

A Delicate Weaving

LCWR Assembly – Presidential Address

August 16, 2013

During last year's LCWR assembly, Barbara Marx Hubbard described a world in flux in the midst of comprehensive paradigm shifts poised for a cosmic break through. Putting her presidential address in a similar context, Sr. Pat Farrell suggested tools to help us navigate these tumultuous times with trust and a spirit of adventure: contemplation, prophecy, solidarity with the marginalized, community, non-violence, and joyful hope.

At the assembly we were aware of the tens of thousands who had written to LCWR hoping for reconciliation of differences that exist in the Catholic Church and for the creation of spaces of honest and open conversation on the critical moral and ethical issues that face us today.

After three days of prayer, discussion and discernment, LCWR members asked for open and honest dialogue to increase understanding between Church leaders and women religious, and also to create more possibilities for laity, especially women, to have a voice in the Church. They specifically instructed us to conduct our conversations with the bishops from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening and open dialogue. The assembly reiterated that the theology, ecclesiology and spirituality of the Second Vatican Council serve as the foundation of our form of religious life and stressed LCWRs role as a voice for justice in the world.

The navigational tools described by Sr. Pat were particularly useful in responding to the challenges and opportunities facing our church and world as LCWR members carried out the mission of Jesus Christ this year. The Church itself experienced a paradigm shift that no one could have imagined, the resignation of Pope Benedict and the election of Pope Francis who is showing us a new way of being "bishop of Rome" and of integrating the church and the gospel. The 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican council which introduced Catholics to a new way of being "church" reminds us of a paradigm shift still in process.

I have spent quite a bit of time this year thinking about our relationship with Church leadership and I kept returning to an image from an assembly of young religious I attended last year in Colombia, South America. One night the representatives from multiple countries in Latin America and the Caribbean were invited to share their culture with the rest.

One group did a very intricate dance holding long colorful ribbons, weaving them over and under, keeping time to the music. They ended by unweaving the ribbon as they danced in the opposite direction. They then invited officers and executive directors of the leadership conferences of men and women religious from Canada, the United States and Latin America to dance with them. We did so laughing, sometimes in synchronization and sometimes at cross purposes, sometimes tangling the ribbon or losing the rhythm. As we became more aware of

the other weavers and of the colorful ribbons they were holding, we were able to complement the movement of each other, anticipate their actions and to develop beautiful patterns.

That seemed to be an apt image of women religious today as we weave together our baptismal call as Christians to be women of the gospel, and a divine call to express this baptism more fully by a public profession of the evangelical councils which identifies us as in a special way as women of the Church.

Against the Second Vatican Council's expanding vision of the church and its call for renewal of religious life, in this 50th anniversary year of the council's beginning I would like to share some of my reflections on what it means to be a faithful woman of the church and of the gospel today.

It is also my own 50th anniversary year, that of my entrance into the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. As I have re-read some of the council documents this year, I have been inspired all over again as I was by that spirit of 50 years ago. As I reflect on them with you, perhaps you will be energized as well.

My presentation itself will be a delicate weaving of reflections of the concepts of women of the gospel and women of the church informed by my 50 years of lived experience in religious life and in applying the documents of Vatican II to my life and ministry. It will also reflect new understandings of church, inherent tensions that sometimes accompany the various gifts of the Spirit, and the role of all Catholics to further their ecclesial mission as they discern together how to apply the gospel in this day and age. In light of where we find ourselves today, these reflections might be a helpful framework for a way forward in our relationships with Church leaders.

In 1906 Pope Pius X described the Church as

essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members toward that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.¹

In this image of the Church, only the pastors were responsible for promoting its mission, and faithful Catholics' role in the Church's mission was simply to follow their pastor.

You've heard that song, "what a difference a day makes." With apologies to that songwriter, the words running through my head are "what a difference a Vatican council makes...."

One of the popes interwove our three concepts of women, the church and the gospel:

¹ Pius X, *Vehementer*, 1906, Nos 8.

“As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man. But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is under-going so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling.”²

Was it Pope Francis who stressed the Church’s pride in women who, impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel, could do much to aid humankind? No, it wasn’t Francis talking about the power and influence of women today but it was Pope Paul VI addressing women at the close of the second Vatican council almost 50 years ago.

