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E-Mail: review@slu.edu • Web site: www.reviewforreligious.org

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Correspondence about the Canonical Counsel department:  
Elizabeth McDonough OP  
Mount St. Mary's Seminary; Emmitsburg, Maryland 21727

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# Review

for religious

## LIVING OUR CATHOLIC LEGACIES

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## Exercising Power and Discerning Spirits

A critical relationship to our exercise of power is a spiritual task for all Christians. This is true, then, for all the sisters who participate in congregational assemblies or chapters, and not just for those elected to leadership. There are many sources of power: wealth, education, ethnic origin, family status, professional role, elective and appointive offices, reputation, organizational skill, control of information, and personal gifts. In a number of situations, we fail to take into consideration the presence of these various powers among us.

As Christians we are responsible for our exercise of power on behalf of the human community and of individual persons within our spheres of power. We are called to live our lives in the service of the kingdom of God and the values of the gospel regardless of our particular settings and regardless of how others may exercise power around us. Choices about our exercise of power may be difficult if we have not had helpful role models. Nevertheless, it is through the critical exercise of power that we inhabit more fully our humanity, empower others, respond to the power of Jesus' spirit

Janet K. Ruffing RSM, professor of spirituality in Fordham's Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education, last wrote for us in July-August 1997. Her address remains GSRRE, Fordham University; 441 East Fordham Road; Bronx, New York 10458.

within the community, and effect change in the world. Our response to God's Spirit in us is such an exercise of power.

The New Testament speaks about a kind of power that is based neither on domination nor position. It is the power that comes from on high over Mary: the Holy Spirit, who effects her conception of Jesus and who comes upon the community gathered in his name after the resurrection. Jesus' ministry is characterized by a release of God's power as he expels demons and heals those who believe. The woman with the issue of blood touches Jesus, and power goes out from him. In Luke, all try to touch Jesus in order to be healed because power emanates from him. When Jesus sends out his disciples to preach, he confers power on them, not to rule but to heal and to cast out demons. Jesus brings into our midst freedom from all that binds us. He heals and forgives sin, and through the Spirit he shares this power for good with us. We share in this healing and reconciling power. The Spirit is poured forth on the entire gathered community after the resurrection, and our gathered communities continue to share in that outpouring.

We, as apostolic women, are empowered by that same Spirit. We are called to develop ways of making decisions, organizing our lives, and harmonizing our gifts so that this holy power is released in each of us and in the group as a whole for mission. The disciples had trouble understanding this, too, for they kept mixing up these two kinds of power—wanting to rule and lord it over others rather than releasing the God life to its own ends.

Religious communities are meant to be places where this power of God's Spirit is manifest in concrete and particular ways. It is part of our witness to the world. Many of us have worked long and hard to change the way we relate to one another through our shared exercise of power so that the life of God filling us with desire might be released in God's people. In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson describes what the experience of the Spirit is like at the level of institutions:

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On the level of the macro systems that structure human beings as groups, profoundly affecting consciousness and patterns of relationship, experience of the Spirit is also mediated. Whenever a human community resists its own destruction or works for its own renewal; when structural change serves the liberation of oppressed peoples; when law subverts sexism, racism, poverty, and militarism; when swords are beaten into ploughshares or bombs into food for the starving; when the sores of old injustices are healed; when enemies are reconciled once violence and domination have ceased; whenever the lies and the raping and the killing stop; wherever diversity is sustained in *koinonia*; wherever justice and peace and freedom gain a transformative foothold—there the living presence of powerful, blessing mystery amid the brokenness of the world is mediated. And it is known not in the open, so to speak, but as the ground of the praxis of freedom that survives and sometimes even prevails against massive violence; as the ground, in Peter Hodgson's telling words, of those partial, fragmentary, disconnected, transient, tiny, yet transforming rebirths that enable history to go on at all in the midst of vast discontinuities and meaninglessness.

