

The following chapter is from a book of essays ably edited by Ann Patrick Ware SL. The book, *Naming Our Truth: Stories of Loretto Women*, © 1995, is now out of print. For this reason, we are providing a typed copy of the chapter "Loretto and the Women's Movement: From 'Sister' to sister," written by the late Virginia Williams SL. Ginny died in 1999, leaving a tremendous hole in our hearts even as we hold dear her presence and influence.

The Loretto Women's Network whose history is chronicled in this chapter continues as a vital voluntary network within the Loretto Community. As of now there are about 190 members. Care is taken to explain that the statements and actions of LWN do not always represent those of the entire community. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement of the principles of feminism. The LWN newsletter *couRAGE* is now in its 20th year of publication. The network meets twice annually and members work on women's issues throughout the year.

LORETTO AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT:

From "Sister" to sister

by Virginia Williams

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What are the factors that have moved a congregation of Roman Catholic nuns to become involved in the women's movement? Most women point to their own experience of oppression as a major component in a change of consciousness. But whatever burdens Sisters had to bear over the years have not been quite like the physical, psychological, and financial threats that afflict so many women. Sisters did not have to balance the conflicting claims of marriage or motherhood with a career. Celibacy eliminated concern about abortion. Teaching in schools that they owned and/or administered, they exercised a degree of authority and were comparatively free from sexual harassment in the workplace. True, they worked long hours and were underpaid, but they considered their services to be gifts to God, spent as they were in serving God's people. And relatively cloistered in information about politics and social turmoil and global conditions, they did not chafe at the male-only decision-making that ordered national and international affairs. As for the church, they presumed that its structures that gave preeminence to men were divinely decreed, and they knew of a body of scriptures that supported that view. So what, then, are the factors that have moved a good number of Loretto Community members to become active feminists?

While official Loretto involvement did not begin until 1970, the story began long before that. We in Loretto come from a long line of strong, active women. Indeed, while "feminist" was not a part of early 19th century vocabulary, it is tempting to think of the women who founded the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross as feminists, beginning with Mary Rhodes. We resonate with pride at the thought of this pioneer woman, but we know precious little about her. Like so many women before and since, much of her life remains hidden from record. She was born in Maryland, educated at Georgetown, and went to Kentucky around 1810 when she was

close to 30 years old. Her brother Bennett was already living on the Kentucky frontier with his family.

Despite a dearth of facts we know Mary Rhodes as an authentic person, one who assumed responsibility for her life. She chose to move to Kentucky. Whether that was due to the difficulties Catholics were experiencing in Maryland or in response to an invitation from her brother, the lure of the frontier, or some other unknown factor, we do not know. But we do know she made her own decision. We know her as both a reflective and an active woman. Looking at the situation in Kentucky and observing that there was no school for her nieces to attend, she decided to teach them herself at her brother's home. This little "school" expanded quickly to include other children, and soon Rhodes invited two other young women of the area, Christina Stuart and Nancy (Ann) Havern, to join her in this adventure.

The three found an abandoned log cabin that became the school and their home. Whatever protestations they may have heard about the impropriety of three women living together or the hardships that might await them, they persisted in their decision. Like Mary Rhodes, Stuart and Havern too were self-confident and adventurous women. They may not have been fearless, but no one of the three was paralyzed by the fears she might have had. They boldly struck out on their own resources, started something new, and did something different.

Some months later, when they made the decision to become religious Sisters, they asked their missionary pastor, Charles Nerinckx, a Belgian émigré, to assist them. He suggested bringing European nuns to initiate them into the ways of "religious life." They politely refused: they would form the community according to their unique situation, and Nerinckx had to acquiesce. He also agreed to their request that he become their spiritual guide. Father Nerinckx contacted Bishop Flaget about the women's desire to be religious Sisters. He in turn asked Father Nerinckx to work with this fledgling group. Subsequently, Nerinckx made several trips to Europe, seeking Roman approval for the Sisters' way of life as well as funds to help in their work. He remained a staunch friend and advocate for the Sisters of Loretto until his death some 12 years later.