Pope Paul ended by giving women a major role to play in the council’s implementation. “Women,... make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life. Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.”³

Women religious had accepted Pope Pius XII’s call to become professionally prepared for our ministries and had begun to integrate theological study and spirituality with secular/professional studies. We were particularly prepared and eager to accept this important ecclesial role.

The week before he resigned, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on Vatican II. He recalled,

“[O]ff we went to the Council not just with joy but with enthusiasm. There was an incredible sense of expectation. We were hoping that all would be renewed, that there would truly be a new Pentecost, a new era of the Church, because the Church was still fairly robust at that time... However, there was a feeling that the Church was not moving forward, that it was declining, that it seemed more a thing of the past and not the herald of the future. And at that moment, we were hoping ... that the Church might once again be a force for tomorrow and a force for today.”⁴

He noted that the relationship between the church and the modern period had gotten off to a rocky start and they wanted to correct it. He explained, “[W]e were looking ... to rediscover the union between the Church and the best forces of the world, so as to open up humanity’s future, to open up true progress.”⁵

² Paul VI, “Address to Women,” 8 December, 1965.

³ Paul VI, “Address to Women,” 8 December, 1965.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Clergy of Rome,” 14 February 2013.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Clergy of Rome,” 14 February 2013.

Because my previous experience of church was very limited I didn't have the heavy feelings Pope Benedict described, but I remember that sense of expectation very well. I was in high school when Vatican II opened up the windows of the church to let the spirit blow through... and I was a novice with the Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi when it concluded. We studied the documents as they were translated into English, and gloried in new understandings of the Church, of the centrality of baptism and the universal call to holiness. Together we all discussed how to apply them in our own lives and congregations.

The documents spoke of the Church in a whole new way. For me the Church was a building or the Vatican and Church hierarchy, and I didn't understand how the Church could be the Body of Christ. I had this strange image of a skyline of buildings over which was superimposed a huge reclining human body of Jesus lying on his side. What did it mean that the Church was the body of Christ? I didn't connect it with Paul's letter to the Corinthians which tells us that "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13) and ends with "Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it."

One day I finally got it, I understood what it meant that the Church was the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ's presence in the world today is made tangible through OUR actions and in the words of one of our saints, Theresa of Avila, "today Jesus has no hands but ours, no feet but ours..." In one Spirit we were all baptized into the body of Christ and we continue to fulfill his Gospel ministry through faith and action.

Paul stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit when he met some disciples from Ephesus and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They told him they had never even heard that there was a Holy Spirit and had been baptized with the baptism of John. Paul then baptized them in Jesus name, and when he laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Before the Second Vatican Council Catholics would have answered Paul that they knew about the Holy Spirit, but they would not have seen the Spirit as active in their own lives, and would have said that the time of prophecy was past.

But the council fathers insisted that the time of prophecy is now: "The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office... and the Holy Spirit distributes graces among every rank of the faithful, "allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills."⁶

As a result of these gifts to every rank, the faithful participate with the clergy in the discernment of faith: "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.⁷ Rather than simply following the Pastors "like a docile flock" in the words of Pius X, the people of God were to join their pastors in reflecting on articles of faith and applying them in their lives.

When discussing divine revelation, the council fathers also indicated that the laity had a role to play with the bishops in our deepening understanding of tradition.

Growth in this

⁶ Lumen Gentium, 12.

⁷ Lumen Gentium 12.

“comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.”⁸

The council fathers understood the laity to be much more than a docile flock to be led by their pastors!