So universal in scope is the compassionate, liberating power of Spirit, so broad the outreach of what Scripture calls the finger of God and early Christian theologians call the hand of God, that there is virtually no nook or cranny of reality potentially untouched. The Spirit's presence through the praxis of freedom is mediated amid profound ambiguity, often apprehended more in darkness than in light. It is thwarted and violated by human antagonism and systems of collective evil. Still, "Everywhere that life breaks forth and comes into being, everywhere that new life as it were seethes and bubbles, and even, in the form of hope, everywhere that life is violently devastated, throttled, gagged, and slain—wherever true life exists, there the Spirit of God is at work." This is not to say that every person who reflects on the world would arrive at this same conclusion. But, within the Jewish and Christian faith, the Spirit's saving presence in the conflictual world is recognized to be everywhere, somehow, always drawing near and passing by, shaping fresh starts of vitality and freedom.<sup>1</sup>

We are often privileged to witness the vitality of freedom in these fresh starts and often fragmentary rebirths around us. Yet, I believe, all of us still have much to learn about our exercise of power. This task requires us to be attentive to both subtle and profound movements of the Spirit of God in our midst and attentive to our need for ongoing conversion in our use of power per-

sonally and communally. Where God's Spirit is authentically at work, individuals experience an increase in energy, creativity, and humanization.

## Challenge and Conflict

Because we live in times of unprecedented cultural change, leadership in women's communities is increasingly charged with tasks of "nonroutine" or adaptive work, to use the vocabulary of Ron Heifetz. Leadership in such times is charged not only with routine administration, but also with guiding a community through adaptive challenges. We have commonly used the vocabulary of transformational leadership for this function. Adaptive or transformational change requires changes in values, beliefs, and behaviors. It requires much more of both leaders and members than simple modification; it will not occur unless leaders identify conflict and work with it rather than avoid it. Groups themselves rarely, if ever, correctly identify the deep-level challenges to which they need to respond. The work is simply too hard, and the ordinary members are frequently lacking the "big picture" or the specific information that would impel them to initiate change. Members are usually so thoroughly immersed in their own ministries that these eclipse the bigger picture even if they have access to it.

Leaders often work with this bigger picture every day. This is one reason why leaders have a responsibility to share information and to articulate their perceptions to the group engaged in deep change. For communities to flourish at the present time, they need skillful administrators who effectively direct the technical or routine details of the group's life and mission, and they need leaders who can distinguish among these tasks while attending to the transformational change process and orchestrating it. Change at this level can result only from a collective and contemplative process.

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Religious communities are now at risk of slow extinction if their leaders think their only task is to implement the consensual decisions of the group. Although this function is necessary, the process is slow and cannot keep up with the pace of change. Leaders need to anticipate and help the group keep moving toward the next change. Yes, women leaders do tend to use their collaborative skills to achieve consensus instead of imposing their solutions on the group, but a group can come to consensus on only so many issues, values, decisions. The energy and skill used in developing consensus, if not focused on really important choices, may drain energy from hard adaptive work that remains to be done. In religious life today, leaders often need to initiate change by correctly identifying unavoidable challenges and helping the group see that some of these challenges must be resolved by a deep level of change, and not merely by technical solutions or skill. For this task, leaders need all of their motivational skills to keep the group engaged in the process, and they need to create a safe enough space for fearful and distressed members to do what they would just as soon avoid doing.

Transformational change is the occasion for a considerable amount of distress. Leaders need to anticipate this distress, which often manifests itself as resistance, and endeavor to alleviate enough of it so the group can do the work required. From leaders this requires all of the qualities the FORUS study in the early 1990s identified in authentically spiritual leaders. Leaders must demonstrate, on the one hand, a radical and genuine trust in God and in the future into which God invites us and, on the other hand, must not minimize the distress in the group. Leaders need to absorb a great deal of the distress and not pass it on, but also to get the group to confront the change. This graced ability to remain unflappable under pressure is difficult. Leaders need to have acquired considerable spiritual, psychological, and emotional resources to do this without damage to themselves.

