



The Gift and Challenge of Communal Discernment

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*May you know the wisdom of deep listening,
The healing of wholesome words,
The encouragement of the appreciative gaze,
The decorum of held dignity,
The springtime edge of the bleak question. ¹
-- John O'Donohue*

Just four months after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued a mandate to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the conference was gathered with unusually large attendance at its 2012 national assembly. As the event was coming to a close, Annmarie Sanders, IHM, LCWR's communications director, stood before the group and read a proposed public position statement, summarizing members' deliberations about how to respond to the mandate. A spontaneous standing ovation and thunderous applause immediately followed the reading, indicating quick and easy approval by the assembly. A certain quiet then fell over the group. There was a palpable sense of gratitude, relief, and awe. In the span of just four days 900 congregational leaders of very divergent positions were able to endorse a common direction at a very critical, emotionally charged moment. Amazing! There was a recognition that we had just participated in a process that included us but that was also beyond us. There had been honest dialogue, a sense of the sacred, and real communal discernment. Many of us went away wondering at how it all came to be.

Among the many relationships LCWR needed to tend with great care during the doctrinal assessment process was the relationship with and among its own members. Public focus at the time looked more to LCWR's relationship with other key players: CDF, bishop delegates, Catholic laity, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the media, the Vatican. Without a doubt, building a relational climate with them which would allow genuine dialogue was of the essence. But LCWR's constituency of elected leaders of US women's congregations was the

group most directly affected by the mandate and the body holding the organization's power of decision-making. Good communication among us was essential. Mutual trust was necessary to move forward together. None of us wanted LCWR to be divided as a conference as a result of the CDF mandate, even as we were aware of differences among us in the face of a complex situation.

With hindsight two important elements had been key components of LCWR's effective process in determining a response to the Vatican mandate: contemplative reflection for communal discernment, and participative processes which facilitated inclusivity and mutuality. Let me describe both.

For a year or more prior to receiving the CDF mandate, LCWR had been guiding its members in learning a process of group contemplative reflection. It was very timely. The large-scale upheaval of one era fading and another trying to come to birth was more and more evident. Large global shifts were making themselves felt all around us. In that context, it was becoming clear that US women's congregations, facing a very uncertain future, needed to discern a way forward together from a place of spiritual depth. LCWR gatherings at national, regional, and local levels had begun using a contemplative reflection process as a way of hearing together how God was beckoning us forward. The method used was a form of communal discernment, weaving significant time for silent reflection with group sharing from a depth of listening. It was becoming a familiar and much appreciated practice just when the CDF mandate was given to LCWR.

LCWR members also have an experiential fluency with participative processes of self-governance. Many of us believe that an important legacy of US women religious to the church and world is the re-structuring and re-visioning of models of self-directed common life, inspired by the ecclesial document, *Perfectae Caritatis*. In response to the renewal invited by Vatican II, we created participative structures of leadership and of the exercise of authority and obedience. Decision-making became consultative, participative, a collective effort to hear the voice of God's Spirit discerned through and from the whole. These changes, while neither foolproof nor without error, offered some corrective to the authoritarianism which lent itself to domination and the abuse of power. Participative, relational processes for decision-making came to be a taken-for-granted part of who we are. They are operative in congregational structures as well as in the organizational design of LCWR, including in its three-person presidency. Those structures, well in place, were the given framework into which the mandate of the doctrinal assessment was given to US women religious.

These processes formed the backdrop, the set of givens, for how LCWR moved into formulating a response to the CDF mandate. A number of other procedural elements were also enormously helpful. I offer a sampling of them by recounting in detail two key LCWR gatherings: the first national board meeting and the first national assembly after receiving the mandate. LCWR's response unfolded over a three-year period and at each juncture modes of proceeding specific to the circumstances were utilized. However, the two critical LCWR meetings I will describe are illustrative of the general approach and style used throughout.

