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JANET K. RUFFING

Leadership a New Way: If Christ Is Growing in Us

As Americans we tend to privatize our religious experience. Because we are schooled by our democratic and pluralistic society to conceal from public discourse the compelling religious vision and experiences that motivate us, some leaders of religious communities carry this reticence over into their role in community. In addition, some come from ethnic backgrounds which presume a bedrock of faith, but discourage talking about it. Leaders vary in their ability to express in their lives the faith by which they live. On the other hand, the entire purpose and meaning of religious life is to help those called to it to focus their lives totally on God. For apostolic communities this response to God's call is accomplished through the love of our neighbor in compassionate service as well as through contemplation and a lifestyle organized to sustain this commitment.

Although the religious dimension of leadership is often neglected, religious life itself is always and only a work of the fiery Spirit that inspires, empowers, and energizes our free response to this grace. The reflections on power and empowerment in the first part of this article show that one gift women religious offer the church in our present transition is the clear movement in many communities toward a communal life shared by equal disciples who are seeking to respond to God's leading. This evolution of empowering authority in religious life could indeed be a sign of hope to contemporary women. If religious life for women is a means for supporting our total transformation so that Christ be formed in us, it will institutionalize itself in ways that genuinely respect and nurture the deepest possibilities of our feminine discipleship. Following Caryll Houselander's words, we can say, "If Christ is growing in us,"[1] we will be at peace because where we are Christ is.

Janet K. Ruffing RSM is associate professor in spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University. The first part of this article, "Women, Power, and Authority," appeared in our May-June 1994 issue. Her address is GSRRE, Fordham University; 441 E. Fordham Road; Bronx, New York 10458-5169.

The entire context in which we seek to live this discipleship has changed. It is a time of chaos and new creation. God's Spirit broods over these waters. Are we paying attention to these movements in our midst? Do leadership teams spend time reflecting together on what is happening in themselves, in their members, and in the various groups in the community that reveals what God is doing in their midst? How are sisters understanding themselves in the light of their central dedication to God in Christ? How are they being impelled in ministry? What do they describe as impeding or deflecting them from this central core of the religious-life project? What are the resistances of leaders to some new things? What are the group's resistances to or struggles with ongoing conversion?

Leaders nonverbally express in decisions and actions their operative vision of religious life, their sense of who God is, their Christology, and their attitude toward the women they lead.

I believe that paying attention to such questions is important for religious leadership. Leaders, consciously or not, nonverbally express in decisions and actions their operative vision of religious life, their sense of who God is, their Christology, and their attitude toward the women they lead. These are all interconnected. If a leader believes she is diminished in her personhood because God wills her to be powerless and dependent on external authority, her behavior will conform to that belief. If she believes that authentic discipleship of Jesus requires members to be compli-

ant to all requests, she will attempt to secure such compliance. If she believes the majority of members to be selfish and individualistic in their choices, she will find this amply documented. However, if she expects discipleship of Jesus to lead to creative initiatives, release of energy for mission, resistance to injustice, growth in compassion, and a deeply contemplative gaze at experience, she will welcome such creativity and action and notice its contemplative interiority. If leaders are not both conscious and critical of the theology they embody in their leadership style, they will fail to recognize how religious faith is functioning within the congregation.

I believe, and the research bears this out, that religious leadership is more than being conscious of and setting an example of grass-roots theology. The Nygren-Ukeritis study found not only that outstanding leaders of religious congregations were themselves firmly grounded in their religious experience, but also that they demonstrated an ability to "find and express . . . the spiritual significance in everyday affairs." The study found, too, that outstanding leaders of religious congregations put greater reliance on God than other members do; generally the male leaders think of God as a "source of support," and the female leaders, as a "source of direction and energy." Further, the interviews showed that in "the spontaneous recounting of their experiences the outstanding leaders more frequently cite instances of actions consistent with the religious theory they would espouse." In the judgment of the researchers, these leaders "communicated a genuine awareness of God's presence in their lives" and acted accordingly.[2] The study concludes that organizations will survive only if their leaders can articulate the founding purpose in contemporary idioms and respond to pressing needs.

