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Leadership a New Way: Women, Power, and Authority

feature

The FORUS study in its general conclusions identified authority as "perhaps the most pressing question for religious to resolve."¹ Underneath the question of authority, I find at least two foundational themes which need to be explored—the meaning of leadership in religious congregations in light of differing interpretations of power and authority and the specifically religious qualities of leadership. As I study the current research on religious life, I continue to uncover the deep ground of grace out of which religious life grows and flourishes. I remain convinced that we cannot hope to understand the reality of contemporary religious life without probing this depth level of religious experience. The present theological, interdisciplinary, experiential reflections address such questions as: Leadership for what? What obstacles impede our ability to collaborate? Part II addresses questions about religious leadership: How do leaders support the ongoing conversion implied as we discover new dimensions of the Christ mystery in our lives and ministries? What ultimately sustains us in our calling?

"Authority in many U.S. institutions, including religious life, has undergone deconstruction. Variable under-

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standings of consensus, subsidiarity, discernment, and leadership have diffused understandings of authority. . . . The abuse of authority in the past makes individuals reluctant to endorse authority in any way."² It is clear from the FORUS study that these differing views of authority and the corresponding understandings of obedience exist within single institutes as well as across institutes. As a result, leadership is sometimes severely impaired in its ability to lead; while in other instances leadership is experienced as empowering and freeing for mission.

Authority functions and is understood differently when charism is taken seriously and when governance takes adult discipleship into account. Women religious particularly have been redefining the meaning of obedience and authority in ways particularly suited to their awareness of their needs and desires as women. The FORUS study reports that vision groups "view authority as power that is shared among communities of equals."³ These changes in understandings of authority are related to how such a vision of power and authority and the implications for redefining a vow of obedience appear to many women to be more compatible with gospel values than does the post-Tridentine version of authority. Women religious as a group, especially at the level of leadership, are pressing for a more enabling exercise of power among themselves.

Although religious desire to maintain an ecclesial identity, the FORUS study reports a "lowered respect for the magisterial authority of the church and the U.S. hierarchy in general."⁴ According to this study, women are acutely aware of their exclusion from leadership by the clerical church. Women religious are looking at church in new ways; they have embraced a clear commitment to changing this church. Clerical resistance to this change will further diminish the capacity of women's communities to

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attract the very women who are looking for a public context in society and church that is meaningful for their dedication and service.

In my opinion, apostolic religious women will not fully stabilize nor be able to attract and retain new vocations until ecclesial conflicts about the church's mission and the contribution of religious within it are resolved. This includes not only resolving the role of women in the church but also arriving at an operative consensus of the role of the church in the modern world. Religious are in a real sense church people whose mission and identity lie at the heart of the church's own. The Brookland Commission Study reported that 94 percent of their respondents named the self-understanding of the church developed in the wake of Vatican II to be a source in forming their ideas about what is essential to religious life.⁵ To the extent that the larger church is ambivalent about the directions set by the council, religious life will continue to be at risk.

In the context of these recent studies which indicate both significant change and continuing confusion, I will describe the psychoanalytic roots of our attitudes toward authority, explore several concepts of power disclosed in the New Testament, and reflect on women and power. I will end with the Whiteheads' descriptions of both the developmental stages which lead to sharing power in Christian communities and the necessary task of healing the wounds of authority which we all bear.

Formative Experiences with Authority

One's basic stance toward authority, those whom I perceive to be "in charge" or more powerful than I, is usually determined by my early experiences with my mother and father and then with institutional authorities such as teachers and other authority figures. This experience forms how I relate to God as an ultimate authority, how I relate to situations of injustice, how I relate to my own authority, and how I relate to ambiguous authority. (Ambiguous authority refers to that exercise of authority which is usually benign but which is occasionally overbearing or oppressive.)

If my experience has been one in which authority was exercised with genuine love and for my good, I will tend to respect and trust authority. I will creatively participate with authority, and I

will feel comfortable being critical of this authority. These responses are based on a sense that persons in authority have benign motives and are both fallible and rational. In other words, were I to present information missing from a decision, that new information would be taken into account and I would not be punished for making a suggestion. Authority exercised with love is neither physically nor verbally abusive, but consistently treats me with respect.

