AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP

By GABRIEL ROBIN

DURING EIGHTEEN out of the thirty-two years I have spent in religious life I have in one way or another been 'in a position of authority' or had some kind of 'leadership role'. For seven years I was the headmistress of a small independent convent school. Then, after only one year as a local superior, I became a member of the international General Council of my Congregation, the Congregation of Our Lady Canonesses of St Augustine. I think this early move in itself and the way in which it was lived, combining continued residence and work in my own country with work in the Generalate, showed how already in 1972 my Congregation was attempting to change the image of persons in authority positions! Since then I have been a provincial and for three exciting and challenging years of that time President of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (men and women) in Britain. I think I can claim therefore to have been right at the heart of most of the changes that have taken place in the understanding and the practice of authority and leadership in religious life since pre-Vatican II days (I joined the Congregation in 1957). As I am what I term an experience-orientated person, that is I learn or reflect from experience rather than from theory, it was not until I sat down to write this article that I really came to see something of the complexity of the period I have been living through and also the profundity of the underlying questions that are challenging us. What exactly is authority in religious life? Where does it come from? What is its purpose? How did we answer these question before Vatican II? How do we try to answer them today? Will we be answering them differently in the year 2000?

My brief as I understand it is to try to provide some of the background for reflection on the transition that seems to be taking place from a pre-Vatican II stance to what some religious claim to be a radically different way of understanding the nature, the source and the purpose of authority and leadership in religious life. In order to do this I propose to distinguish some of the influences

that helped bring about changes in my own Congregation (these influences may not have the same emphases in Britain as in the United States, Latin America or elsewhere). I also want to raise some of the critical questions that are now facing us, and to find some way of discovering where men and women religious in this country, both contemplative and apostolic, situate themselves in relation to these issues and, if there are differences between them, to ask to what they might be attributed.

Some influences for change

The documents of Vatican II and *Perfectae caritatis* were already in print and my Congregation was beginning to organize international meetings to prepare for the Special Chapter to be held in 1969. At this point, 'Paris '68' happened and some of our young French sisters were among the university students who had staged the revolution challenging all forms of authoritarianism if not authority itself. Their ideas rapidly inflamed the younger representatives who had come together from all parts of the Congregation. Only the British contingent felt a little out of its depth for it had not yet begun to question such issues as the way authority and obedience were being exercised, the simplistic manner in which the vow of celibacy was treated or the lack of attention paid to some of the more human and relational aspects of our lives. The superiors, though somewhat discomforted, did however pay attention to what was being said and in particular for the demand for more participation and more responsibility in the life of the Congregation. The immediate result was a Special General Chapter nearly twice as large as any previous ones and attended by a large representation of the younger age groups. Paris '68 had played its part in helping the Congregation realize one of the most important insights of Vatican II, namely that the Holy Spirit acts in and speaks through every person and therefore every member of the Congregation, and not just through certain designated persons.

The awakening of the Church in Latin America to the cause of the poor and the issue of justice also had a great impact on the authority structures of the Congregation. In the first place our Brazilian sisters threatened to leave the Congregation if we did not put an end to the categories of lay sister, tour sister and choir nun. Secondly, they required us to examine every aspect of our internal and external relations in terms of justice. We could not pretend to be working for justice among the poor and oppressed in Brazil if

we were living with injustice in our own communities. Again the British found their questionnaire, covering as it did every aspect of political, social and economic life as well as life within the congregation, somewhat daunting. In the early 70s, they had hardly moved out of the semi-enclosed monastic style of life the Congregation had been living for over three hundred years, and there was only one community living and working among the less privileged people in this country. Finally it was the realization of our Brazilian sisters that the needs of people were the governing factor in our choice of work and life-style that, as it were, turned our system of 'mediation' upside-down. God's will was not only being shown to us through our sisters in the community but more importantly through the situations of injustice and the deprivation of people of their most basic human rights. Response to this kind of need is, of course, the basis upon which most apostolic congregations were founded!