Leaders need not convince members to resolve challenges exactly as they would prefer. What they must do is continue giving the task of finding creative solutions back to the group—or to one or more committees if that seems more practical. Effective responses can and do emerge out of careful handling of conflicting points of view. Frequently the resolution is not going to be what the leaders envisioned. This is why nominees, when asked what they would do in a particular situation, can

rarely answer convincingly. They simply do not know what the emerging issues are or will be. Only as new issues arise can leadership identify them and focus attention on them. To ignore these late-rising issues would be to ignore the rest of the work to be done. Leadership serves the group by continually trying to think ahead of it and be ready to help the group respond to emerging issues.

For the prophetic or dissenting voices to have any impact in the group at all, leaders will need to make room for both the novel and the differing until they get enough hearing to enable the group to shift. Whenever the novel emerges, the group needs time to welcome the possibilities it offers and to negotiate the many subtle interior shifts that such a change might require. It is difficult for people to receive the novel if its herald is not one of the more acceptable and respected members of the group. Yet the proposed newness may be exactly what is needed. This deeper level of change can never happen in a group unless the positional leaders, the women elected to leadership and bearing the right to exercise authority in the name of the group, use that power skillfully until the tensions can be resolved.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the studies on women in leadership show that women leaders tend to rely more on their personal power than on their official authority. If those of you who are leaders in a specific situation are wondering if you have authority or not, it may be because you are not making enough use of it as you invite, cajole, encourage, inspire, and entice the group to do what it needs to do. Some of you may avoid using your positional authority in order not to evoke old transferences to authority. Women leaders and their communities need to see authority as a resource to be used for the sake of the group. Most members want to be challenged to be their best selves, even though everyone is aware that conversion and growth cannot be coerced.

In facing the particular challenges of transformational change, we as women let our historical wounds regarding authority heal. We develop the skills of being leaders and members in partnership, in mutuality. We focus our energies in harmony with the divine energies for the sake of mission. I want now to reflect more at length on the exercise of power in a discernment mode—in the context of choosing leaders and gathering together in assembly or chapter.

## Discernment of Spirits

My reflections draw on some themes from Catherine of Siena's teaching on discernment of spirits and also on the skills and wisdom of the Quaker tradition of communal discernment.

Although Catherine of Siena does reflect incidentally on various interior movements in the course of her *Dialogue*, she emphasizes discernment. For her, discernment has more to do with right relationships and living in harmony with God, whom she often calls Truth. Because discernment is rooted in supreme Truth, "it rightly sets conditions and priorities of love where other people are concerned. The light of discernment, which is born of charity, gives order to your love for your neighbors. . . . The priorities set by holy discernment direct all the soul's powers to serving Me courageously and conscientiously."<sup>3</sup> Discernment is born of charity. This implies that an open, unselfish, loving heart fosters discernment by the ordering activity of love. Discernment is a virtue that puts everything in perspective and shows us what we owe to each person and situation. Catherine insists it grows and develops as we do in the life of God; it enlarges our capacity for love expressed in ministry. As we grow in our love for God, so do we grow in our discernment. Catherine has three stages to the spiritual life, to growth in charity, and to discernment which she calls the first, second, and third lights.

Discernment is the light which dissolves all darkness, dissipates ignorance, and seasons every virtue and virtuous deed. It has a prudence that cannot be deceived, a strength that is invincible, a constancy right up to the end, reaching as it does from heaven to earth, that is, from the knowledge of Me to the knowledge of oneself, from love of Me to love of one's neighbors. By this glorious light the soul sees and rightly despite her own weakness.<sup>4</sup>

There are, I believe, several implications that we might draw from this teaching. As a community gathers for decision making in a discernment mode, no two people in the group are able to participate in exactly the same way. As we assemble, we are all in different places. The more each of us knows and loves God, the more we understand ourselves. The more we know and love our neighbors, the more we love God. Catherine recognizes that discernment as a virtue grows and develops over the course of our graced history and in proportion to the intensity of our love for God and for others. This growth reveals to us our particular weak-

nesses, blind spots, cowardice, and resistances and our reactions under stress—all of which, sowing confusion and doubt, may keep us from making costly decisions.