We are experiencing a profound theological reinterpretation of religious life in the light of rapidly changing circumstances. For numerous reasons entire congregations find considerable difficulty in coalescing around a new vision. While some members are stuck in the old paradigm, others propose only a limited view of the new reality. All of us act on old habits of thought and behavior. Leaders are reluctant to quench new initiatives since it is rarely clear which one might be leading to the future. Leaders also resist taking initiatives themselves since they are convinced these initiatives need to come from the group. Much of this can be described as a conflict of interpretations or a conflict of perspectives. The FORUS study recognizes that leaders strongly affect the outcomes of such conflicts. "Leaders can have a strong impact on the outcome of the conflict between perspectives. If they support only one perspective, they are likely to decrease the creativity of the transformational process and the active involvement of members whose perspectives are not taken into account. . . . If they enable conflicting perspectives to interact with each other, they will increase the chances of paradoxical transformations, of new and creative *shared* understandings that emerge from the interaction of the competing perspectives."[3]

It is a function of religious leadership to notice and articulate to the community the religious dimension of experience. This includes the team's view of affairs, but also that of the other members. If the group is assembled, leadership leads by creating an atmosphere in which conflicting perspectives can meet one another and be modified by the dialogue. If the group is not assembled, leadership needs to reflect the range of perspectives and call the group to respond to a religious vision that can be accommodated within this range.

I am describing a form of grass-roots theological reflection in which leaders of communities keep before the consciousness of the group a way of sharing the religious heart of their shared religious life. This is a delicate and important task, not just a form of pious exhortation. It requires careful listening, schooled in experience, for what God is actually doing in the group. What form is discipleship taking? How well is it grounded in Scripture and in a sense of who Jesus is? Members will welcome this discourse if it is objective, respectful, and truthful. If this reality can be spoken of in narrative or thematic ways, it can foster into the future a sense of shared life, shared goals, and shared commitments. It can build the theological bridges for understanding one another and for a new form of corporateness.

The First Epistle of Peter describes something of this process: "Venerate Christ in your hearts. Should anyone ask the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully" (1 P 3:15-16). Such accounts of the hope that animates us draw the community together around its most central identity. Far more than they do, leaders need to concern themselves with helping communities to do such spiritual accounting together if religious life is to move through this transitional and transformative time.

Christological Models

While the FORUS study highlights the singular importance of the faith dimension in religious leadership, it neglects to examine in any significant way the content of faith, specifically our understanding of Jesus. Since the conciliar teaching on religious life emphasized that gospel discipleship is the fundamental norm for religious life, how we individually and communally understand our following of Jesus constitutes the religious heart of our vocation. We *live* religious life in quite different ways with each new interpretation of our faith in Jesus.

To help our reflection on the practical following of Christ in religious life, I propose three models of Christology that are operative in contemporary communities. Although oversimplified, these three models might be described as an ahistorical/mystical model, a historical/liberationist model, and a feminist model.[4]

The ahistorical/mystical model is the largely monophysite Christology that preceded the council and informed much of the 19th-century spirituality many founders lived. In this Christology the one thing we are absolutely certain about is the divinity of Jesus, hence the term monophysite, meaning one nature. The one divine nature managed to obscure the other half of the Chalcedonian definition, namely, Jesus' human nature. Spiritual writers and meditation books emphasized a one-to-one relationship with Jesus. Greater emphasis was placed on the hidden life and the passion than on either the public ministry or the resurrection. Few Catholics, including religious, actually read or meditated on the texts of Scripture but rather used devotional manuals. The focus of these meditations was the interior attitudes of Jesus in his humiliation and suffering—humility, obedience, suffering, patience, love, meekness, and so forth. The follower of Christ was to imitate these virtues in order to achieve holiness and to enter into the mysteries of Jesus. These meditations usually had a strong trinitarian flavor. Since Christ was God, the desired attitudes were adoration, reverence, and docility before the Mystery. The meditator was drawn into the Trinity itself through the mysteries of incarnation and redemption.