A few Congregations in this country with large numbers of American members will claim that the feminist justice movements in the United States in the late 70s and early 80s have had a far greater impact on them in their thinking about authority and leadership than on those of us who have no American members. I think this is probably true, though the growing awareness in human consciousness of the place of the feminine is certainly beginning to make itself felt in Britain, both in individual religious congregations and on a national level too.

One last influence I would like to mention in this far from exhaustive list (I have chosen those which stand out for me personally) is that of the world of management and big business. None of us can help but be affected by the way large organizations and business companies have been forced to re-model their management structures and to involve people more effectively in responsibility and decision making. As with all secular models open to imitation, religious must needs be critical of what they adopt if they are to fulfil their prophetic role of challenging secular structures and if need be Church structures if these structures compromise kingdom values.

Critical questions

The changes in style of leadership after Vatican II happened with great rapidity. When I entered religious life the image of authority, religious or secular, was of awe-inspiring figures to be

revered at all times (they could never do anything wrong!). However kind and maternal these women could be, the very words we used to describe them, such as 'powerful', 'strong', 'forceful', and even 'she was a real battleaxe', kindly meant of course, would not be words we would normally associate with women, our own mothers for instance, even though we did not question this at the time. The difference in status between subject and superior was accentuated even more by the aura and trappings of power with which she was surrounded. We should not underestimate the sudden loss of identity and role confusion experienced by many superiors in the immediate post-Vatican II period. In a discussion at one General Chapter about whether she was to be called a 'sister-in-charge', 'une responsable' or even 'a moderator' an English sister caused a great deal of hilarity when she suggested that 'queen' might be the appropriate terminology as she was obviously 'an authority figure with no power'. The discussion that produced this kind of seemingly light-hearted remark was the beginning of a whole series of questions about which styles of leadership would be appropriate to the awakening desire for co-responsibility both in community life and in the renewed formulation of the Congregation's apostolic project.

What were the skills required to enable people to discern their personal apostolic call within the Congregation's total apostolic project? What were the skills which would enable a community to be consulted or to contribute to or to arrive at consensus decisions? Should superiors adopt a directive or non-directive approach? Should there be superiors at all (at local level, in small communities at least)? What are the dynamics if there is a superior in a small community where members cannot shed overnight either their former image of a superior or in some cases their old expectations? What are the risks if there is no superior, for example, of the emergence of the most powerful person in the group as the leader? In other words what is power? What is authority? Is there a distinction between the two? Much has been written in answer to these questions and I do not propose to add anything here except to say first that the order in which they are listed indicates some progression in our thinking and secondly that after many years of confusion and even abdication from 'authority roles' certain clear distinctions are emerging which are important for our present discussion. One example is the distinction between the personal power every human being necessarily possesses and authority which

is not necessarily given. Personal power is the power of one's own personality consciously or unconsciously to affect other people, to influence decisions, to change the course of events, a power which risks becoming manipulation the more unconscious or unaware of it the person using it happens to be.

When a group of people recognize that the quality of a particular person's power is going to enable the group to achieve its objectives and the group chooses to give that person this role or ask of him or her this particular service, that person's power becomes a 'legitimized' power or 'authority' within that group. This basic definition leads on to another distinction that women religious have been grappling with during this last decade, namely what differentiates the concept of 'personal authority' from 'shared authority'?

In the case of personal authority the source of authority is held to be God, it is received through the Church by way of the ratification of Constitutions and the presence of bishops at the election of a superior general and it is handed down to superiors. In the case of shared authority it is held that each person has an inalienable responsibility for his or her own life and his or her own part in the Church and if a person joins a religious community he or she is equally responsible with every other member for the common project of that community. The concept of shared authority is a consequence of this shared responsibility and so the community is held to be the source of authority. In the case of personal authority, authority is normally held to be delegated; with shared authority the community would normally choose or elect persons to fill authority positions. In the case of personal authority there is consultation in decision making; with shared authority decisions are made with rather than for the persons involved and as far as possible by consensus agreement.

