

LEADING FROM A CONTEMPLATIVE SPACE CONTEMPLATION – “AS A WAY OF BEING-IN-THE-WORLD”

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For the past three years LCWR members have been engaging in a contemplative process as a part of all our LCWR gatherings. As we continue to try to deepen and strengthen this process of engagement it seemed helpful to step back and reflect on the why and the how of contemplative engagement. The following reflection offers one way of looking at what is involved in taking a contemplative stance.

What is Contemplation?

The most familiar definition of contemplation is, “taking a long, loving look at what is.” Both the “long” and the “loving” are foundational to the practice of contemplation. The practice of contemplation is not something new to our lives as women religious. While the practice of contemplation was muted and often distrusted over many centuries, the mystics have always known the importance of taking this path. And in the history of apostolic women religious, while this distrust has been present, there has also been the awareness that contemplation and action are two sides of the same coin – both are needed if we are to be – as we are called to be – effective instruments of God’s action in the world.

Why a Contemplative Stance?

In recent years, it seems we are being drawn ever more insistently to ground all our action in a contemplative stance. Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to the increasing complexity, speed, and demands of life today. It seems ever more important to slow down, step back and open ourselves to see and hear from a more centered space.

More importantly, we are living in a time of conflicting understandings and interpretations of what the gospel demands of us in response to the signs of the times. There are differences of world view, of values, and doctrinal understandings. There is for all of us, a clear call to integrity, authenticity, and conversion of mind and heart. The way ahead is not clear, and it is not possible to engage the demands of this time from a “business as usual stance.”

The Effect on our Leadership of Taking a Contemplative Stance

Engaging our leadership from a contemplative stance

- Centers all that we are, and all we desire to be, on the movement of God and God's spirit
- Enables any gathering/group conversation to become a spiritual experience rather than just a business meeting
- Engages our minds and hearts in movement toward a new consciousness – a new way of seeing, a new way of being
- Opens us individually and collectively to ongoing conversion of mind and heart
- Assists a group in moving from "I" to "We"
- Invites silence which supports reflection and deeper conversation
- Suspends debate and mere problem solving, allowing for creative possibilities, emerging options, and peaceful resolution
- Supports a "flexible shaping" and integration of prayer, reflection, and conversation in addressing any variety of topics, concerns, or questions

How Do We Engage in a Contemplative Process?

There is not just one way or one formula for engaging in a contemplative process. In LCWR we have been using a process that sets aside time toward the end of a gathering to step back, gaze at the experience and the various components of the gathering, and listen for what may be emerging. It is also possible to build a contemplative pace and process into all the components of a gathering or meeting.

Common Elements

However the contemplative experience is structured there are some common elements to include.

Coming to Quiet

Coming to quiet externally

A still body

External silence

Coming to quiet internally:

Stilling the mind

Letting go of thoughts and chatter

Coming to a quiet heart

Letting go of reaching and grasping

Paying Attention

In "A Summer Day" Mary Oliver writes, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention..." How do we pay attention?

Noticing what is, without judging what is
Just taking what is there in
Taking time and not rushing to conclusions
Waiting

Listening

In his most recent book, *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*, Mark Nepo writes:

To start with, we must honor that listening is a personal pilgrimage that takes time and a willingness to circle back. With each trouble that stalls us and each wonder that lifts us, we are asked to put down our conclusions and feel and think anew. Unpredictable as life itself, the practice of listening is one of the most mysterious, luminous and challenging art forms on Earth. (p. ix)

He speaks of learning to listen "...to what we are not yet aware of..." (p. 11)

He also emphasizes the importance of listening together, writing, "...the humble approach to a greater life of listening begins with the acceptance that we hear more together." (p. 12)

Learning to listen

to myself, without prematurely judging

to others, without prematurely judging

to the situation, without prematurely judging

Speaking

Offering what I see and hear freely, without judgment

Returning

Returning to quiet receptivity

Grounding our leadership ministry in a contemplative stance, then, is not just a fad or a thing of the moment, something we do "for a while," the latest technique of effective leadership. Rather, it is a way of seeing, being, doing in the world, a way of opening ourselves individually and collectively to the action of God in our lives. It is a way of being true to our deepest vocation, a way of allowing Holy Mystery to use us, individually and collectively, to bless the world.