Frequently, the image of God the Father was rather harsh—a just God who demanded the blood reparation of his Son for humanity's sin. Apostolic religious life in this model usually meant long hours of devotional prayers, use of a meditation manual, and the imitation of the virtues or inner states of Jesus in common life and in ministry. What mattered was increasing conformation to the Christ mystery through prayer and virtue. Obedience and humility were valued over activity and originality. Obedience to superiors and the rule was equated with obedience to God's will. Just as the understanding of Jesus in this model failed to honor Jesus' human reality as much as his divine reality, so too this kind of Christology often led to a neglect of our own humanity and a loss of a sense of the sacramentality of human life. In many communities, women were not respected as individuals with differing gifts, histories, and abilities and were not encouraged to care for themselves appropriately. Since this form of relationship to the Christ mystery was entirely interior and ahistorical, it did not really matter what we did in our world so long as we did it with the proper interior attitudes. This Christology supports the consecration model of religious life. Consecrated to an intimate relationship with Christ, religious are set apart from mundane secular life by cloister, rule, and garb and seek the one thing necessary, namely, progressive contemplative assimilation to the Christ mystery.

To become intimate with Jesus, to participate in his life does cultivate in us an entirely different perspective on reality.

Much still remains valid in this Christology, especially the way in which Jesus does lead us into the deeper mystery of the Trinity. To become intimate with Jesus, to participate in his life does cultivate in us an entirely different perspective on reality. We are opened to transcendence; we discover the deepest reality of ourselves in the love which comes to us from the Divine Mystery. We never exhaust the need to penetrate to ever deeper levels of the divine and of our own graced reality.

The second model is the historical/liberationist model. As one wave of Christology at the time of the council broke over our consciousness, we began to appreciate more clearly the full humanity of Jesus. As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, "if God became a human being, then it is very important to see what kind of human being God became."[5] This led to a full appreciation not only of Jesus' human experience, but of our own as well. As schol-

ars recovered more and more of the actual history of Jesus and the movement which he inspired, focus turned to a close examination of his ministry, death, and resurrection. Jesus not only talked about the kingdom of God, but actually made it present in the way he was with people, by what he said and did. He embodied the reality of God in his concrete human history. When we began to contemplate this part of the story, we discovered incredible things. It became apparent that Jesus favored the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts. Women were a primary group among his disciples, and he seemed to enjoy their company. Jesus appreciated embodied life and drew most of his parables from nature and from common human experience. The kingdom of God was already in our midst.

For apostolic religious life the implications were significant. Much of the four Gospels was about Jesus' ministry—which gave us a clue about how we are to be in ministry. It became apparent that Jesus was killed because of the choices he made and what he said in his ministry. As Jesus expressed it, love is more important than law. The law was made for human benefit, not to oppress people. God's will is for abundant life, fullness of life as John's Gospel puts it; God's primary attribute is compassion rather than judgment. When Jesus was killed for upsetting the religious authorities of his day, God validated his ministry and his teaching by not allowing sin and evil to have the last word, but by raising him from the dead.[6]

As this reflection on Jesus' lived history continued, liberation theology began to develop among poor and oppressed peoples. Drawing on the choices Jesus made in his ministry to share life with the poor and to offer wholeness and liberation to the oppressed, poor and oppressed Christians added social critique and praxis to Christology. Thus, liberation Christologies begin in the context of the suffering of a particular oppressed group. The process of this reflection is communal. Oppressed people come together to reflect on their situation, to pray, and to seek actions that will change things for the better. These actions become the subject for further reflection. Thus, thought and action are intertwined.

Liberation theologies emphasize the social nature of sin and grace by reflecting on how the community experiences them within their social structures. These theologies also consider how God and Christ are present in the community as it struggles for justice. Typically there are three steps to this method. A situation is recognized to be oppressive, is called sinful, and is analyzed for its causes, including the way Christian tradition has contributed to the oppression: Has there been complicity in the church and its preaching? Has Christ been understood in a way that is helpful to the oppressor? In this step, liberation theology is quite critical of the tradition. In the third step, guided by the experience of the oppressed, Christian tradition is searched for elements that would yield new understanding and a new liberating practice. In liberation theology, discipleship always entails a change in praxis—activity on behalf of the kingdom of God, judged to be more a present reality than an entirely future one. It is out of this theology that Medellín developed the notion of the preferential option for the poor. Massive injustice is analyzed as social sin and not as God's will.