On the other hand, if my experience has been one in which authority was not so exercised, fear will be my dominant emotional response. I will either conform to the wishes of authority to avoid notice or abuse or I will rebel against it. Neither rebellion nor conformity are particularly healthy responses because both are rooted in a feeling of alienation and powerlessness. Authority functions against me and I feel powerless to do much about it. If I rebel, I choose noncooperation. I do not help to change the situation; instead, I may create a separate peace by withdrawing or opposing. If I conform, I do so because I feel powerless. I do not tell the truth but tell them only what they want to hear to avoid conflict. Since I perceive authority to be unloving and irrational, rational discourse cannot achieve anything fruitful, so I do not even try. Of course, no one is a pure type, and all usually have had some experience of both forms of authority. But most of the time I inhabit one attitude more than the other. I either offer myself to the process of authority-making or I withdraw in fear from participation.

If my early experience is primarily loving and rational, I will experience God's authority to be for my good; I will recognize and act against situations of injustice; I will experience my own inner authority and act out of it in nondefensive ways; and I will be able to be critical. I can tell the truth in the face of ambiguous experiences of authority. I can afford to see that a given person in authority has room to grow in the way he or she exercises that authority.

New Testament Concepts of Power

The New Testament presents two concepts of power. It addresses the way authority exercises power through the behavior and teaching of Jesus, and it begins to redefine power as the activity of God in our midst. "Power in the kingdom of God will

be totally different from power as it is exercised in the kingdom of Satan (the world). The power of Satan is the power of domination and oppression, the power of God is the power of service and freedom."⁶ All the kingdoms and nations of this present world are governed by the power of domination and force. The structure of the kingdom of God will be determined by the power of spontaneous loving service which people render to one another. In Mark, Jesus puts it this way: "You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant (diakonos), and anyone who wants to be first among you must be a slave (doulos) to all. For the son of man himself did not come to serve but to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:42-45, Mk 9:35). This teaching occurs in all three synoptics and is paralleled by the footwashing pericope in John's gospel. "You call me teacher and lord, rightly so—if I your teacher and Lord have washed your feet—so also ought you to wash one another" (Jn 13:14). This is an example of the way power is to be exercised among the disciples—placing ourselves at the service of one another's freedom, calling forth from one another by our example "kingdom qualities," and releasing the power of the community in mission.

Jesus is very clear about the difference between domination and service. As Albert Nolan says, "The power of this new society is not a power which has to be served, a power before which a person must bow down and cringe. It is the power which has an enormous influence in the lives of people by being of service to them."⁷ Also relevant to this discussion is Jesus' attitude to the law, the power which enabled religious rulers to dominate and oppress. Jesus consistently attacked this abuse of the law. He rejected any interpretation which was used against people. The law was meant to serve genuine human needs and interests.

Unfortunately, many fear the responsibility of freedom. We seek the security of a law which gives us prestige and allows us to dominate, or we let others make decisions for us, hiding behind rules, relying on the letter rather than on the spirit of the law. In so doing we enslave ourselves by our fear of freedom, and we deny freedom to others as well. Jesus does not abolish the law, but relativizes it so that we will take responsibility for the systems we create and use them to serve the needs of humanity. The

exercise of power and authority in God's kingdom is to be functional. It should embody the arrangements that are necessary if we are to serve one another willingly and effectively. Every type of domination and servitude is to be abolished, including religious forms of these abuses.

The New Testament also speaks about another kind of power—the power that comes from on high over Mary, the Holy Spirit, who also comes upon the community gathered in Jesus' 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 the disciples to preach, he confers power on them, not to rule but to heal and to cast out demons. Jesus releases in our midst freedom from all that binds us. He heals and forgives sin and invites us to share in this power for good which is the Spirit's action in us.

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 for mission is released in each of us and in the group as a whole. The disciples had trouble understanding this; 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.