First Meeting of the LCWR National Board

In preparation for the first national board meeting after receiving the mandate, in May 2012, the presidents and executive director of LCWR communicated with the executive committee of the national board by conference call, recounting their experience in Rome and answering questions. A precedent was established in that call: sharing as much information as possible at suitable levels, and agreeing to appropriate confidentiality in judiciously deciding what information to make public when. That guiding pattern served us well throughout the entire process.

When the board met in person, we benefited from the help of a psychologist who led us in a process to surface and express emotions. The hope was to create a safe environment to communicate feelings openly so that the potential negative impact of anger and sadness would not create a toxic environment or cloud clear discernment of a response. Those feelings needed to be processed in order to harness and direct their energy. There were many emotions in the room, and we wanted to consciously integrate the force of those feelings into an unfolding process. It took time. The catharsis was clearly only a beginning, but helpful and instructive. A deeper bond had been forged among those present. We could see the need for and the value of doing something similar with the broader LCWR membership. At strategic points we did convene extra regional meetings for members to air feelings, provide mutual support, listen to one another, and strategize together in anticipation of critical decisions.

Another support at that first board meeting was the presence of a spiritual director, attending the process, listening for movements of the Spirit and reflecting that to the group at different moments. It was a great help in keeping all of us attentive to the divine presence within and among us. To what was God inviting us at this moment in time? What Scripture spoke to us? How were we being led? The spiritual director intermittently gave feedback and invited silent reflection,

prayer, or conversation. Her very presence was a call to live the process of responding to the CDF mandate from an awareness of God's presence and leading. We were invited to deep listening.

Why was the presence of a spiritual director important to us? Our desire was to be led into the most faithful response we could give at a moment when it was not easy to determine, in the heat of the moment, what was of God and what wasn't. It was a great benefit to have an outside ear listening for what might be the source of the responses that were surfacing. Were they coming from anger, from peace, from sincere searching, from an agitated soul, from knee-jerk emotions, from a listening heart? It was also helpful to have someone being consciously attentive to subtle movements of the Spirit in the group while each of us was more intently focused on the business at hand. Only through deep listening for God at work in our deliberations could we feel confident of being capable of moving toward right action.

Our listening included attempts to gather what we were hearing from LCWR members locally. Each board member summarized feedback she was getting from her geographical region. It was important to consider the experiences, concerns, and suggestions the national board members had been hearing from their members and to incorporate that perspective into our discernment.

There was also very deliberate gathering of needed information. Beginning with this first board meeting, and throughout the entire process, LCWR invited the perspective of various consultants. We heard from civil lawyers to better understand the rights and responsibilities of the national board in its role in the civil corporation of LCWR. A canon lawyer shared observations on the CDF document from the viewpoint of canon law, reflecting on its implications for LCWR as an entity with canonical status as a public juridic person. A prominent layman gave suggestions of ways to interface with the laity whose concerns for the church had been newly triggered by the mandate. At other key moments we invited the wisdom of theologians, as well as experts in organizational dynamics, nonviolent conflict transformation, and communications.

This input was intertwined with varied methods of small and large group processing. We asked what seemed to be coalescing, becoming clear. We considered what might be guiding principles, LCWR non-negotiables, in formulating a response to the mandate. We heard each person in turn reflect on possible next steps. We formulated possible scenarios. Perhaps most significantly, we engaged in a lengthy contemplative reflection process, a communal discernment tool now familiar to LCWR members. In that deep listening

there seemed to emerge a greater clarity about who we are and who we are called to be, about what really matters and what doesn't. A few of the emerging insights from that discernment:

- We believe in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. We embrace through grace the greater public role into which we have been thrust.
- LCWR, with our companions in faith, responds to the Spirit's call to speak truth with love and courage.
- We are immersed in larger issues of reform in the church and will be faithful to our role as midwives and participants.
- We are called to not be afraid and to remain interiorly free, regardless of what the exterior looks like. We are called to remain faithful to the Gospel, and to our mission for the future of the church.
- We are at a moment of convergence of lots of energies at the foot of the cross. The convergence is coming in the hope of, and the fear of, new life.