In the case of personal authority the mediations in order of importance are usually: canon law and the legitimate authority of the Church, the legitimate authority of the congregation, the community as a group and finally the voice of those whom we are called to serve in the Church or the world. In the case of shared authority the mediations are: God speaking to us through the gospel, through the needs of the world and especially of the poor, through the Church, through the community, through those who have been entrusted by the community with authority to facilitate discernment and decision-making in accordance with the agreed

project of the congregation.[1] To put the superior at the end of this mediation may seem somewhat unexpected but this reflects the reality of the changed role of the superior which many congregations are experiencing today. Most congregations will recognize where they stand in relation to these two concepts of authority and that in reality these distinctions are by no means clear-cut.

These ideas were further clarified for me in Sandra Schneiders' book *New Wineskins*,[2] where she compares the model of authority in religious life which she claims many religious communities of women and some of men have abandoned with the model of authority toward which they are moving. She names the model 'hierarchical' if authority is thought to be somehow God's authority communicated directly to the superior and exercised as a personal possession in regard to those who do not share in God's authority but submit to it. The model is 'participative' if the authority is thought to be the community's authority (divine or human in its source) which the community chooses to exercise through one or many of its members. Underlying the hierarchical model are the beliefs that all legitimate authority comes from God and that those who share in this divine authority are in a superior position to those over whom they exercise it. Underlying the participative model are the beliefs that all are intrinsically equal and that 'if for the good of all someone is given a position of authority it is provisional, temporary, limited in scope, functional and non-sacralised. The person is first among equals in a particular domain of community life but not the representative of God to others in an exclusive sense' and the others 'never abdicate personal responsibility either for themselves and their own actions or for the group as a whole'.

I would question how far we can go with this kind of analysis without the risk of losing the essence of the mystery that religious life is in the Church; it is not simply an organization like any other. I would also question whether the historical development of the different contemplative and apostolic traditions actually lends credence to such clear cut distinctions or to there being a progressive move from one model to the other. Lastly I would question whether the British reality actually corresponds to the American if, as may be possible, Sandra Schneiders is basing her reflections more on what is happening in religious life in the States than elsewhere.

Field survey: in search of answers

It was as this point that I decided that the only way to find answers to these questions was to conduct a small field experiment. As I could not handle all the material that would have come to me had I approached every religious institute in England and Wales, my sample was limited to forty-two. The principle of selection was to obtain a balance of contemplative and apostolic, women and men (lay and clerical), as far as possible in the same proportion as these different categories exist in this country, and to make sure that all the main spiritualities were represented.

From almost every reply it came across clearly and unambiguously that religious in Britain take as basic and axiomatic the principle that God is the source of all authority and all power, just as he is the source of all being. Consequently religious, in common with all other Christians, are committed to seeking and obeying God's will through the mediations appropriate to their particular way of life. Most of the differences relate to the *manner* in which this authority is mediated and also to the *style* in which it is exercised.

To answer the query about whether the historical development of religious actually lends credence to such clear-cut distinctions as those made by Sandra Schneiders, I attempted to situate the different orders and institutes which replied to my questions, within a spectrum between the two models she describes. After reading through the forty-two replies, I reached these conclusions:

It would seem that nearest to the hierarchical model and corresponding to the personal authority model come the Jesuits, with their highly centralized and hierarchical authority structure. However, they acknowledge that there is a prior authority expressed in General Chapters. In answer to my question about whether they exercised collective responsibility they referred to discernment in common with an individual responsibility to fulfil the conditions of the discernment.

The very strong influence which the Jesuits have had on the majority of institutes founded to do good works and answer social needs has meant that inevitably the structures of these institutes have also been highly centralized and hierarchical. This was seen to be necessary both for the most effective deployment of their members and to preserve their unity.

Next come the men and women's monastic communities which follow the rule of St Benedict. For all Benedictines, the abbot or

abbess still unequivocally 'holds the place of Christ in the monastery'.[3] The only change mentioned is that there is now more emphasis on the abbot as 'pastor, healer of the sick, wise counsellor, lover of the brethren'. There is a sense in which these monasteries also hold that there is a prior authority in the whole community expressed at election time and in the fact that the abbot or abbess is obliged to consult the whole community on matters of importance, since 'the Holy Spirit often reveals what should be done to the younger monks'.[4] The clearest statement about the source of authority came from the Cistercians: 'Whatever the theory of the Abbot's authority, on one level he has it because his community has elected him'.