Many of you will remember when *Perfectae Caritatis* called on religious to undertake a “radical renewal” in the sense of a return to the roots or sources of Christian life, including the vision of our founders; and to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as we adapt to the changing conditions of our times. We were reminded that the Gospel is the supreme rule⁹, and that our call to religious life is rooted in Baptismal consecration, is a fuller expression of it!¹⁰

We were charged with adapting our manner of living, praying, working and governing to modern physical and psychological circumstances, the needs of the apostolate, and the demands of our culture, economy and society.¹¹

In order to do this, religious would need a “proper understanding of men, of the conditions of the times and of the needs of the Church.” Evaluating current events in the light of faith, they would be more effective in their service.¹² In addition to “religious, apostolic, doctrinal and technical training,” sisters were to be properly instructed in “the behavior-patterns, the emotional attitudes, and the thought-processes of modern society.”¹³

In an address in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI noted that “in recent years the anthropological, cultural, social, and religious framework of humanity has changed.”¹⁴ Women religious who are aware of these advances in human understanding have asked key questions about how to apply the gospel in light of them. When we have encouraged the Church to integrate relevant findings from the new advances in psychology, human anthropology and other sciences into appropriate areas of church teaching we have made some members of the church hierarchy uneasy.

Spiritual renewal was of utmost importance and *Perfectae Caritatis* encouraged daily reading and meditation on the Holy Scriptures and celebration of the sacred liturgy “with both lips and heart.”¹⁵

⁸ *Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 18 November 1965, 8.*

⁹ *Perfectae Caritatus 2.*

¹⁰ *Perfectae Caritatus 5.*

¹¹ *Perfectae Caritatus 3.*

¹² *Perfectae Caritatus 2.*

¹³ *Perfectae Caritatus 18.*

¹⁴ Homily at Eucharist at Av. dos Aliados Square, in Porto, Portugal, on May 14, 2010.

¹⁵ *Perfectae Caritatus 6.*

This spiritual nourishment was to direct the focus of religious outward so “they will love Christ's members as brothers, honor and love their pastors as sons should do, and living and thinking ever more in union with the Church, dedicate themselves wholly to its mission.”¹⁶

In light of that male language, it probably won't surprise you that the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church wasn't clear on how women religious were situated in the church.

The Chapter on The People of God, stressed the unity of the faithful in Christ. Along with all the baptized we share in the ‘common priesthood of the faithful,’ and as such participate in the one priesthood of Christ as do the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, though differing in essence and degree.¹⁷

But *Lumen Gentium's* chapter devoted to the laity divided the faithful into three groups when it defined laity as “all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church.” It went on to note that by baptism they are part of the people of God and “in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”¹⁸

In the chapter on “Religious” the council fathers described a third way women religious are situated in the church. When one looks at the “divine and hierarchical structure of the Church,” it cautions that religious are not in a distinct group midway between clerical and laity.¹⁹ Instead, the faithful are called from these two groups to consecrated life.

I visualized this description of religious life with the church as a small circle for the ministerial priesthood, next to a much larger circle of the lay state. A third circle overlaps the first two to indicate that consecrated religious belong to one of these two states.

While at the time I was not aware of these inconsistencies, I am not alone in thinking that this role confusion has contributed to the tension sometimes experienced among women religious, laity and hierarchy.

Embracing the universal call to holiness and the centrality of our baptismal commitment highlighted in the council documents, we walked more closely with the whole people of God. The documents called on Catholics to be more involved in the world. It stressed that we are all called to be women and men of the church and of the gospel, but as consecrated religious it becomes our central focus. Catholic sisters gradually understood that we have a mission to proclaim and enact Christ's gospel call both through our ministry in the church and in society.

Because we have come so far, it is easy to forget how revolutionary these ideas were at the time. About 1970 I heard a presentation on the potential influence that women religious could have in the Church and was very inspired with the possibilities. As a teacher I influenced the lives of the 30 students in front of me, but this was a real paradigm shift. When I excitedly shared these new ideas with one of the co-pastors in my parish, he asked, “Do you really want to be more involved with the Church?” When I said, “O, Yes,” he told me, “There is wax on the sacristy

¹⁶ Perfectae Caritatus 6.

¹⁷ Lumen Gentium, 10.

¹⁸ Lumen Gentium, 31.

¹⁹ Lumen Gentium, 43.

floor...” For him, the church was still a building, and women religious had very traditional roles.

I remained closely allied with Church ministries, but participated in the wider social justice issues of the day. My first mission assignment was teaching the upper grades in a parish that during my time there quickly changed from white to black.

