



RELIGIOUS LIFE *Evolving*

As the Leadership Conference of Women Religious corporately discerns the “something new” God is doing in and through women religious, the conference is gaining some insights into how religious life is being challenged to evolve. Clearly, there are movements toward living and operating from a deeper contemplative stance, a growing sense of communion among women religious, a desire for greater collaboration with one another and with the laity, and a realization that the voice of women religious is valued in the public forum and considered credible.

LCWR associate director for communications **Annamarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed three women religious with significant leadership experience about these shifts and how they might be shaping religious life as it moves into the future.

Kathleen Durkin, CSJ currently serves as a member of the leadership team of the Congregation of St. Joseph. Prior to the reconfiguration of seven CSJ congregations, Kathleen served in leadership for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wheeling. She continues to serve as a

retreat and spiritual director and lives in Wheeling, West Virginia.

Sheila Lemieux, CSJP is presently serving as the director of formation for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. She has served both as province leader and congregation leader. She ministered in schools and parishes as well as in the PeaceHealth system.

Mary Jo Nelson, OLVM is a member of Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters, and served on the leadership team of her congregation from 2000-2008. Currently she ministers as a spiritual director and as a facilitator and consultant to religious congregations across the United States.

Q What significance do you think the shifts that are taking place within religious life have for us? Are there other important shifts you are observing?

Sheila: In retrospect, the trauma and pain over the apostolic visitation and doctrinal assessment of LCWR have drawn out the best from our leaders and ourselves as members. I know this did not happen automatically; it involved tremendous struggle and working through anger and hurt at the perceived disrespect of the years of dedicated service of women religious. I think that

through this we deepened our ability and openness for dialogue and it became a graced time. I think we women religious stand on the edges, relying on God’s grace and strengthened by our solidarity. I think this is an incredibly important realization as we move into the future.

Kathleen: As someone who has been in religious life for 50 years, it feels as if we as women religious and as congregations have been immersed in a shift from a static worldview where everything was ordered to an evolutionary worldview. Immersing ourselves in Vatican II changed our theology, our vision of God, our ecclesiology, our Christology, the way we see scripture, and our whole view of the world. This shaped the way we naturally engaged the apostolic visitation and the doctrinal assessment, which is to say, that engaging in contemplation and making attempts to dialogue have become part and parcel of who we are.

Mary Jo: I would add to the list, our shift in understanding, experiencing, and naming what is happening among us as church. I came to religious life after Vatican II, so I don’t have an experiential handle on the way the life was before then. My experience of religious life has been that of constant change, constant questioning, and constant reflection on what I am experiencing, what’s going

on in the world and church, and what's going on in the bigger picture of religious life. One of the things I have observed is how we understand ourselves as church and how our place within church structures has shifted. Many religious congregations in the United States were founded to meet the unmet needs in a new country through education, healthcare, social services, and pastoral services. We were at the edge, because that is where the poor and marginalized were. Over time we have educated, developed, and empowered the laity—we have helped them to be church. At this time our role and place in the church is changing for a variety of reasons. However, what I do see on the horizon is a new way to collaborate and partner with the laity — not because of our changing demographics but because collaboration has become our way of being. One of our ways of being church is walking, working, and praying with the laity.

Kathleen: I was just at a gathering the other week with young adults between their 20s and mid-40s who gathered to talk about their experience of church and how women religious might connect with them. They spoke of longing for community, for places to have prayer and serious conversation about the questions they have about faith. These are people who often have skills and expertise that we, women religious, don't have and they are looking to us for some mentoring and guidance in contemplation, prayer, and community.

Sheila: Seeing and living out of a reality of interdependence where we see community in terms of the cosmos, and not just human dynamics, is an important shift. This new way of seeing ourselves in light of what we are learning from the sciences affects our spirituality and how we look at the world.

Kathleen: I think this cosmic worldview influences our charisms and our ministries and the kinds of decisions we make as well. For example, the Congregation of St. Joseph is looking at the seven big centers we have, knowing that we will not need all of them as our demographics change. So the questions we ask are not just about finances, but are the relational

questions in terms of ministry, our carbon footprint, our responsibility for the future of our membership, and the care of our members. We try to base our decisions according to our relationships with everyone and everything.

Sheila: The impact of globalization, mass migration, climate change, refugees, trafficking and so many other issues play on our consciousness and on our prayer. I think the call of our time is learning how to live our lives knowing of the misery and destitution of so many on our planet. This is another shift — getting out of our insulated world and collaborating together to address these issues.