Next come the women's contemplative orders of other traditions (e.g. Poor Clare, Carmelite) who make a far stronger claim for the existence of a prior authority in the whole community than the men, based chiefly on the fact that the communities elect their abbess or superior, and also on the fact that the abbess is more obviously accountable to the whole community and could be deposed by the community. Presumably the men could depose the abbot if really necessary but the women thought it worth mentioning. In any case these communities (who either *were* completely autonomous e.g. Canonesses of St Augustine, or who still *are*, e.g. Poor Clares, Carmelites) stated quite clearly that although her authority belongs to the category of 'personal authority', the abbess received the authority 'to take the ultimate decision from the community'.

Among the Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians the tradition that made the strongest claim for the existence of a collective authority was the Augustinian. A quotation from an apostolic women's congregation of this tradition states their position clearly, 'In my Order authority is not seen as coming from above. It has always been the Prioress General with her Council who holds authority and she takes her mandate from the General Chapter of the Sisters, so it has always been a collective authority delegated by the group to a named leader'.

A few of the founders of the earlier apostolic women's orders chose the Benedictine or Augustinian Rule as did the Ursulines and my own Congregation. It is a well known fact that whatever Rule or spirituality these first women's apostolic orders chose, the Congregation of Regulars (the equivalent of CRIS) attempted to impose on them a strictly reformed monastic way of life. Often we

have seen only the negative and restrictive aspects of this and not recognized the potentially positive effect on our structures of government. Once my own Congregation had been allowed, after nearly 400 years of existence, to drop the inappropriate monastic customs, we found that we had an older and more collegial form of government from which to draw, with a tradition of local electing and consultative chapters. This is because, until the early part of this century, all the 'monasteries' in my 'apostolic' congregation were autonomous, in spite of the fact that the founders (St Peter Fourier and Blessed Alix Leclerc) had both wanted a form of 'general government' in order to foster union and mutual aid between the monasteries.

So it was only in 1963 that the whole Congregation became united under a single generalate, the principal role of which is to promote unity among communities scattered in fourteen countries and four continents. The Superior General and her Council are required to make very few decisions. The principle locus of authority is therefore at local level. This is of great assistance in a congregation in such culturally different situations as ours. For an apostolic congregation to have a generalate with little or no power to 'send' people from one 'vicariate' to another (we are not organized in provinces as vicariates are far more flexible an arrangement) could prove to be to the detriment of the more needy parts. Instead of centralizing authority, however, the solution to this problem, if it cannot be found at local level, is being sought through an extended general council including all the vicars (or provincials). This is a return to greater collective authority. Our Augustinian spirituality combined with the same monastic traditions also made it easier to introduce participative structures at local level such as 'Open Assemblies'. All that has been said so far would seem to prove that there is no clear historical progression from one 'hierarchical' stance to a more 'participative' one.

When I began to look at orders mostly founded within the last two hundred years in relation to the exercise of collective responsibility, I found the picture became rather confused. Most of the men listed the ways in which 'collective responsibility' is exercised: through election to and participation in General and Provincial Chapters, through international commissions and through varying degrees of consultation at all levels. Nowhere was it said that there were any local communities without a local

superior. (My sample may not of course be sufficiently representative). The nearest was where 'the local superior had no council because this was now the whole community.'

With regard to 'collective authority' or 'collective leadership' the men on the whole seemed wary of these terms. There were only two or three references to 'collective leadership', one 'in the sense that all the provincials with the superior general are together responsible for the running of the Congregation (implementing the General Chapter)' and 'in the sense that both General Council and Provincial Council like to see themselves as a team and as having collective leadership'. (This order, Carmelites, actually predates any of the others and their Dutch counterparts have three co-provincials.) One person summarized the reasons for the difficulties and tensions in trying to live a more collective responsiblity or shared authority as 'the result of "divisive theology" depending on the age group, the ambivalence of *Perfectae caritatis* and the attempts of CRIS to arrest any tendencies to move away from the hierarchical model'. A rather obvious conclusion after reading all the replies is that all in the sample are living a mixture of the 'from above' and 'from within' models, a mixture of 'hierarchical' and 'participative' and the mix is different in every case.