This experience thrust me right into the civil rights and anti-war movement. I joined the Social Responsibility Committee of the Milwaukee Archdiocesan Sisters Council, where I met sisters committed to systemic change.

I was astounded when we asked one of the members to chair the committee and she replied, “I can’t take on another responsibility until this war is over.” I had never met a person who thought her individual actions could make a profound difference, but this sister felt personally responsible for ending the Vietnam War. Her role as woman of the gospel and woman of the church had had expanded far beyond the classroom.

Pope Paul VI was aware of the women’s movement while I was still blind to it. I have a very clear memory of the first time I heard a sister point out how our language marginalized and excluded women. When a priest said, “Pray, brothers,” I knew they meant me as well. But later I began to realize that when the terms “men” or “brothers” were used generically, people did tend to think of males first and often exclusively, and that women’s invisibility was reflected in wider societal institutions.

If I asked students, “Who do you consider to be the most influential men of the last century?” They never named any women. When I explained that if the term “men” really included females as well they wouldn’t have limited their thinking to males, there was usually silence in the room. They, too, began to see that our use of language in which men were the measure, taken as the norm, and women were often excluded, was symbolic of cultural and societal roles as well. In calling on women to bring the spirit of the council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life, Pope Paul was part of a paradigm shift that has been long in coming.

Later popes continued to reflect on women’s roles in church and society. After acknowledging the Church’s need to overcome all discrimination, one noted that looking at the world through women’s eyes would have far ranging consequences. It sounds just like Pope Francis, doesn’t it?

But it was Pope John Paul II who pointed out that women’s new self-awareness would affect how men looked at things and understood themselves, and how they interpreted history and their place in it. Most importantly, it would help men reconsider “the way they organize social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life.”²⁰

Between the time when Paul VI wrote his Address to Women at the end of the Second Vatican Council and when John Paul II wrote these words in the mid-1990s, I had completed an advanced degree in a women’s history program and had done research on the history of women religious. This time I could understand the pope’s analysis of the need to reconsider how society should be organized in light of women’s experiences.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 57.

John Paul II had called a synod of bishops and religious to examine the significance and future prospects of consecrated life in light of the new millennium.²¹ *Vita Consecrata*, his Apostolic Exhortation written as a result of the synod, contained a section devoted to “the dignity and role of consecrated women” which affirmed the church’s mission to promote ways of thinking and action in light of Christ’s message of liberation, and recognized that women religious had a key role in this.

He noted that based on our experience of the Church and being a woman in the Church, we could “help eliminate certain one-sided perspectives which do not fully recognize her dignity and her specific contribution to the Church's life and pastoral and missionary activity. Consecrated women therefore rightly aspire to have their identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly recognized, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life.”²²

In this passage, Pope John Paul II is inviting a complex weaving including gospel, church, and gender. We are not only women of the gospel carrying out Christ’s message of liberation, but we are women of the church called on to expand perspectives to create a new reality which recognizes women’s identity, ability, mission and responsibility, both in the church and beyond.

Pope John Paul wasn’t just theorizing, but immediately moved to action. He called for urgent concrete steps to provide “*room for women to participate* in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.”²³ However, their influence went beyond that. Much was expected from “the genius of women” in the fields of “theological, cultural and spiritual studies, ... in understanding the faith in all its expressions.”²⁴

Women religious were asked to promote a “new feminism” which didn’t replicate male domination, “in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.” Most feminists at that time would have also repudiated domination as a model and would agree with the need to overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation, and to insert women into every aspect of society.

The definition of feminism that I have always liked is “Feminism is the radical idea that women are people, too.” This definition makes people laugh, but it really implies that women should be given the same respect, opportunities and choices to develop their full potential in every aspect of society as are men, balanced with the common sense obligations of individual situations, acknowledging that some choices preclude others.

As I taught women’s studies and women’s history, studied how the writing of women’s history went through various progressions of interpretation, and reflected on how my own feminist consciousness developed, I noted that people in marginalized groups and those empathetic to

²¹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March, 1996.

²² John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 57.

²³ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 58.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 58.

them seem to go through a series of similar stages. Later I found these progressions identified more precisely by psychologists or sociologists.