It should not surprise us that, although the ideas and initiative came from the three women, Father Nerinckx became known as the founder of this religious community. Indeed, the Sisters of Loretto were called the brightest blossoming of his productive missionary work on the Kentucky frontier.¹ In this, Loretto history even within its own memory has followed the usual pattern: the work of women is subsumed anonymously into the historical record or, not infrequently, a lone man connected with the work is credited. It is only recently that we Sisters of Loretto have reclaimed our heritage and acknowledge that our founding was the work of three strong women with assistance from a missionary priest.²

From this beginning in 1812 the school in the log cabin grew rapidly, and other women came to join Rhodes, Havern, and Stuart. As the population moved westward, the demand for schools grew rapidly. Consequently, these young Lorettoines opened additional schools in Kentucky, moved on to Missouri, and then to the Southwest Territory and Colorado. In each instance, the Sisters started from scratch—taking out loans, buying property, building schools and running them.

By the mid-20th century, the Sisters of Loretto operated 10 secondary academies for young women, two women's senior colleges and one junior college for women in the United States. The Sisters were teachers, principals, deans, and presidents in these institutions. They also served as teachers and principals in 87 diocesan elementary and 14 diocesan high schools. Many of today's Loretto members were students in these schools, and they pay tribute to the Sisters as role models of strong women.³

Another factor that played a significant part in moving the Sisters of Loretto towards participation in the women's movement was the sweeping change in the Roman Catholic Church beginning in the 1960s. Pope John XXIII had called the 2nd Vatican Council to "open the windows" of the Catholic Church and "let the fresh air in." And Catholics everywhere were excited about what this council would mean for all the people of God.

Mary Luke Tobin, superior general of the Sisters of Loretto, was invited to attend as an official observer, the only woman from North America. Through her efforts the Sisters of Loretto had begun the study of scripture and theology. Meanwhile, at the Council Sister Mary Luke was in daily discussion with recognized scholars. As a result of her talks and letters, the Sisters at home were learning what contemporary theologians and the scripture scholars were thinking and writing about the church and religious life in the post-industrial world. It was intellectually challenging and stimulating. It set the stage for renewal. As Loretto Sisters later commented, Vatican II was "a hopeful sign, pointing to the recognition of women as having 'some visible value' in the life of a renewed church." It was the beginning of the notion that women have much to offer and should participate in Church affairs and decisions."⁴

Tobin called for a special General Chapter in the late 1960s to begin the renewal process for the Sisters of Loretto. The chronicle of the women's movement and Loretto's part in it was about to begin. This account will be confined to the last three decades of this century; it will raise up several of the major statements promulgated officially during that time and point out some of the actions that resulted. It will take note of Loretto groups that have worked directly in the women's movement and comment on some of the outcomes of their tasks. Next it will tell how we educated ourselves on feminism and the women's movement, and conclude with a personal reflection on what the author thinks we have learned in the process.

The General Assembly and Women's Liberation

Our chronicle begins in 1970, a significant year for Loretto from every point of view. The community had designed a new form of government, more accessible and participatory than earlier structures. A General Assembly of 40 delegates elected by and from the community members became the legislative body, and the first of what were to become annual assemblies took place in August 1970. Unlike earlier decision-making meetings, assemblies were now open to any Sisters who wished to attend.

The first reference to women's liberation was made at this meeting. In the 23 Assembly meetings that have taken place since 1970, there have been more than 20 in which feminism, the

women's movement, or the roles of women have been touched on in some way integral to the community.

The outgoing superior general, Mary Luke Tobin, and her council sought input from the total membership of Loretto on items people wanted addressed by the delegates. It was in this context that the subject of the women's movement came up, though rather obliquely. One of the papers produced, titled simply "Culture," highlighted the tension between powerlessness and power. "People at all levels," it read, "are trying to get—or to keep others out of—the art of decision-making."⁵ Among a number of other topics treated in the paper was a specific piece on women's liberation:

Not only in the church but in civil society as well are women asking for a share in decision-making. Statistics revealing inequities of pay for similar work are being made known as well as discrimination in hiring practices. Women increasingly voice their resentment at being shackled to disagreeable and lusterless household chores and at cultural patterns which make marriage incompatible with a career. But Women's Liberation contains within its thrust a mixture of demands. It has, for instance, strongly supported the legalization of abortion as the repeal of discriminatory law against women. Since so many of us are educators of girls and women, we must be in touch with this movement if only for the reason that we may hear firsthand what is being said on these questions. Likewise, if a Christian presence is to attend this movement, it must come from inside and not stand outside it.⁶