Q You have been naming some of the edges where you believe religious should be. Are there other specific edges to which you feel we are called?



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Mary Jo: I think we need to be there for people who are on the edge, the margins, who are struggling for life on so many levels. Although we have traditionally served these populations, I think we have to be creative in terms of serving them in new ways and with new partners. Perhaps it is by looking at our properties in new ways; maybe the question is with whom will we partner to continue to meet unmet needs. Or maybe

we need to creatively explore how we can be centers of spirituality that focus on the God search and provide opportunities for prayer and contemplation for people who are searching

Kathleen: I would tag on to that the call to help people find ways to experience what we have experienced through LCWR and in our own congregations and that is, people coming together in prayer, sitting together, and trusting that the Spirit of God is at work in the body, and listening together for what is the next best step for a group to take. This is so counter-cultural, but it is something that many people seem to be hungering for.

Sheila: I would also add that there is a need for us today to stand with other Catholic women. I feel deeply sad seeing so many women leaving the Catholic church because their gifts are not recognized and they feel there is no place for them there. Women are looking to us for a safe place where they can deepen their spirituality and their hunger for God.

Q This is a period of great vulnerability for religious life where challenges are coming to us at almost every level as we deal with our financial stability, rapidly changing demographics, and questions about our appropriate role within the church and society. To what do you think this time of vulnerability and uncertainty might be inviting us?

Mary Jo: There is going to be a big shift in the demographics in religious life in the next five to eight years and I think this is inviting us to be more intentional and collaborative about midwifing our life form into the future. Larger communities may not experience this dramatic shift right away, but a number of smaller communities will be down to 20 to 30 members within five years. How can these communities be creative about imaging a new kind of religious life that might go beyond the boundaries of their current community? Whatever the future is going to be, it will not be what we have

now. It's possible that we cannot yet image what religious life might look like in the future, but I think some women who are in the life now may see something different. I think we have a responsibility to establish places for creative thinking and imaging. Since there is so much letting go, it might also be a time of "letting come", -- a question which leads us back to our practice of contemplation and dialogue.

Sheila: I feel that vulnerability and uncertainty may be a blessing in disguise. It is not easy being there, but I think it is where we are meant to be and it is where so many in our society are today. I think this place on the edge is going to be our future, and it provides a constant reminder of our need for prayer.

Kathleen: What we are experiencing is what families are experiencing as well -- losing a parent, selling a home, needing to think of new ways of doing things -- but we are just experiencing it on a much larger scale. I think we have important opportunities to give witness to how to deal with aging, dying, and generativity.

Q Given the changing demographics of religious congregations, it's interesting that women still value religious life and are drawn to enter congregations. What are you finding attracts people to religious life today? Do you have a sense of what new members hope for in this life?

Kathleen: Mary Jo's observation reminded me of a young woman who is preparing to enter our congregation. She desires community, but knows that community within religious life in the future may or may not mean living in the same house with others. This young woman knows she will be living out her religious life alongside the married couples and single people in her life. So engaging with her peers in friendships, conversations, and prayer is going to be very important for her. That gave me a glimpse of what religious life might be for future generations.

Sheila: I recently asked some of the women who have just entered or who plan to enter our congregation about what they hope for in this life. The

response was: "I have a sense of mission, I can find community with others, and I can develop a prayer life on my own. What I want is a way to integrate this all." They see in us an integration of spirituality, charism, and of union with others that is attractive and energizing. And they see possibilities that often I haven't seen.

Kathleen: Women who are coming to religious life today often have a worldview that is very different from the perspective most of us came with. They often have not only professional experience, but also experiences that give them a very large worldview. How do we incorporate this broader perspective into our congregations?

Sheila: Another reality is that new members are often coming from a variety of cultures. As our congregations become more inter-generational and more multicultural, we need to look at how we are preparing ourselves to be open to being changed in these ways as well.

Q As you listen to the hopes of women religious and as you observe what is happening in religious life today, are you sensing a shift in our understanding of what religious life can potentially be?

Kathleen: I am sensing in us a willingness to live into the mystery of what religious life is becoming. I think there



is a belief that God is active and present and that we are open to noticing the signs of new life and living the questions. We seem to be willing to pay attention to the change without having answers.



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Sheila: Vatican II really shaped our self-understanding of religious life. I think that our fundamental understanding of the life and the spiritual core are the same, but how the life has evolved and how we are living it out now is unique.

Q As public light has come upon both LCWR and women religious in recent months, are you sensing a new consciousness of the significance of religious life for these times?