I haven't tried to describe these stages of historical interpretation for a while so they are a bit foggy, but I remember them as moving from denial or lack of awareness of discrimination (the "women are invisible" stage of history when they aren't even mentioned), to highlighting "great women" in history such as women rulers, sheriffs or inventors (individual women who act like men), to including women in general as victims of male oppression (men's actions are still the focus), to understanding that women's historical experiences and perspectives might be different from that of men but were equally valid. Women who have moved through similar stages of feminist consciousness continue to draw attention to discrimination and work to overcome it, but being an angry victim isn't how they want to live their lives. I didn't notice when I first wrote this how very much it sounds like the hopes of Pope John Paul II for a feminism which "acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."

When some people hear the word "feminist" they think of women who are focused on women as victims of societal, especially male oppression, and understandably, the response of these women is anger. When I was explaining these stages of historical writing and feminist consciousness to a women's history class, I noted that other marginalized groups seemed to go through similar stages. I'll never forget the poignant plea I got from an African American man in the class, "Sister, I'm stuck in that angry stage. How do I get out of it?"

Pope John Paul followed his request for a new feminism with the hope that women in consecrated life would be involved in forming future priests, animating Christian communities, giving spiritual support, promoting life and peace and educating other women.²⁵

Today women are sometimes chancellors of dioceses, administrators of parishes, pastoral ministers, directors of religious education, social justice ministers, etc. Such opportunities, however, seemed to be contracting in many dioceses.

After his election I had been waiting for some sign of how Pope Francis viewed women, and in what better context could it happen than on Holy Thursday when he washed the feet of two of them.

Pope Francis explained his actions as a symbol of service and love. "Let us think that this sign is a *caress of Jesus*, which Jesus gives, because this is the real reason why Jesus came: to serve, to help us."²⁶ Pope Francis was publicly criticized for extending this "caress of Jesus" to women because he wasn't following liturgical norms set by the Congregation for Divine Worship that only men's feet were to be washed.

The Vatican spokesman defended Pope Francis, explaining "the rite was for a small, unique community made up also of women... Excluding the girls would have been inopportune in light of the simple aim of communicating a message of love to all in a group that certainly

²⁵ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Viva Consecrata*, 25 March, 1966.

²⁶ Homily of Pope Francis, Mass of the Lord's Supper, 28 March 2013.

didn't include refined experts in liturgical rules." I smiled when I realized that even Pope Francis has to delicately weave his role as man of the gospel and as man of the church, in particular as pope.

Since then, Pope Francis has often included women in his discourse. On his plane trip back to Rome after the World Youth Day in Brazil at the end of July, he told reporters that we "don't yet have a truly deep theology of women in the church."²⁷ There might not be an official "deep theology" of women in the church, but lots of "deep thinking" has already been done on this. A good place to start would be to recall how Jesus related to women:

- He counted women among his closest friends and disciples;
- he used the actions of women to describe the kingdom of God;
- he included the daily life experience of bread makers, spinners of cloth, and housewives in his teaching.
- The gospel of Luke recounts that he would cure a woman, then a man; raise one from the dead, then the other; tell a parable that appeals to women's experience, and one that appeals to men.
- He appeared to women first after his resurrection and they were the first whom he commissioned to spread the news, "apostles to the apostles."

In reading the Epistles of Paul, we find women leading faith communities, named as deacons, supporting the Apostles in their missionary activities, and more. Recent scholarship on the history of women in the Catholic Church discusses the times and places over the centuries in which women assumed significant leadership. The words of Popes Paul VII and John Paul II I have quoted should also be considered. Since schools of theology opened to women in the mid-20th century, women theologians have begun to create a "deep theology of women in the church," and they will be an essential resource for this development.

Over the past 50 years we have all grown in our understanding of the multiple meanings and expressions of "church." This, too, call for delicate weaving, as it seems we are sometimes operating out of different understandings. Pope Francis gave a series of reflections on the mystery of the Church during his general audiences beginning at the end of May. His first reflection was the Church as the family of God. After describing how "Jesus gathers round him a small community which receives his word, follows it, shares in his journey, becomes his family"²⁸ he also addressed the human aspect of the church, which includes shortcomings, imperfections and sins of those who make up the Church, pastors and faithful. He confessed, "The Pope has these too — and many of them; but what is beautiful is that when we realize we are sinners we encounter the mercy of God who always forgives."

