

Exercising contemplative power with the Vatican



by [Nancy Sylvester](#)

Jun. 1, 2015 in [Contemplate This](#)

Recently I had an opportunity to lead the discussion following the screening of the film, "[Band of Sisters](#)," which I am in. It tells the story of how we women religious became involved with various ministries following the Second Vatican Council. It focuses on the emerging works of social justice, political advocacy, the movement toward sustainability and ecological centers and the transformation of consciousness rooted in contemplation. Woven within the film is the challenge women religious faced with the investigations initiated from two different Vatican Congregations.

What became clear to me again is that the very ways we women religious responded to renewal and living out the Gospel became the basis for the concerns raised by the Vatican offices. The very process of the investigations demonstrated the Vatican's failure to understand the transformation that had occurred with women religious during these past 50 years.

The Vatican officials operated out of an approach reminiscent of a time when "Father knew best" and Sister humbly acquiesced. However, today women religious are mature adults whose experience is integral to how we discern challenges and accusations brought before us. We have years of practice within governance structures that value each person's perspective. In these last decades [LCWR](#) and its member congregations have deepened a commitment to contemplation so as to communally discern how to imagine new ways of responding to what may appear as impasses in our lives.

"Exercising contemplative power" (ECP) is a phrase that the [Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue](#) (ICCD) coined to describe how we can be and act out of a contemplative stance. I invite you to read [ICCD's reflection paper](#) on the meaning of exercising contemplative power.

Prior to the investigations, LCWR began to integrate a contemplative process into its proceedings at the national assemblies. We took time to sit in contemplative silence together, setting the intent to be open to the Divine working within and among us. We experienced the importance of slowing down discussions so that we could really listen to each other and explore our differences.

This approach intensified after the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life announced its [Apostolic Visitation](#) in 2008. In the beginning there was concern, anger, disbelief and fear as the individual congregations were asked to participate in the investigation. Because women religious had been growing in trust with each other through

LCWR and its regional meetings, it was natural that we turned to each other and entered into communal discernment as to how to approach what was being asked of us.

Part of this first investigation involved a team of visitors charged to interview sisters within select congregations. It was apparent that this developed into an opportunity for leadership to involve their own members in looking at this from a contemplative place. In the [ECP reflection](#), we speak of it as compassion which addresses injustice in a way that relates to each person in an exchange of mutual love and respect no matter the personal cost. The sisters who were interviewed spoke their truth honestly and clearly, even if it cost them. And in many situations they felt mutuality was created among the interviewees and the interviewers.

As this investigation came to a close I heard only positive feelings toward Mother Mary Clare Millea, ASCJ, who was appointed leader of the U.S. investigation. Something had occurred in the personal interactions and with the various team members to surprise both sides with our connectedness and our oneness in the midst of differences.

In the [ECP reflection](#) we reference theologian Dorothy Soelle who spoke of contemplation as seeing things as God sees them which leads to an active resistance to evil. Following the announcement of this investigation the outpouring of support from laity in this country and around the world was overwhelming. They saw that what was being insinuated or clearly stated about women religious was just wrong. Letters of support for women religious were sent to LCWR, to individual congregations, to U.S. Bishops and to the Vatican.

The [second investigation](#) was focused on LCWR whose members are the elected leaders of U.S. women's religious congregations. This was separate from the first investigation but closely linked. LCWR helped religious congregations enter into renewal following Vatican II and provided educational resources and theological reflection over these past 50 years. The annual assembly served as a time for all the leaders to discuss together the theologies coming out of Vatican II and the various ministries being engaged to serve emerging needs.

In 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith completed a doctrinal assessment of LCWR and issued its mandate, which appointed a bishop's committee to oversee the reform of LCWR according to the assessment's findings.

LCWR members continued to act the way we did with the first investigation. At the LCWR assembly we entered into communal contemplation to discern how to approach the mandate. We spent time listening to each other; feeling our humiliation and anger as these false accusations continued to be publicized; and hearing where we felt the same and where we differed. What became clear was that we wanted LCWR to stay at the table with the bishops appointed to oversee the mandate **and** not sacrifice LCWR's integrity. The direction to the LCWR elected officers was clear and very challenging.

LCWR has a rotating governing structure in which a third of the three-member presidency and a third of the national board rotates off each year and someone new is elected. That is why I think the image of a jazz ensemble is a good one to show how they exercised contemplative power.

With the LCWR assembly decision to engage this process out of contemplation and dialogue, each elected leader was committed to a contemplative collaborative way of being. Each leader

was committed to the direction set by the assembly, and yet each leader took her place at a specific moment in the process and had to listen and engage with everyone involved to sense when to move in and offer another perspective or to affirm what was being said. As the conversation continued different movements became possible and everyone was willing to shape the next intervention attuned to what went before and move it forward.

This was especially true with the presidency and executive director during this time. They were the ones to invite the bishops into a new space to see what was happening with new eyes and to hear with new ears. Knowing from their contemplative heart that all are more connected than separate, they wanted and did emphasize relationships as much as the issues being addressed. They chose to relate to each person with respect and yet clearly state concerns no matter the personal cost. They did that both with the bishops and with the assembly.

One of the challenges of exercising contemplative power is that you have to be willing to be changed as well. It is not easy to believe that those who have falsely accused you of something have anything worth listening to. That reactive stance is transformed into a responsive stance. Defences are softened and the common good emerges. This requires both an honest acknowledgement of falsehoods and misjudgements and a willingness to move forward together for the greater good of the church. I believe that is what happened. Both the women representing LCWR and the bishops changed. Something happened to bring closure to this mandate at the end of three years rather than five. They got to know each other and especially Archbishop Sartain got to know LCWR as he attended the national assemblies. The candour and strength with which LCWR remained at the table enabled a space to open and grace to enter. (I invite you to read [the current presidency's own reflections](#) on the conclusion of the investigation and mandate.)

I believe that both investigations provided LCWR and its member congregations an opportunity to reflect on who we have become since Vatican II. It was an opportunity to be in solidarity with one another knowing that, although not perfect, we have responded to the Gospel the best we knew how and it has transformed us. It was an opportunity to deepen the commitment to communal contemplation and action. It was an opportunity to exercise contemplative power.

[Nancy Sylvester, IHM, was an associate member of LCWR representing NETWORK starting in 1978. She became a full member of LCWR in 1994 as vice-president of her congregation and then was elected to the LCWR presidency in 1998 serving in that capacity until 2001. She continues as an associate member attending all the national assemblies. In her [2000 Presidential Address](#) she invited LCWR members to imagine new ways of addressing the impasse women religious were experiencing within the church through contemplation and dialogue. Since 2002 the [Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue](#) (ICCD), which she founded, has offered programs on engaging impasse, communal contemplation, listening and speaking from a contemplative heart, dialogue and exercising contemplative power.]