Women and Power

As women we can often remain confused about these texts and themes. We have been trained in our tradition to be powerless—to be the servants. Kathleen Fischer puts it this way: "Rhetoric about servanthood has often been used against women, trapping us in subservient roles. As suffering servant Jesus exercises power in the service of relationships, affirming the dignity and worth of each individual. He empowered others, unlocking their deepest desires and enabling them to use their best gifts."⁸ Women's role in the church has been designated as the subordinate one (servants) while others have assumed the positions of

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authority, taking charge, lording it over, and engaging in ritual footwashings while not holding power lightly. As a result, women find themselves oppressed by religious authority and in a position of permanent subordination.

Since *power* has been a bad word among Christian women, we perceive it as a negative and dangerous reality. Because it is

something none of us is to have or exercise, we are therefore often mystified by the use of power in the church and in religious congregations. We do not want anything to do with power, and we may be afraid to exercise it. If we want power, we must be bad. Exercising power in our own interest can leave us feeling selfish, self-destructive, or threatened in our relationships. This ambivalence about power and our social conditioning in patriarchal systems create a situation in which we often exercise our power indirectly or unconsciously. Or we may become confused and anxious when conflict or struggle comes out into the open. If we

do exercise power unconsciously, we will probably do to others exactly what has been done to us.

So as not to oppress anyone else as we have been oppressed, we need to understand power differently. We need to see power as a strength and understand how to participate in the healthy use of power. Jean Baker Miller redefines power simply as the "capacity to implement."⁹ Expressing power does not need to be coercive or oppressive. Women, however, do not exercise power any better than men unless we become conscious and critical of how and when we express power.

The Whiteheads on Power

In the American church many men and women, clergy and laity, struggle to reflect critically on their experience of power in ecclesial contexts and to change how that power is expressed. Recent writings by Evelyn and James Whitehead have supported this struggle by exploring *gospel* understandings of power in the

light of the contemporary social sciences. In their work with hundreds of teams and in workshops across the country, they found that the single greatest obstacle to collaboration is a mystification about power along with the inability of many people in authority to share power. The Whiteheads define power and authority this way:¹⁰

Authority is the right to command or exercise power in relationship to the goals and values of the group. It is vested in persons (elected leaders) or in offices (specific roles/functions). Who or how the "vesting" occurs may be formal (appointment, election, consensus) or informal. But the social group recognizes the function of authority and the process of transferring it from one person to another.

Power is the achievement or control of effects. Often it is the ability to produce a change. It may or may not coincide with authority. The Whiteheads continue:

It is always present in interpersonal relationships. It is every way of exercising influence over another. One person is always subject to the power of another and no one is completely without power. Power refers to the interactions among us.

Finally, they say "power is best perceived as those interactions that both create and threaten human community." According to the FORUS study, it is this definition of power as a resource to be shared that emerges as the dominant view of power among visionary people in religious life. The question remains: How operative is this understanding of power in religious life?

In *The Promise of Partnership*, the Whiteheads consider that one of the primary tasks of religious leadership is to foster the transformation of our experience of power. If religious leaders genuinely exercise power in a manner consonant with the New Testament's understanding, they will use their power to welcome the power of others. They will use their role as leaders to enable those they lead to experience their shared strength in the group.

As we mature in personal strength, we experience different modes of power. Early experiences and cultural influences can delay or impede our being comfortable with more mature expressions of power. Relying on David McClelland's work, the Whiteheads describe four basic orientations toward personal power—receiving power, achieving autonomy, expressing power, and sharing power.¹¹

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Faces of Power

Childhood is our basic experience of feeling strong because we are cared for and supported in our growing by our parents. When we are nurtured well, we learn to feel safe in the presence of others' power. We are empowered by this protection. Feeling empowered by others in this way continues into adulthood when we are strengthened by friendship, teamwork, or collaboration. I can feel comfortable receiving care and competence from others, and I do not have to rely entirely or only on myself. If I grew up in an unsafe environment, I learned not to trust or I remember dependence as demeaning and shameful. Adult experiences can also disappoint us and cause us to withdraw, but they are often overcome when we fall in love again or open ourselves again to a new relationship.