The contemplative reflection process created a greater peace and unity among those present which made easier some of the crucial tasks remaining. A public statement had to be written for release to the large number of reporters awaiting its publication at the close of the meeting. The process was again participative. An initial draft was written by a small group, brought to the large group for feedback, considered in a process guided by the spiritual director, tweaked and approved. The board considered a communications plan for dealing with the media and approved a press release. The group determined to call an extra geographical regional meeting before the August assembly, providing an opportunity for members to air feelings and concerns, to identify non-negotiable values to safeguard, and to consider options before coming together nationally and facing the pressure of critical decisions. The board prepared a guide to follow for that meeting and composed a letter from the national board to the LCWR members, sharing as much information as was appropriate. Knowing that the media coverage of this first board meeting would be extensive, all members were provided talking points in the event they were asked to comment on this matter by their local media outlets.

Important patterns and understandings were established at that first board meeting. We came to recognize the grace of not seeing a way out of the challenge we faced. It was very clear that we had to discern together, that we depended on and needed one another as never before, that we were to entrust ourselves to the larger divine movement which was holding and carrying us. It was evident that we were dealing with something larger than ourselves. We were invited to hold the tensions and to discover unseen ways beyond polarization and dualities. We needed to pray and discern our way through the months ahead with honest dialogue, relationship-building, careful communication, consultation, transparency,

anticipation, and thorough planning. We were on our way, not knowing where the path ahead would lead, but headed there together.

First LCWR National Assembly

As LCWR members gathered for the 2012 national assembly in St. Louis, intense public interest was evident in the large number of requests for media credentials and by the crowds gathered in support outside the convention site. In recognition of the sympathetic demonstrators, members present at the assembly were invited to accompany the LCWR presidency as they addressed the crowds and mingled with the supporters.

More delicate was the careful relating to the multitude of media contacts present. There would be no official communication available to the media until the close of the assembly when the presidency was to hold a press conference on the outcome of LCWR's deliberations. The communications strategy for the time prior to that was to take advantage of the moment by providing educational sessions to help the media understand religious life and the context of the doctrinal assessment. Each day different panels of sisters briefed them on background information: how religious life came to be as it is today, the role of contemplation and dialogue, LCWR's history and emerging future.

Communication with LCWR members was, of course, most important. A critical task would be sharing information and carefully listening to the wisdom of the group. Former LCWR presidents were invited to a session with the presidents and executive director before the opening of the assembly. They represented the history of LCWR as it faced other critical moments. The wealth of their insights was invaluable.

The assembly included a closed session to allow members the freedom to muddle towards a gradually emerging direction without precipitous outside interpretation and speculation. In that environment, confidential updates were shared as well as clarifying information concerning implications of directions LCWR might choose. Possible scenarios in response to the CDF mandate were presented, inviting the creativity of the assembly to modify them and to elaborate others. The two facilitators guiding the process had strategized carefully how to enable attentive listening and candid dialogue. Much thought was given to creating conditions for the expression and consideration of minority viewpoints. There would be small- and large-group conversations, time-limited open-mike sharing, ran

domly selected samplings of group conclusions, and large-group leanings, inter

persed with times of contemplative silence. What was slowly distilled in the process was the group sense to proceed in dialogue with the bishop delegates so long as LCWR's mission and integrity would not be compromised. It was not, however, until LCWR members heard their indistinct consensus reflected to them in a well-articulated statement that the recognition of a discerned direction settled peacefully over the group.

Communal Discernment

The 2012 assembly was an experience of communal discernment, and it was a gift. LCWR members convened, initially unable to see a clear way forward. That alone was a starting point of grace, much as it appeared to be anything but that. Our acknowledged unknowing was a fortuitous fertile field for genuine discernment. Out of the urgency of felt need we listened collectively to how God's Spirit was guiding us. Ultimately, we were able to see together with the eyes of our common heart more than any one of us could have seen alone. An African proverb says: "It is because one antelope will blow the dust from the other's eye that the two antelopes will walk together."² In our precarious walking and attentive listening to one another, God's transformative presence somehow enabled us to access a pool of wisdom arising from our collective consciousness. We were carried together in a direction which only gradually showed itself and which stretched beyond our own effort.

