



Women at the Well *Dialogues* Visioning Carmel for the 21st Century

Leading Through a Time of Change

LCWR Occasional Papers – Winter 2008

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LCWR's director of communications Annmarie Sanders, IHM interviewed Ray about his insights on what these rapidly changing times are demanding of religious life leaders and how they might effectively respond.

Q: At this year's LCWR assembly, the keynoter, Laurie Brink, OP, spoke of "the elephant in the living room" of religious congregations today. She name the elephant "Indecision", noting that religious congregations are not moving together in any direction and suggested that unless congregations choose a common direction and move together, religious life will not survive. From your experience, would you say that this is true? And, if so, what might be happening that has led to this phenomenon within religious communities?

I would agree that we seem to be paralyzed in our ability to make a decision to go forward in any particular direction. I think what is underneath that indecision is an inner experience of real ambivalence – an ambivalence that arises from a sense of powerlessness or futility. It's often expressed as, "Nothing that we do is going to make any difference anyway, so why should we even bother?" Or, "Absolutely, something should be done, something should change, somebody should do something different, but that somebody is somebody other than me." We often think that if only other people would change, then everything would be all right, and allow ourselves the luxury of waiting for the world outside of us to change before we take any steps ourselves.

If we are going to move forward, we have to name the reality of our ambivalence and challenge it. Ambivalence looks for a place that is comfortable and where it can just sit. We can challenge ambivalence in ourselves and others by raising rather than lowering expectations, which will inevitably evoke a reaction of greater resistance. The raising of expectations shakes us out of the comfort of staying still, but in a way that is disturbing, and so our reaction to raised expectations is usually not positive or cooperative. If we are going to overcome the ambivalence that is paralyzing us, we need to withstand the initial resistance to doing anything new or different, absorb the initial reactivity that will come with a fury,

and continue to expect more of ourselves and one another rather than less. However while we need to raise expectations it is essential that we communicate those raised expectations in a manner that is not judgmental or demanding. In face of condemnation and demands, ambivalence grows stronger and causes us to dig our heels in even deeper. The raising of expectations has been accompanied by a lot of love and reassurance that makes it possible for us and others to go forward with some security.

So if religious life is going to become a real life-giving experience for the people living it, expectations need to be raised for each of us in the places where we are most resistant to having expectations raised. This requires a real willingness to challenge ourselves. Leaders have a role in inviting us to do this. To move religious life forward, we all have to look at what it is about this life that I don't really buy into and I'm not that interested in and then ask how I might be called to conversion in that area.

Q: Religious life today seems to require a capacity to live with change as a continuous experience. What could help religious live healthily in this kind of environment?

Life, and not just religious life, requires a capacity to live with change as a continuous experience, and I don't think that's just today, I think that's life. Life on this planet has always been a constant evolution in something different and new. The social forces in organizations are always in upheaval, the economic forces that drive us are always shifting and changing, even the physical climate is changing. We are all, as people, living in an environment where forces are changing all around us. We have to find a way to respond to them.

I think religious have a real role to play in terms of figuring out how to be in a reality that is changing all the time and isn't under our control and entering into it with faith, hope, and love, rather than from a stance of mere survival. We are called to be people who genuinely search for God in the midst of the changing reality. From our religious traditions, charisms, and spirituality, we have the resources that make us better educated than any other group on the planet to live with and respond effectively to change. We have the spiritualities that call us all to detachment in some form and that invite us to be ready and able to serve the evolving needs of the world. If we are going to respond to this ever-changing world in the healthiest way for ourselves and in service to the world, we have to look at the reality of the world without any denial or illusion, and without pretending that the changes are not also happening to us.

We also need to resist our innate desire to react to change. We have to allow the experiences of change to rattle around inside of us and pay attention to what they are doing to us as individual human beings and as a group of human beings. That means needing to talk about how the change feels, whether it frightens me, makes me angry, is a source of sadness and grief. We need to be honest about how things are actually affecting us and using that honesty to see truths about ourselves. Seeing the truth is not usually very fun because it makes us pretty vulnerable. But it is in this very contemplative listening space that we can see the changes that are happening as an invitation to the place where we really encounter God – which is the point of religious life. The key to doing this well is not only found in praying well, but praying in a way that allows us to tell the truth about what is happening in our lives and the truth about ourselves. And that is hard.