Frequently, when religious espouse voluntary solidarity with the poor, they discover a new experience of God, experiencing Christ in the poor themselves.

There is a mystical side to this Christology, but it is more a spirituality of a people than of individuals. Faith influences base communities as they reflect on the Scriptures, the concrete situation of the poor, and action taken to address it. Frequently, when religious espouse voluntary solidarity with the poor, they discover a new experience of God, experiencing Christ in the poor themselves. Poor people become the ongoing occasion for conversion. Elizabeth Johnson notes that this theology is also conflictual. The powers within either church or culture do not like to be challenged. To act and live in solidarity with the poor is to risk certain conflict even as Jesus did in his ministry. In this Christology there is less an imitation of the interior attitudes of Jesus than a willingness to accept the consequences of a liberating praxis. What differentiates solidarity with the poor, in this theological perspective, from involvement with the poor in the earlier mystical model is concrete social analysis. Rather than simply relieving the poor in a loving way, one joins them in their struggle.

In the third model, a feminist Christology, we find similarities to the historical/liberation perspective. Feminist theology is liberation theology done from the perspective of women's experience. It draws inspiration from the historical material about Jesus' compassionate healing and liberating treatment of women and a discipleship of equals among the men and women who followed him in the early community. Women clearly understand that their oppression in all cultures is not willed by God. The same steps of analysis and action and prayer as described above are applied to the situation of women. Feminist theology in first-world countries recognizes the resources in Christology for women's liberation.[7]

The Jesus tradition is a powerful and important spiritual resource for Christian women in their struggle for full participation and personhood in church and society. Feminist theologians in third-world countries pay attention to the situation of women everywhere. The God Jesus reveals cannot be hostile to the deepest reality of women; women as well as men are fitting images of this God. Likewise, women disciples of Jesus are images of Christ, are every bit as much "altera Christa" as men are "alter Christus." Women recognize their suffering and oppression reconciled, healed, and overcome in the death and resurrection of Jesus fully as much as other oppressed groups.

Women in religious communities probably lie along the entire continuum of these three Christologies. For some, their relationship with Jesus is primarily a mystical/interpersonal one that has not been significantly changed by reflection on the actual historical situation of Jesus' life. Others have deeply appropriated this historical perspective and have assimilated it to their mystical experience of Jesus. The Jesus they meet in prayer is the embodiment of God's compassion. To be involved with him is to be involved with all who suffer. If the FORUS study is correct in its conclusion that service with the poor is not a fully operative priority in communities, it is because a significant portion of the membership has not made the historical/liberation turn. Religious life is constructed on the dominant understanding of what the following of Christ entails in a given historical period. The larger church—both ordinary parishioners and the hierarchy—is more comfortable with religious doing good work motivated by a mystical Christology than it is with a stance of prophetic solidarity based on either a liberationist model or a feminist Christology.

Feminist Christologies are arising all over the world because even countries that began to address the structural causes of poverty were doing so from the perspective of men rather than women. As worldwide statistics on women become available, it is clear that in every culture women (with their children) constitute the masses of poor people and suffer additionally purely because of their gender. Religious institutes whose originating charisms focused on women and children can reappropriate those charisms in the contemporary context by adopting some form of Christian feminism.[8] This is the development our constitutions and chapter statements document, but I suspect that they are not fully internalized because our operative Christologies have not yet caught up with them. Religious life has historically been lived longer from the mystical model, which did not necessarily entail apostolic life. Further, religious life has also been lived by women in contexts determined by masculine consciousness and explained in theologies rooted in masculine experience. As apostolic religious and as women, our challenge is to integrate a personally appropriated Christ mysticism with historical consciousness and liberationist praxis in our postmodern context in a way that is fully consonant with our feminine experience. These are the Christologies that support both a prophetic and a contemplative religious life for women.