And so it is with many of the women. But the difference between them is that it is in the women's congregations that the greatest divergence of positions is actually found. To illustrate this here are some of their statements: 'We do not have collective leadership. Authority is vested in the individual'. 'If collective leadership means being ruled by a team we do not have it but we have a model of consensus agreement.' 'We have collective leadership to some extent for we state in our Constitutions that all authority is exercised in a collegial manner, though the major superior in each area is recognized as bearing the final responsiblity.' 'We believe that authority resides in the whole community. All superiors and others in authority are either elected or appointed after consultation. The local superior is seen as a member of the community acting as centre and animator.' 'Authority resides in each member by virtue of her call, and in the community as a whole. We are supposed to have local superiors but in practice few communities have them. If she existed her role would be to facilitate co-responsibility and community discernment. Superiors are not seen as having God's authority (did they ever?) but the institute's which is there to facilitate each one's obedience to God in the common

mission.' At no point did any of the men express themselves like this.

Several women's congregations described how collective responsibility and even collective leadership is being exercised at local level in communities without superiors. The following statements illustrate this: 'In local communities shared responsibility is expected as most of our houses have no resident local superior. We have a "group superior" for three or four houses. The sisters work out with this superior what is expected by way of communication and reference'. 'Collective leadership exists formally in three communities with no sister-in-charge. In small communities most matters are discussed in community and a consensus reached. Responsibilities and duties are shared and each member is accountable to the whole community.' 'Community meetings are held regularly and the "community project" is formed by everyone together, arising out of each member's personal aspirations and apostolic activities.' Only two congregations mentioned 'team government' at General and Provincial level, one of them saying 'the Constitutions cannot express it but in practice decisions are made through consensus' and the other, taking it even further, that in practice the 'team is elected first and then the responsibilities are shared out'.

A fairly obvious conclusion to this section is that quite a few women's congregations in this country are probably beginning to move beyond what they have been allowed to express in their Constitutions.

A general conclusion

As a conclusion to this small survey which I am sure does not do justice to the richness and diversity either of the religious congregations who were asked the questions or of those who did not have a chance to express themselves, I would like to attempt to suggest some reasons why women seem to be moving more quickly than men towards a more participative model of religious life. It is almost too trite to say that one of the most obvious reasons is that in many cases women religious had their authority structures imposed on them by men, either because they were founded by men, on the pattern of the men's orders, or because their Constitutions had to be approved by a Roman Congregation composed mainly of men, within an institutional hierarchical Church organized by men. But it is encouraging to discover that

quite a number of the men religious who replied to my questionnaire are acknowledging this fact, still not generally recognized in the Church at large. I asked the question of both men and women, if women were free to develop their own structures in religious life would they in fact be different from men's. Some of the men admitted, at least by implication, that hierarchical, highly structured, legalistic models of organization are more masculine in character. There was a particularly emphatic remark from some contemplative women that their rules for enclosure would certainly be less rigid and legalistic than they are now. Some of the words used by both men (rather wistfully perhaps) and even more by women (probably more hopefully) to describe what kind of structures they thought women would want included personal, relational, net-working, creative, intuitive, imaginative, flexible, loosely-structured, temporary, fluid, homely and human . . . all words more associated with the feminine way of doing things.

Perhaps the most cogent reason of all for women to be so much clearer than men about the direction they are taking towards more collective leadership in government and more collective responsibility in local communities, is their growing awareness of the need for the feminine not only in religious life but in every aspect of Church life.

One gem of a remark from a man would seem to sum it all up and provide as good a conclusion as any to this article:

'"It is not good for man to be alone" but also it is not good for woman to be alone. The two halves need each other, and when they function in *complete* separation then something will be unbalanced. When you have human beings who have achieved a balance between the masculine and the feminine elements within themselves, then it won't make a great deal of difference whether they are male or female.'

NOTES

1 Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur: Reflection Paper 3, 1983.
2 Schneiders, Sandra M.: *New wineskins* (Paulist Press, New York, 1986) p 107.
3 Rule of St Benedict, ch 2.2.
4 Rule of St Benedict, ch 3.3.