Kathleen: I think people are recognizing that there is a power -- in the best sense of the word -- in the way we are organized. I think people also sense we create a space for them that they can't find elsewhere on their spiritual journey. I wonder if this is an invitation for us to ask what this means -- for us and for the people looking to us.

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Mary Jo: I've been asking myself what it is that the laity are drawn to in our lives and what I came up with is what I call transformational practices – things we have cultivated over the years like contemplation, dialogue, communal learning, discernment, our commitment to partnerships and collaboration, and the way we make decisions. These are things that the institutional church does not offer easily.

Kathleen: I think there is also interest in the way we develop both the leadership of the membership of our congregations, as well as of our lay colleagues who work with us.

Mary Jo: I think people are drawn as well to our efforts to respond to very difficult situations in a nonviolent way. I think our understanding of nonviolent responses differs from what it was say 25 years ago, and I think that some of that comes out of our contemplative stance, as well as our efforts to dialogue.

Q What might you like to say to women religious in leadership in these challenging times? In order to bring religious life forward, what do you believe are some of the most important tasks of leadership today?

Sheila: In his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II emphasized the prophetic role of religious life. I think leaders need to embrace that call, not in an arrogant way, but as a humble acknowledgement of God's working within them. I think we need to unpeel the significance of this role and learn how to promulgate it. I also believe an important role of leaders is to inspire and challenge. Most of us are ordinary people, but with the grace of God and with one another, we can do some extraordinary things. To live with uncertainty and vulnerability requires inspiration and leaders are called to be a guide in that process. I think leaders could also help us learn how to be open to change as we welcome members of other cultures among us. Another is to help us face into the reality of struggle, chaos, and suffering.

Kathleen: I think religious life leadership looks different than it did 10, 15, or 25 years ago. Today we need to be able to face into the complexity of issues related to ministry, the future of our mission, the care of our members, and seeing how all of this is interconnected. I think our relationship with the church and the wider world is more complex. We also are committed to a new kind of leadership that calls us to keep engaging with the wisdom and gifts of our members, to trust how that wisdom contributes to the ongoing life of the congregation and its mission. The day of the singular leader is over. To work effectively as a team, we

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have found that we need to give significant time to prayer and sharing faith. This transforms the way we are with one another and the kind of work we do on behalf of the congregation.

Mary Jo: I am coming at this question from my perspective as a consultant and facilitator. I see real struggles in communities right now for a pool for leadership and I absolutely agree with Kathleen that the role of leadership is to be in partnership with the members on the agenda and issues of the congregation. With that being said, I think there are still styles, models, and cultures of leadership that do not facilitate that kind of partnership. Today's issues are complex, and they are complex whether a congregation has 20 members or 2000 members. It has nothing to do with numbers. I don't know how one deals with this complexity except by working in a collaborative way both with one's team and with the members of one's congregation. In addition, the leadership work of the community is compromised.

What I would most want to stress to leaders is the importance of doing their own personal work around issues of

authority, power, and leadership and address the shadow side of their own lives. Some of the hardest work of leadership is internal. Yet, this is one of the best gifts you can give to your members.

Sheila: I resonate with Mary Jo's and Kathleen's reflections on leadership in religious life today. It brings into play the critical need for mentoring our leaders. We elect leaders and then assume they come with all that they need to take on the role.

Kathleen: I appreciate Mary Jo's encouragement for leaders to attend to their own inner work. I also wonder if we, as leaders, feel more successful if we take on tasks that we know we can get done, rather than place ourselves in the more vulnerable role of holding the big picture and helping that picture unfold by engaging others and delegating leadership. In those processes, our own contribution as the elected leaders may not necessarily be that clear. Also, it takes leaders a lot more time to engage others, rather than move ahead on their own.

Mary Jo: I think these questions about leadership relate to the shifts in the world we have been discussing. Shifting our styles and understanding of leadership is hard, not for everyone, but for a number of religious. I think part of this is because we don't have a lot of other models to follow. So we are creating new models that fit these times and the in context of the new consciousness.

Kathleen: I think we have to know that as we live into these new models that are so transformative, we are not going to proceed without tripping – both personally and corporately. We have done this, for example, in our attempts to use technology. In order to expand our conversations and engage the members, we have used conference calls, live streaming, video conferences, etc. – and sometimes with stumbling efforts. But we need to keep looking at how we can reframe the way we have conversations with one another through technology, which makes this a very different but potentially exciting way of moving forward. And I would add that doing it all with a sense of humor greatly helps! □