This self-knowledge is extremely important. If we do not know our characteristic ways of responding to stress or distress, our blindness may increase the confusion and doubt of the gathered community. Some members may be skilled in this discernment, and others, for various reasons, may not have the same clear perception of a situation or the same capacity to accept God's invitation to move forward. This incapacity may come from current circumstances: a recent bereavement, physical illness, or recent ministry challenges that have left them benumbed.

The best preparation before we gather for communal discernment is to increase our prayer, to seek self-knowledge in the present moment, and to heal and reconcile anything we can with other members. Intensifying our connection to God, gaining self-knowledge, and reconciliation efforts can remove potential blocks within the group. If any member speaks the truth about an issue, situation, or challenge that the group needs to face, every other member must receive it and "test" its possibilities for herself and for the group. If this truth is spoken by a member whose opinions people frequently perceive to be "off the mark" or whom they tend to dismiss because of past performance, the others may fail to respond with openness to conversion, that is, with willingness to change their minds. Individuals and the group need to allow enough time for such a potential shift to occur among themselves. This is a quite different process from the response those readily receive who—by reason of their education, their election, or their previous performance—are customarily taken seriously.

In Catherine of Siena's system, those who practice discernment according to the third "light" are those who have "clothed" themselves in God's will. They are attuned to God and God's desire. This harmony with God's will is not necessarily about specific issues; it is a matter of practical insight into the Mystery

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of Jesus' total self-giving love for us in the paschal mystery. The touchstone is not seeing a single issue clearly, but living constantly within the Christ mystery. Such "seeing" elicits desire to imitate Jesus' self-giving love without counting the cost to self. In Catherine's words, such a person "loves me sincerely without any other concern than the glory and praise of my name. She does not serve me for her own pleasure, or her neighbors for her own profit, but only for love." Such persons are alive with the charism of their community. Full of apostolic zeal, they basically love in un-self-serving ways. Such persons are not prevented from choosing God's will because of their own selfishness, nor does suffering or anticipated difficulty prevent them from choosing what is best for God, others, and self.

What is sought is God's will, which Catherine assumes leads us to what is best for everyone. Communities today face many pressing issues. What is best for one community may not be best for another. What God may be calling one community to at a particular juncture is not the same as another. With who we are, where we are geographically, and where we are in our communal and personal histories, what is best for our mission, our selves, and those with whom we minister?

From the rich Quaker tradition of discernment, I will discuss only three themes: unity, peace, and clarity. Quakers, like other Christians, draw on the "fruits of the spirit" as sketched by Paul in Galatians 5:23 as a touchstone for discernment. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, trust, gentleness, and self-control." This cluster of outcomes or fruits resulting from behaviors, attitudes, spiritual practices, and interactions with others reveals lives authentically lived in the Spirit.

These fruits are all interrelated. For the Society of Friends, privileged unity in God's love was an important result in community life of various impulses or "leadings" of the Spirit in individuals. At certain times of corporate "waiting on the Lord," they experienced their unity, their being gathered in God, as a palpable mystical experience. This unity bore fruit in love of neighbor. For them kindness and gentleness were dimensions of the fruit of love. Traditionally they came to ask whether a particular course of "action would produce more or less love, greater or less unity, more or less joy."<sup>5</sup>

They valued Truth as well, assuming that, once the community

was deeply "gathered in unity," an individual under divine guidance would be consistent with the perceptions of others who were also attuned to divine guidance. So the quality of love which could gather the community in unity also led to discerning the truth.