Q: Is there anything that you could recommend to leaders who might want to encourage that kind of honest appraisal of reality among their members?

I think they could start by telling the truth as fully as possible about what is really happening and not try to protect members from the financial realities, personnel realities, and other pragmatic realities. And then they could ask each member to be responsible for this truth. But they also need to engage people with this information on an emotional level. I think some leaders are doing this, but I don't know if we do it long enough or regularly enough, or stay with our feeling level long enough to have it be really revelatory. We need to invite people to acknowledge their fear, their anger, and certainly their sadness and grief over what we are losing, because change is about loss. You don't change anything without losing something, even if you are getting something more. We need to name our anger and not have it be about what is happening outside of us, but letting it reveal our neediness and our powerlessness. As events are happening in religious communities, we need to give members the time, space, permission, and guidance to go into their own emotional life and see what it is really revealing about themselves.

In some situations of reconfiguration, I have seen communities work hard at engaging members in making collaborative decisions, and they are doing a great job. But I don't know if we always acknowledge the loss that these kinds of change involve. The emphasis seems to be that this new move will be a good thing for us as we go forward and it will help us do new and better things and do them longer. That all is probably absolutely true, but when members start to feel that they are losing something and if that loss is not addressed, then their hearts and minds will not be engaged in embracing the new reality. Telling the truth in these situations means that we have to be straightforward and honest about the costs and the loss. And, of course, we often don't know what it is that we are going to lose until we actually start losing it.

Q: What about voluntary change? What leads people to choose to change on their own?

This is a very tricky question because unless we have to change, we tend not to. Rarely do we choose to change. Even when my head knows that a change would be good, it takes a lot of convincing to the rest of me to take the steps to change. People in religious life see that this life, as it is now, will not last. But when we see that, we tend to think that someone else has to do something about it, rather than I have to do something. Change generally has to be seen as something that will be in our best interest and that it will benefit us more than it will cost us.

This is where religious are called to approach change differently than most people and go into it with a sense of faith, rather than focus on the practicalities. In religious life we probably are not going to see how change will benefit us. Some of the changes that we are going to be called to in the future are not going to be seen as benefiting us at all. They are going to cost a great deal and we are going to lose a lot through them. So the resistance is going to be very powerful. If we pretend that change is not going to cost us, then as soon as it does, we will go back to the way we were before.

Responding to change requires that people be on their toes, yet we often prefer to settle. The biggest challenge of change is the work of maintaining it. So, leaders are the ones who are going to have to exert the energy needed to make sure that people stay the course of change. Things will get difficult and will get hard. This is when leaders have to keep the attention of the members on why changes are important and necessary. They are going to have to do lots of engaging with resistance with great affection and love. The inertia of ambivalence is very powerful and it will keep trying to pull us back.

Q: At the LCWR assembly, Lynn Levo, CSJ raised the questions: “Are our boundaries as religious institutes too porous? Do we need to name more clearly who we are as religious?” How important is it for religious today to be clear on what religious life is?

We deal with a healthy and creative tension in trying to keep a balance between wanting to be part of the rest of the human race and needing to have an identity of our own. The danger is that we can try to resolve that tension prematurely by saying that we want to go one way at the exclusion of the other. We can say that we want to include everyone with us, that we don't want to be set apart from the human race and want to be joined with them completely. And we absolutely need to attend to that desire within us. If we separate ourselves completely, though, then we are not of use to anybody. But we do need to see ourselves as set apart from others and acknowledge, without condescension or superiority, that we are not like the rest of people. Both truths about our identity need to be held in creative tension, not giving into one or the other prematurely, if we are to find our true identity as religious. Living with an awareness of these two poles is a tense place, but I think that our vocation is precisely to be in that very tense place, and to be there with depth.

Religious life does set us apart in terms of what we are called to be. Our uniqueness is going to be in our willingness to go deeper in the way we respond to the reality of life happening to us along with everyone else. It is not particularly useful to set ourselves apart from others in surface ways like dressing differently or living in different kinds of houses unless that really serves the deeper project of engaging the real experiences of life in a deeper and different way than most people. The unique identity of religious is in the depth by which we embrace life and other people.

