Mk. 7:24-28).

But finally, when he was rejected by the leaders of his religious community and sentenced to death by the powers of the Roman Empire, he accepted death rather than change or suppress the message he had come to offer: the radical, almost unbelievable, message of God's absolute and unconditional love for every human being, a love that would not be withheld from or defeated by even the most serious sinner. God raised the executed Jesus from the dead and restored him to his followers, whom he then empowered to continue to be his saving presence in the world, warning them that they would face the same fate he had if they remained faithful to

his “scandalous” message of God’s all-inclusive, law-relativizing love. This is the nature and mission of the community called Church, the Body of Christ in this world.

The spirituality of Christian leadership is determined by the kind of community the Church is and the kind of mission with which it is charged. The Church that Jesus formed around himself is not an imitation of any secular model of community and therefore its leadership cannot and must not mimic the exercise of authority of secular power structures. The Church is not a divine right monarchy in which some individual person is vested by God with absolute divine power over all the members. Nor is it a one-person-one-vote democracy in which truth or even policy is decided by a majority, leaving the minority to fend for itself. It is not an oligarchy or rule by the powerful few whether they be titled nobles, or military officers, or corporation moguls, or vested clergy. It is not a plutocracy or rule of the very wealthy, nor a totalitarian dictatorship in which truth is decided and right is established by the brute force of the most powerful. It is not even that probably best form of secular government we humans have devised so far, the republic in which power is vested in, and exercised representatively by, the governed.

The Church is a unique kind of community, the union of those baptized into Christ, formed by his Word which is not bound (see 2 Tim. 2:8-9) -- never fully grasped nor controlled by anyone -- gathered around the table where we share Christ’s Body in order to become his Body for the world. It is a community 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.

What kind of leadership is possible and appropriate in such a community, in the Pilgrim People of God called to be the Body of Christ in this world? What is the spirituality of leadership that Jesus modeled and taught among the somewhat ragtag group of very ordinary women and men whom he formed into the first Christian community? What does such leadership look like on the ground, in our day and age, in our post-modern culture? Let me make three suggestions about what, minimally, Gospel leadership would look like.

First, the leaders would *emerge from the community* rather than imposing themselves or being imposed upon it. They would be chosen because they share, incarnate, model, and articulate the faith and hope and commitments of the group. Several times since the mandate of the CDF was imposed on the LCWR the bishops in charge have insisted that they have no problem with the Sisters whom they love and admire. It is only their leaders who are problematic. But, unlike clerical leaders who are regularly imposed, without consultation, on communities to whom they have no relationship, because of the loyalty of the appointee to the higher authority rather than to the community to whom he is sent, the leaders of Religious Congregations are freely elected by the members precisely because they *do* represent the best hopes and commitments of the community. Leaders of Religious communities are chosen *from* the community, *for* the community, and when they complete their term of service they will not move up to a higher post in a power structure but will resume their place *in* the community. Leaders in Religious communities are and remain fundamentally equals of their sisters or brothers. They are not called or empowered or sent to dominate or lord it over the community, to take the first place in the assembly or dress in finery or give themselves honorific titles or demand obsequious marks of respect, but to be the servants of all, even to the laying down of their lives in various ways for those they serve.

Secondly, the leader of a Gospel community, a community with a mission to the whole world which God so loved, would, like Jesus who prepared his disciples for what lay ahead,

exercise what Pat Farrell in her recent National Public Radio interview called “*anticipatory leadership*.” Anticipatory leadership is not just crisis management, or shop-tending, or *status quo* preservation, and certainly not a channeling of abstract absolutes from without. It is an active fostering of discernment about what is coming toward us from the future and how we can be prepared, like good stewards drawing on treasures both old and new (see Mt. 13:52), to meet those new challenges with the riches of the Gospel tradition but also with the best contemporary resources and communal reflection.

Third, the leaders of a genuinely Christian community must be capable of leading that community not only to *do* what is needed *in* this world but also to *be* what is needed *by* this world, not only to *act efficaciously but to live with integrity*. It is not enough that leaders themselves not abuse or dominate the members of the community but, like the Good Shepherd who does not abandon the flock when it is in danger (see Jn. 10:11-13), they must resist and energize the community to resist whatever threatens its integrity, whether such threats come from within or without, whether they are spiritual or societal or ecclesiastical. To incarnate, promote, and above all witness to the freedom of the Gospel in the face of interlocking domination systems, both secular and religious, is a primary task of the Christian community, the Body of Christ in this world, and we have been made very aware in the past six months of just how urgently the Church, and even people outside the Church’s formal boundaries, are looking to Religious communities for leadership, for a witness to integrity, for a living model of what it means to be Church in these difficult times.

Given the project that is Religious Life it is not at all surprising that this lifeform has generated, and is still developing, a form of Gospel leadership which is increasingly emerging into public view as a genuine alternative to ecclesiastical or secular leadership defined as dominative power. This, for me, and I think for people all over this country and beyond, is what LCWR kin. *This kind* of servant leadership in *this kind* of Gospel community is as baffling to

those in power today as was Jesus' mode of leadership to the Temple hierarchy and the Roman Empire of his time. Those in power only wanted to know, under penalty of death, whether in fact, Jesus was a king, a dangerous challenger subverting their domination systems. But Jesus replied, "*You* are the ones who are talking about *power*. For this have *I* come into the world, to bear witness to the *truth*. Those who are of the truth hear my voice" (cf. Jn. 18:37).

It is that witness which I have so long admired not only in the leadership of my own Religious congregation, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which is, in an important sense, the real recipient of tonight's award, but also in the courageous and visionary leadership of those gathered in this room and their predecessors. Thank you for this honor, but most of all, thank you for your service and witness to all of us, your Sisters, and to the Church and world we serve.

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