Though the intensity and drama of this national assembly made it an unprecedented event, the experience sounded a note of familiarity for many of us. In our community lives, women religious have often lived critical moments of tension and struggle in group decision-making. At times we have experienced genuine communal discernment, enabling us to move forward together in harmony. At other times we have been left facing unresolved issues, despite our best efforts. Clearly the outcome does not depend solely on well-designed procedures. Communal discernment is simultaneously what we do and what God does. On our part, there are helpful predispositions we can bring to the process.

One is the sort of uncertainty with which we entered the LCWR national assembly. To come with minds made up or with predetermined solutions would present a serious obstacle to group discernment. A necessary predisposition is an open mind, open heart, and open will, laying aside judgment, cynicism, and fear.³ Staying with ambiguity leaves us open to the unexpected movement of Spirit. It requires trust.

Another helpful disposition is deep listening, to both internal and external voices. Attentiveness to interior movements requires noticing whatever arises in the moment. It also includes being present to our own history and experience, to all that has shaped who we are, to the relationships and values to which we desire to be faithful. LCWR's awareness of that was important in discerning what a response of integrity meant for us. Listening to external voices required open and receptive relationship with bishop delegates, CDF, CICLSAL, concerned Catholic laity, LCWR members, religious throughout the world. We were challenged at every level of dialogue to listen for mutuality within unfamiliar, discordant, variant voices. Commitment to relationship and commitment to deep listening seemed inseparable.

In listening to external voices, Pope Francis describes the need to be grounded in what is concretely before us. He says that discernment "must be embodied in the circumstances of place, time and people. It is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor...The wisdom of discernment redeems that necessary ambiguity of life and helps us find the most appropriate means, which do not always coincide with what looks great and strong." ⁴

Similarly, a commitment to truth is essential to discernment. It implies honest self-awareness, of being with rather than running from the truth of our own experience, including those feelings and attitudes we'd rather not have or those we are slow to recognize and embrace. It demands simply being with what is, rather than what we might prefer. It involves courage and the discipline of honest dialogue and, for that, the willingness to be vulnerable.

Communal discernment presupposes a readiness to be transformed, a willingness to be changed by an encounter with another. It invites us to recognize both the light and the shadow present in who we are together. To recognize our group shadow invites openness to being challenged, purified, molded, questioned. To see our own light leads us to claim our gifts and to put them at the service of the greater whole, to stand boldly in our own truth.

Personal and communal freedom is another important predisposition, implying fearlessness, an indifference to outcomes, and a willingness to assume the consequences of a group direction. The freedom to choose comes in paying attention to what brings peace, to what causes agitation and unsettledness, and moving in the direction of peace.

There is hard work involved. We must do the homework of gathering information, working together to understand, sort through, imagine options, critique, and manage processes. We need to consciously integrate our real feelings. And then we need to simply surrender, to let go of desired results. We even need to let go of the timing. It is not helpful to either rush to decide too quickly, or draw things out unnecessarily, delaying or avoiding difficult decisions. The process takes place in limited, real time, but also needs the spaciousness of its own unfolding.

Finally, discernment is prayer. It is a conscious opening to God's Spirit, inviting transformation. In the LCWR assembly, the prayerful silence integrated into the process was empowering, as was the prayer of so many others directed toward us during that time together.

The 2012 LCWR assembly ended with a decision, with a public statement discerned under pressure, yet embraced in peace. We were only given to see the step immediately before us. It was grace enough for the moment. It was hope for the days to come.

Endnotes

1. "For a Leader," from *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* by John O'Donohue, copyright© 2008 by John O'Donohue. Used by permission of Doubleday, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.
2. Quoted in: Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND, *Group Spiritual Direction, Community for Discernment*. (Paulist Press, 1995).
3. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2009).
4. "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," by Antonio Spadaro, SJ, *America*, September 30, 2013.