Q: Can you say more about the depth with which you believe religious are called to live?

I think this is found primarily in the difference between reacting to things happening to us, to external events crashing into us, and responding to whatever is happening with a genuine sense of faith, hope, and love. Going deeper means not succumbing to the illusions that we are safe from harm and not vulnerable because of the security we might enjoy as people with education, influence, and even financial security, but deliberately seeing the precariousness of our existence and our powerlessness to control those forces that make us vulnerable. Going deeper means finding the grace that is found when weakness, power reaches perfection.

Going deeper means a willingness to risk rather than attempt to mitigate all risk to ourselves while maximizing the safety of others in our care. Going deeper means to risk humiliation and rejection by offering our service when it is not the service requested by the world and even the church, but it is what we genuinely and authentically have to offer. Going deeper means having the humility to learn from the least of our brothers and sisters as well as the most of our brothers and sisters and the courage and willingness to teach both. Going deeper means allowing the various points of view and perspectives so widely available in this post-post-post modern world, including and especially those with which we do not agree and seem to be dismissive of our own perspective, to have an impact on us and perhaps challenge us. Going deeper means to open ourselves to criticism as a valuable resource to self-awareness rather than defensively protecting what we have settled into as a way to engage life comfortably. To pick up a point I tried to make earlier, going deeper means attending especially to the invitations to change to which I may be most resistant and being self-critical enough to look at why I am resisting those changes.

During my first year studying theology at the Washington Theological Union, Ed Dobbin, OSA taught us about the transcendental method of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan. That method has four steps and those four steps challenge us to go deeper in exactly the way I think we need to. We are called to pay close attention to what is really happening to us, to be curious and ask a lot of questions about our experience in order to see it as fully and as accurately as possible, to be critical, especially self-critical about the responses we see ourselves and others automatically considering as the best ways to respond, and finally to act in the most responsible way possible. I think we are called to this depth in the smallest and most insignificant experiences as well as experiences that seem to be cosmic and universal. I think religious, and I think all of the charisms and traditions of religious life show us different ways to do this, are called to engage intentionally in this kind of depth in as many experiences of life as we can.

Q: There are many external forces trying to shape religious life today that may try to define our unique vocation in other ways. How can a group engage these forces in a meaningful way and in a way that helps them be clear about who they are and who they want to be?

There are lots of people who want religious to be what they want us to be: the institutional church, the laity, and all sorts of other forces. We can respond to this in a way that is very healthy and whole, if we put a real check on our reactivity to it. For example, we might read some directive from the Vatican about religious life and find our muscles tensing and the hairs on the back of our neck standing up. We start saying, “They have no right to talk to us like that. Who do they think they are?”

I suggest that rather than just react, we might be more consistent with who we are called to be if we can receive the efforts of any external force, whether it is the institutional church or the secular world, without dismissing too quickly or submitting to it unreflectively. We receive it with an authentic desire to listen to it, to consider what wisdom that voice might contain that we would not otherwise have access to. Instead of pushing those external voices aside and reacting to them by dismissing them, we can bring it into our contemplative space and ask: “How does this rattle inside of me? What in this might really be calling me forth to something deeper and more authentic?” If we could do that, we are going to be in a place that is a lot less dismissive of people, which is a natural, but very violent, tendency born of our innate drive for self-preservation. Instead, we allow for the possibility that there might be wisdom contained in what others are asking of us that we would never ask of ourselves.

All of these external forces who try to define us have something to say. We do not need to figure out what we are called to because we are not called to be everything that everyone wants us to be, but we can’t do that well if we dismiss input coming to us because it might be coming from sources we have already learned to mistrust. Otherwise, we are just talking to ourselves. We need to listen to what we feel when we hear the input, and know that those feelings are more revelatory of ourselves than of the external force calling us to something, and also to listen to the voice of God in the midst of all those voices and forces. With all of that input, we make a choice that is consistent with our integrity as persons and with our vocation and mission.

Q: You have said that you think religious life in the future will include martyrdom. What makes you say this and what would you say to leaders in particular about this?