Autonomy is the strength we have on our own. In achieving autonomy we celebrate our self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Acting on my own behalf expands my sense of power. Having developed some skills and competencies, I become an agent in my own life. Collaboration depends on my having some basic confidence in my own resources. If I lack autonomy, I will undermine any partnership through my dependency. However, if I do not learn how to move beyond self-sufficiency, collaboration and openness to outside influence will feel like weakness, for it will imply that my own resources are deficient. Women often have difficulty in achieving autonomy unless the culture in which they function values their self-sufficiency and personal agency. Some religious communities have impeded this development in their members while others have fostered it but have not yet been able to direct this self-reliant energy back into communal projects.

Expressing power turns us outward, as we begin to influence others and have an impact on our world. At this stage we feel strong when we influence the world beyond ourselves. A new sense of power stirs when we express our ideas, make demands of others, assume responsibility, take charge, and when others respond favorably. McClelland found that this orientation was prominent among management, supervisors, lawyers, and people in the helping professions. Success in all these fields depends on being able to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others. Personal assertion and social influence are the two particular resources of this power. However, these resources can be displayed differently. Some express power exclusively in a combative

stance of competition with a need to dominate. A leader who feels strong only in this way easily becomes authoritarian. This kind of leader may function effectively in a military unit, but not as well in a helping role or in organizational leadership. In these roles it is more appropriate to feel powerful when motivating others, offering assistance, coordinating resources, and helping a group move toward its goals. The shadow side of this ability to influence is dominance and control.

Maturity lures us toward still another face of power—feeling strong in sharing power. People at this stage feel themselves to be personally strong and also involved with something larger than themselves. Something beyond self-interest—the will of God, or commitment to a vision—prompts their action. They feel both powerful and empowered, strong both in autonomy and in collaboration. These people welcome interdependence, the ability to enjoy mutual influence and mutual empowerment. When we work together the power we share increases and enhances my strength. The outcome that emerges from this interplay of interdependence is less mine, yet I feel stronger because something better has resulted.

Genuine interdependence is possible only if a significant number of the members of religious communities mature to this fourth level of power. The hierarchical church, in its current exercise of power, shares power minimally. One group is authorized to express power and another group, namely the laity, receives it. If actual partnership is to flourish in the ecclesial community, we need an abundance of religious leaders who value sharing power and who are not threatened by widening the sources of influence.

Much of the governance journey in religious life for women has been toward this mode of sharing power. The old way of leadership is not capable of fostering the full religious maturity of its members. A single charismatic leader can function in level three

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of this schema, but that requires the entire group to submit to that individual charism. I believe the gifts of grace and discernment are distributed both more broadly and more abundantly than that. If we truly believe that our charisms live in all of us, that God's spirit releases an outpouring of energy and power, then sharing power is the only style of religious leadership that has the flexibility and openness to engage in the discernment of these movements.

Healing the Wounds of Authority

The FORUS study critiques dysfunctional religious leadership in many religious communities. I understand that much of this dysfunction is a manifestation of incomplete adult development. For authentic interdependence and collaboration to be possible, those in leadership must be committed to continuing their own development and to fostering the development of their members. Healing the wounds of authority is often an integral part of the process.¹²

The Whiteheads describe a continuum of growth in our perspective about authority. It moves from the perception that power and authority are completely external to ourselves to the perception that we confer authority in partnership with others for common goals. *Women in religious life stand all along the continuum.* The way authority used to be exercised was coercive. A large part of our individual and corporate journey through renewal has involved deconstructing coercive authority and either avoiding the question of authority altogether (hence not a few resistant women in our midst) or constructing an entirely new way of exercising it.

Briefly, the Whiteheads portray the function of authority as expanding life, making power more abundant, and calling others to collaborative partnership. However, many of us find ourselves unable to respond to this adult invitation to share power. We persist in viewing authority as external to ourselves, with those in authority holding on to power as a permanent and privileged possession to be used as they see fit. This kind of authority makes us feel like either children or victims, vulnerable and liable to be hurt when we interact with authority. We project onto our leaders impossible expectations, requiring them to be all things to all people. We treat them as different from us, more knowledgeable,

more wise, more talented. Such projection masks our irresponsibility and delays our process of maturing.

A more mature approach to authority views leaders very much as we view ourselves. We hope they are competent, but we understand that they have no special access to wisdom. They, too, are limited, fallible, susceptible to bias and error. No longer something leaders do to us, authority becomes relativized and results in a sense of partnership. Rather than beneficiaries, victims, or observers, we become participants with leaders in shaping the best decisions.