²⁷ Quoted by John Allen, National Catholic Reporter, July 29, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-homosexuals-who-am-i-judge>.

²⁸ Pope Francis, General Audience, 29 May 2013.

He ended with a series of questions, including “What do I do to ensure that she is a community in which each one feels welcome and understood, feels the mercy and love of God who renews life?”²⁹

When reflecting on the Church as the Body of Christ in a later audience, he noted that being part of the Church means being united with the Pope and Bishops who help bring unity and communion.

In plain language he added,

“It also means learning to overcome subjectivism and division, to understand each other better, to harmonize the variety and the richness of each person; in a word to love God and the people beside us more, in the family, in the parish, in associations.”³⁰

In his reflection on the Church as “Temple” he insisted, “we are all necessary for building this Temple! ... No one is the most important person in the Church, we are all equal in God’s eyes.”

Then in his charming, spontaneous way he added, “Some of you might say ‘Listen, Mr. Pope, you are not our equal.’ Yes, I am like each one of you, we are all equal, we are brothers and sisters!”³¹

Pope Francis is well aware that the ideal isn’t always reflected in the real. The Church is the Body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, but it is made up of fallible people with different roles to play who need to harmonize the variety and richness of each other. Sometimes this weaving results in a beautiful tapestry, but sometimes it is a more difficult process and results in a piece that needs snips or unknitting and re-weaving as we learn to overcome subjectivism and division and harmonize the richness of individuals.

I’d like to turn again to the Vatican Council’s pastoral and dogmatic constitutions on the Church for a fuller understanding of these roles and how the council fathers envisioned this delicate weaving. They pointed out that all Catholics shared in Christ’s prophetic office, not only through the hierarchy but also through the laity “to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensu fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life.”³²

In fact, it was the laity who had the principal duty to permeate the world so it “fulfills its purpose in justice, charity and peace” using their secular training, skills and civic culture for the benefit of all “according to the design of the Creator...”³³

²⁹ Pope Francis, General Audience, 29 May 2013.

³⁰ Pope Francis, General Audience, 19 June 2013.

³¹ Pope Francis, General Audience, 26 June, 2013.

³² Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 35.

³³ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 36.

Sometimes the laity was even obligated to express opinions concerning the good of the Church because of their knowledge, competency or special ability. They were to do it through church agencies “in truth, in courage and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ.”³⁴

After pointing out the laity’s prophetic role and obligation to express their opinion for the good of the Church, the laity were admonished to “promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds” and the shepherds were admonished to take the “prudent advice” of the laity and give them responsibility and freedom for action.³⁵

The council fathers appreciated how this delicate weaving between laity and their spiritual leaders would make both more effective: Such dialogue will give the laity “a strengthened sense of personal responsibility; a renewed enthusiasm; a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their spiritual leaders.” And the spiritual leaders, helped by the expertise of the laity, would come to clearer temporal and spiritual decisions.³⁶ The council fathers believed this would result in a stronger church more able to fulfill its mission, and many laity today are eager to partner in such a way with their spiritual leaders.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church cautioned the laity that pastors weren’t experts everything, and couldn’t always give concrete solutions to complicated problems, nor was that their responsibility. In those cases, “enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.”³⁷

Sometimes the gospel application would be clear, but sometimes Christians of good faith would disagree. When that happened, “no one is allowed ... to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion.” In that case they should have an honest, charitable discussion with the common good as their goal.³⁸ While this advice was addressed to the laity, all could benefit from it during our contentious, polarizing climate which sometimes makes its way into church discourse as well.

Pope John Paul II noted that religious share in Christ’s prophetic office is a special way because of the radical nature of their following of Christ and their dedication to the mission of consecrated life.³⁹ It acknowledged that sometimes their prophecy can be directed at those who represent the church in an official way.

“In the history of the Church, alongside other Christians, there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit,

³⁴ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 37.

³⁵ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 37.

³⁶ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 37.