What we witnessed in Myanmar in the fall when the monks took on the secular, oppressive government was very powerful. That has something to say to us as religious. I don't think that we are called to put ourselves in front of machine guns and let people kill us, but there are all sorts of martyrdoms in life. The willingness to surrender to things that matter to us for the sake of what we are to is a form of martyrdom. It is martyrdom when we allow ourselves to engage our own resistance to different parts of religious life. I might say, "I work very hard for the poor, I have a deep prayer life, and I have a very simple lifestyle, but I can't stand living with those in my community and I want to be by myself." Perhaps the martyrdom that I choose is to enter into the common life so that I am authentic to my call. These are the kinds of martyrdoms that will come when we allow ourselves to be called to do what we resist because it is going to be very inconvenient and filled with loss for us. There is also the martyrdom of trying to break away and free ourselves from the unjust, violent, and non-life-giving forces within our culture and society. If we are not willing to accept this kind of martyrdom, then there is not much point in religious life.

Q: Often leaders say that they know that there needs to be a shift in the concept of religious life leadership today, but they don't know how to bring that shift about. What do you believe leaders could do to help bring the members along in changing the concept of religious life leadership?

What I understand of the dynamics of leadership I have learned from being a group therapist, which is a lot simpler than trying to lead a congregation of several hundred men or women. But I do think that it helps to have an awareness and understanding of the dynamics that occur between people who are in positions of authority and the people they are trying to lead. While leaders have a job description and a mission that are probably outlined in constitutions and congregational documents and based on the Gospel, the reality is that every individual member has his or her own job description for the leader. Each one of us wants our leader to do something for us and to take care of us in a way that we want to be taken care of. My job description for my leader is, "Leave me alone. Take care of everybody else – particularly those who are bothering me – but leave me alone to do what I want." Other people have very different ideas. Some want to be more dependent on the leader, have their leader present with them, receive more attention. If leader tried to match the expectations and meet the needs of every single member, they would fail. They would burn out and, in the end, no one would be challenged to grow.

Often the last thing we want leaders to do is to call us forth to fidelity to our very difficult and painful mission, which is just the sort of calling forth to change that we have been talking about here. When leaders take their eye off the ball and start assuming that their job is to respond to the individual needs of members, then they won't be doing their real job which is to call forth members into the mission. Yet when they try to do that, they will encounter enormous resistance of all kinds. People try to disempower the leader in all kinds of ways, and this needs to be named. I think if leaders can be better educated on the natural dynamics that occur when human beings are gathered in groups, and particularly what happens between members and the person of authority, it will be helpful. There are ways to respond to these dynamics and learning them can help people carry out their leadership rather than be disempowered by the members.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about today that you might want to say to leaders?

Being a leader is a very, very stressful thing. My observation is that the time when religious are called to make sacrifices for the sake of the community is when they are called to leadership. Often these religious are called to surrender ministries which they deeply love and in which they are very effective in order to serve their brothers and sisters. That's a tremendous sacrifice. I have met and been edified by leaders who recognize that sacrifice and have allowed the martyrdom that it exacts to be a deep, faith-filled, and transformative experience for them.

I would like to suggest that leaders take the transformation that has happened to them in accepting this sacrificial change in their lives and use it as a model for what they can call members to. One of the realizations that I have come to is that the point of religious life is not what I can do for others, although I am called to that. But what is essential is what religious life does to me and the conversion and transformation it exacts. Often what most shapes and forms us are the things in life that we most resist, whether that be in the living of the vows, the common life, or ministry. The places of resistance are so sacred. If we resolve the tension that we feel in them too easily then we are missing most of what religious life can do for us.



Please take some time to reflect on the reading and respond to the following reflection questions. These are thought-starter questions designed for your personal reflection. What you share of your own personal reflections, in a dialogue session or with others, will be completely at your discretion. Taking the time to reflect on these readings and questions will prepare you to enter into dialogue. The readings and questions are intended to prepare hearts and minds to thoughtfully enter into communal and association dialogue.

Reflection Questions:

- The key words, phrases and concepts in this article that stood out for me are . . .
- One area in which I would like to live my life with more depth is . . .
- One area in which I would like my community to live with more depth is . . .
- Fr. Dlugos states each member of a community has an essential role to encourage authentic fidelity to the mission. This calls me to . . .
- How I handle/cope with change is . . .
- How my community handles/copes with change is . . .
- CCA can further support and enable living with more depth and adapting to change by . . .