How do we heal the wounds of authority? Transformation begins, according to the Whiteheads, whenever a crisis causes us to examine behavior that no longer works, whether it be avoiding authority, fighting it, or trying to win its approval. The process moves through the successive stages of withdrawal, disbelief, self-scrutiny, and authority-making.

In *withdrawal* I recognize that I have put authority outside myself and retreat to an inner place. My external behavior may not change much, but basically I ignore authority and its claims on me.

In the stage of *disbelief*, I realize that I am more than what authority thinks of me. My sense of self and self-worth no longer depends on external authority. This stage may begin as rebellion—"Who says this is the way things are?" I question how things are and think about how things could or should be. I recognize that how things are is often merely the way those in power have decided they should be, sometimes benefiting the leaders more than anyone else. The risk of disbelief is that it can harden into skepticism that rejects all exercise of authority. I can be preoccupied with exposing the faults and failings of those in authority when I do not yet see myself as an equal.

The stage of *self-scrutiny* allows me to recognize how I have participated in maintaining coercive authority all along, whether by elevating those in authority, attacking them, or blaming them for things for which I am also responsible. I become able to ask

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the critical question: When is the influence of external authority—a leader, a value system, a set of laws—legitimate in my life? A certain level of intellectual and emotional maturity is required in order to respond freely, neither compelled to negate these demands nor anxious to satisfy a hidden motive. I understand that, as I have contributed to my own oppression, I can participate in my own empowerment.

When I can exercise my personal power in response to authority both by taking initiative and obeying, I have reached the stage of *authority-making*. At this stage, I am able to face conflict if necessary in the pursuit of a common purpose. This is possible only after I have recognized my prior negative contribution through fear, apathy, or magical thinking. The Whiteheads caution that one cannot wait until this stage is completed; even conscious of wounds and the continuing process of healing, I need to be engaged as a partner in authority.¹³

The unhealed wounds of authority are frequently the unacknowledged agenda when leaders and members experience tension between individualism and the common good. Authority will be interpreted and experienced differently depending on the level of healing and the vision of exercising power espoused by each religious. If leaders can encourage communities to begin to heal the wounds of authority and if the majority of the members can endure the pain of growth in this developmental process to become capable of sharing power, our communities will be very different. Both leaders and members will be partners in codiscernment, as both respond to the ever changing call to be shaped by and to express in life and ministry their shared charism and discipleship of Jesus.

According to the FORUS study, outstanding women leaders were extremely active in securing the commitment of the group to appropriate actions or decisions. They used their positional and personal power to influence outcomes, but not at the cost of diminishing the sharing of power in the group. Further they tended "to encourage participation of those they lead, share power and information with them, and enhance their self-worth and energize them."¹⁴ This style of leadership has been pioneered largely by women in a variety of settings as well as in religious life. Clearly, one of the gifts religious women can offer the church is the healing of our wounds of authority and our growth in sharing power, thereby releasing the power of God's spirit in our midst.

Notes

¹ David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, "Research Executive Summary: Future of Religious Orders in the United States," *Origins* 22 (24 September 1992): 271.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

⁵ Katarina Schuth, "The Intellectual Life as a Value for Women Religious in the United States," Appendix: Survey, Brookland Commission paper, 16-18 October 1992, 10.

⁶ Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976 and 1992), p. 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1988), p. 140.

⁹ See Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1976 and 1986), for a full discussion of the topic women and power.

¹⁰ Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Emerging Laity: Returning Leadership to the Community of Faith* (New York: Image, 1988), p. 36.

¹¹ The description which follows is dependent on Evelyn and James Whitehead, *The Promise of Partnership: Leadership and Ministry in an Adult Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), pp. 115-127.

¹² See "Healing the Wounds of Authority," in *Promise*, pp. 27-36, for the full description of this schema.

¹³ It should be apparent that only in these latter two stages of self-scrutiny and authority-making is discernment possible.

¹⁴ David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, "Religious Leadership Competencies," *Review for Religious* 52, no. 3 (May-June 1993): 413.



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