³⁷ Pastoral Constitution on the Church 43.

³⁸ Pastoral Constitution on the Church 43.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, 84.

have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the Pastors of the Church."⁴⁰

This certainly illustrates the need for delicate weaving between our roles as women and men of the gospel, and women and men of the church as we realize, "*True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history.*"⁴¹

Vita Consecrata then addresses our dual roles clearly: to be faithful women of the church, we must be attentive women of the gospel.

"Consecrated persons will be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world, if they can renew themselves constantly in the light of the word of God."

But the spirit resides in all of us, and all share in Christ's prophetic role. While religious are able to enrich others with their charismatic gifts, they in turn "let themselves be challenged by the prophetic stimulus which comes from other sectors of the Church." The document describes how the prophetic challenges can result in unity:

"In this exchange of gifts, guaranteed by *full harmony with the Church's Magisterium and discipline*, there will shine forth the action of the Holy Spirit who "gives [the Church] a unity of fellowship and service; he furnishes and directs her with various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic".⁴²

This section illustrates the many ways the people of God share in the prophetic role of Christ. We have to be open to the prophetic challenges of others. Our delicate weaving is also affected by our attentiveness to the truth of the gospel and the promptings of the Spirit; by the knowledge, competence and special ability of the faithful; by the hierarchical and charismatic gifts of the Church; and by the concrete realities of our human experience.

In 2000 the concrete realities of my human experience expanded to include the wider world when I was appointed as director of the New York office of Franciscans International and represented over a million Franciscans, women and men, third order secular and vowed, at the United Nations. Our goal was to influence international policy in the areas of concern for the poor, care of creation and peacemaking.

Many other groups of women and some men religious also have representatives at the United Nations and we worked together on many projects and with other nongovernmental organizations. In fact, there are seven of us here at this assembly.

A few days after I returned from a trip to Colombia, South America where I was able to observe first-hand the effects of their decades- long civil war, the expert in Latin American Affairs at the UN embassy sat down next to me at lunch. Over the next hour and a half I told him about

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² John Paul II, Vita Consecrata, 25 March, 1996, 84.

visiting several villages where there had been massacres, some controlled by the guerrillas and others by the government, of staying in a slum built over a reclaimed garbage heap which was home to families displaced by the long term fighting, of how US policy was playing out “on the ground” on both sides and what the unintended consequences might be.

At the end of the conversation the expert on Latin American affairs told me, “You have been to places I could never go, and have seen things I could never see.” That statement illustrates both the gifts and the tensions of the delicate weaving. Because of our experiences sharing our gospel ministry with those on the margins, women religious have sometimes been to places the hierarchy could never go, and have seen things they could never see. At times our role as women of the gospel results in tension. Our dual roles and complementary experiences can result in a beautiful tapestry with beautiful yarns of various hues. But I think our differing ministerial experiences can result in some members of the Church hierarchy viewing our weaving as full of knots and snags, and broken yarn.

The opening words of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* proclaim, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”⁴³ This past year in ways we couldn’t have imagined, people of faith have reached out to us across the US and Europe, sharing with us their hopes and anxieties regarding both their personal lives and the church they so love.

We have begun to see this moment in our history in a wider context. Our situation reflects larger questions and concerns such as the ongoing implementation of the Second Vatican Council and the ecclesial roles of women religious and of the laity, especially women; understandings of authority, faithful dissent, and obedience and the need for spaces where honest, probing questions about faith and belief can be raised and discussed.

Monika Hellwig once observed that “Religious Life practices being Church for the Church.” As we engage with the CDF we are practicing “being Church for the Church.” Many of the people we have met in various countries this year have expressed appreciation for LCWR’s commitment to conduct our conversations with the bishops from a stance of deep prayer that values mutual respect, careful listening, open and honest dialogue to increase understanding between church leaders and women religious. Indeed, some have called it a third way. Perhaps we, by what we do and how we do it, may model a way forward for society at-large that embodies authentic non-violence and become a vehicle of grace for the ongoing renewal of the Church in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

Florence Deacon, OSF

President, LCWR

Director, Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi

⁴³ *Gaudium et Spes*, I.