Conclusion

In her theological monograph commissioned by the FORUS study, Elizabeth Johnson points to what she calls a "new experience of God emerging in the context of postmodern consciousness." The paradoxical experience so many of us have of presence in absence, the loss of familiar ways of experiencing God, and the emergence of something deeper or different are all of a piece. She asserts that a shift is going on in our understanding of the nature of God revealed to us in Jesus. In this essay I have described some of these changes through a Christological lens. However, these changes in Christology also initiate changes in our experience of God. Johnson describes the features of this new experience this way:

> If there be a God at all, then this is absolute holy mystery that can never be fathomed. Not literally a male person writ large, the sacred can be pointed to by any created good:

> male, female, animal, cosmic. This mystery does not dwell in isolation from the world but encompasses it as the Matrix of its being and becoming. God in the world and the world in God—panentheism—describes the mutual relation. Thus related, the Holy One of Blessing is a God of pathos who participates in the suffering of the world in order to transform it from within. Divine power is the strength of love, rather than raw, monarchical omnipotence. Passionate for justice and peace and compassionate over pain, Holy Wisdom typically self-reveals in the fragmentary breakthroughs of well-being that come about through human partnership with divine purpose. Forever God acts to create a fresh, new future: liberation is her signature deed. A God like this calls for an ethic of critical compassion. We are impelled so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it.

She goes on to describe this experience of divine absence and presence as:

> an experience of the Spirit of God: radically transcendent, like the wind blowing where it will; and at the same time radically immanent, dwelling at the heart of the world to vivify and renew all things. Empowered by the Spirit in our age, people of faith who treasure the living memory of Jesus seek the hidden God of life (contemplation) and live out the passion of God for the world in need (prophecy).[9]

Rather than a return to the old securities that would quench the fiery Spirit moving in our midst, we need more profound prayer, more attentive listening to the experience of God breaking through in our midst, and acting from its liberating energy toward a more just, more contemplative, and more novel future. One of the tasks of religious leadership is to contribute to this new naming of God in ways that unite contemplation and prophecy, compassion and action, women's well-being and that of the earth, nonviolence and conflictual change. This task cannot be accomplished without thinking theologically as well as psychologically, without the courage to articulate one's own core religious experience and that of the community, without a sustaining hope grounded in God's faithfulness. Whatever the eventual shape of the next form of religious life, it will both emerge from and disclose this new experience of God.

It is the task of religious leaders to tell the new story of the surpassing gift of God's fidelity, love, and emancipating compassion. It is the task of leaders to uncover the foundational experience of God in every woman in the community and in every interaction with one another. Religious leaders must forge a new vocabulary of the Spirit's presence that honors everyone's experience of God and also points to the "new experiences" emerging in our times and in many of our members. If religious life clearly manifests this profound rootedness in the Holy Mystery, "all will be well and all manner of things will be well."[10]

Notes

[1] Lavinia Byrne, ed., *The Hidden Tradition: Women's Spiritual Writings Rediscovered. An Anthology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 23.

[2] David Nygren, Miriam Ukeritis, John McClelland, et al., "Religious Leadership Competencies," Review for Religious 52, no. 3 (May-June 1993): 412.

[3] Nygren and Ukeritis, "The Religious Life Futures Project: Executive Summary," Review for Religious 52, no. 1 (January-February 1993): 11. Interpretation theory also suggests a similar process by bringing the possible interpretations together in dialogue, to arbitrate among, and to seek agreement. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 79.

[4] For a readable survey of these contemporary changes in Christology see Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

[5] Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, p. 50.

[6] Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), is still the most accessible form of this insight into Christology. Originally published in 1976, it is being superseded by John Meier's and Dominic Crossan's recent works, *A Marginal Jew* and *The Historical Jesus*.

[7] See Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) and *Consider Jesus*, for ample bibliography of feminist theologies.

[8] For an example of this process, see Janet Ruffing and Theresa Moser, "An Option for Women?" Way Supplement 74 (Women and Ignatian Spirituality in Dialogue, summer 1992): 89-100.

[9] Elizabeth Johnson, "Between the Times: Religious Life and the Postmodern Experience of God," Review for Religious 53, no. 1 (January-February 1994): 22 and 23-24.

[10] Julian of Norwich, *Showings of Divine Love*.