As Patricia Loring describes it, the unity sought is *not* simple agreement, not consensus, compromise, or an irreducible minimum of views. What is sought is a sense of deep interior unity which would be a sign that the members are consciously gathered together in God and may therefore trust their corporate guidance:

The felt gathering in God tends to illuminate and clarify motives, to dissolve or harmonize differences—or allow them to stand side by side in the tenderness accompanying gathering in the spirit of God. Unity may enable a way forward to be found even if members continue to hold differing views. Divisiveness, disruption, or simple lack of unity indicate that one, all, or some members of the group are not fully under guidance.<sup>6</sup>

Peace is yet another important touchstone of the gathered community. The unity of the gathered community brings about peace by harmonizing disparate elements within the community and within the self. Quakers discovered that "the reconciliation of disparate parts of one's self or of one's experience in a new, sometimes unexpected direction or action can issue in a deep interior sense of peace. . . . Living close to the Spirit has the effect of such harmonizing and reconciling both within and between persons." For Quakers, peace as a touchstone in communal discernment is "the feeling of being at peace with a decision or an outcome, even if it is not what one sought or hoped for, even if it calls for considerable hardship or change."<sup>7</sup>

Often a new burden or task disturbs one's peace initially. Peace or ease is restored only when one accepts the burden or fulfills the task. In leadership selection processes, frequently those being considered experience considerable lack of peace. Sometimes, when a nominee is graced to accept a potential call to leadership, a flood of peace results. When or if this deep peace makes itself felt, a leader may confidently trust the election and will often return to this initial grace of leadership in difficult times. Lack of peace is as important as peace. When peace is disturbed, some action is called for. Sometimes the action or resolution is neither simple nor obvious. At times individuals and groups suffer a prolonged period of living with disquiet before the fitting response becomes clear.

Quakers often used the word “clear” as in “getting clear” to describe an outcome of discernment. Sometimes it had the connotation of being released from a burden. At other times it involved acting on a “leading” (that is, a matter discerned) and faithfully carrying it out. In this early form, getting clear was closer to how we might describe feeling free. Quakers now use the term clarity or clearness in the sense of coming to intellectual clarity about what they are to do or what a “leading” might be about, and much of their individual discernment is aided by convoking a clearness committee. The members of such a group are invited on the basis of their spiritual sensitivity and typically only ask questions which might help the individual discerners clarify their inner truth. They help them clarify their situation, motives, and “leadings”: they do not offer advice.

As Patricia Loring describes such a gathering, it first of all opens itself to divine guidance. For Quakers this is not a perfunctory moment of silence, but a much deeper recollection: “for an intentional return to the Center, to give over one’s own firm views, to place the outcome in the hands of God, to ask for a mind and heart as truly sensitive to accepting of nuanced intimations of God’s will as of overwhelming evidences of it.”<sup>8</sup> This is an attitude of receptivity to subtle hints of God’s will as well as to unmistakable clarity.

Discernment is, then, a habit of the heart. From my perspective it is intimately linked with our spiritual development. When we exercise power in any context, but especially when it is time for major decision making in community or when we are in official positions of authority, we need discernment to ensure that we are exercising our power in service of the reign of God and not for self-serving benefits of any kind. When we or our communities are thus “gathered” in God, an incredible amount of energy is released for the sake of others and of ourselves. When we enter into this discernment in partnership with God, whose Spirit impels us toward goodness, toward love, toward peace, and toward patience, the results are energy, enthusiasm, gentleness, and joy.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 126-127.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Clarke, “Leadership When It’s Time for Adaptation,” *Human Development* 18 (Fall 1997): 5-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue*, ed. and trans. Suzanne Noffke (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), §11, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue*, §11, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305 (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Loring, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Loring, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Loring, p. 24.

#### The Woman

Arusha, Tanzania

*So short the bridge on the main road  
in the city  
few notice the deep stream,  
nor see,  
among the bustling feet,  
a woman, in rags, on the dusty pavement,  
leaning against the stone parapet,  
clutching a begging cup.  
One sprawling leg wears a tattered shoe,  
the other a soiled bandage  
lying loosely where a foot should be.  
I walk grimly on, and on, and on.  
Troubled,  
I turn,  
walk back two blocks  
and share my conscience  
with a leper.*

Hugh Sharpe CFC