As I look back at this statement, I wonder where it came from. There is no word in the *Assembly Proceedings* (nor, for that matter, in the oral tradition) that the Sisters of Loretto felt much interest in women's liberation one way or the other. Certainly there is no indication in the statement itself that the Sisters felt a solidarity with women of the movement. Likewise there is no hint that the delegates felt they needed any personal help in this area. *Rather it seems, it was our work as Christian educators that pushed us to learn about this phenomenon.*

Every Sister of Loretto who was a classroom teacher taught girls as well as some boys. Those who taught secondary and college classes taught mostly young women. So it may be from this vantage point that the assembly delegates, who were also full-time educators, felt they needed to know about the women's movement. How else could they inform (or, perhaps warn) their students about what was beginning to be reported in the newspapers and seen on TV on an almost daily basis?

It seems fairly clear from the statement itself that the Loretto women considered the Women's Liberation Movement wanting in that it lacked a "Christian presence," something that Loretto members could bring to the movement. Regardless of the motivation for the inclusion of women's liberation in the Culture Statement, the delegates did not just leave it there. They included a number of suggestions for individual sisters to implement. They suggested that members:

1. Join and take an active role in women's liberation organizations, e.g., the National Organization of Women.

2. Join and take an active role in groups established for the effective action of religious women, e.g., the National Coalition of American Nuns, the National Association of Women Religious.
3. Consider the need and implications of seeking the ordination of women.
4. Become active in the political field both as office-seekers and members of groups like the League of Women Voters or one of the political parties.
5. Re-examine all teaching concerned with “woman’s role” and “feminine psychology”; also all hidden assumptions about “how to succeed as a woman.”
6. Work through the legislative structure to change laws repressing women or inimical to women, and to introduce laws protecting exploited women, e.g., day workers, migrant workers, domestic help who generally have no medical insurance, unemployment insurance or retirement benefits.
7. Challenge all advertising that exploits the image of women, e.g., Virginia Slims; or the household products that show a woman’s most pressing problem as “ring around the collar” or how to get a spotless floor.
8. Support Women’s Liberation Day, August 26, which involves not making any purchase on that day, and similar programs.
9. Be ready to suggest names of competent women when committees are formed.
10. Protest the formation of committees, teams, task forces that have only a token woman member.
11. Support professional women by seeking out women physicians, women dentists, etc.
12. Emphasize the contribution of women in history.

The suggestions were solid, practical notions. While no specific mechanism was established to ensure that any or all of these would be carried out, many individual sisters did follow through, and the women’s movement in Loretto was well underway. Involvement of Loretto members in three of these twelve items is worth noting, however.

Loretto and the National Coalition of American Nuns (#2 above)

The National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN) is a grass roots group of religious women whose purposes are to study, work, and speak out on issues of human rights and social justice. A number of Loretto women have served on the NCAN board.⁷ While that board had spoken out on numerous issues of human rights and social justice, it was the group’s opposition to the Hatch Amendment⁸ that got two Loretto board members into difficulty with the official church. Ann Patrick Ware, vice-president of NCAN at the time, appeared with three other members of the board on the Donahue Show to explain the NCAN position. Virginia Williams was asked to speak to a group in St. Louis on the same issue. In spite of that fact that both women stated clearly NCAN’s opposition to abortion as such, the Loretto president Marian McAvoy was contacted by the local archbishop, who asked her to discipline each of them for these activities.⁹

Loretto and Women's Ordination (#3 above)

Loretto members have worked with the issue of women's ordination since 1974 when Margaret Traxler, a School Sister of Notre Dame, called together a group of women to discuss the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. Loretto Sister Joan Campbell attended the meeting, and when the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) developed as a result of that meeting, Campbell worked as the full-time conference coordinator.

Held in Detroit over Thanksgiving in 1975, this first Women's Ordination Conference attracted more than 1,000 Catholic women. Clearly ordination was a major question for the participants, and they formed a committee, known as the Core Commission, to move the issue forward. Loretto members played major roles in the second WOC meeting in Baltimore in 1980, and three are actively working for the 20th anniversary conference to be held in 1995.¹⁰

Loretto and Women's History (#12 above)

The first recorded suggestion to highlight women's contributions in history was made in 1970, nine years prior to formation of The Institute on Women's History. At the institute's first meeting, held at Sarah Lawrence College, Maureen McCormack, representing the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), was one of 45 participants. As a result of their experience, the students of the Institute called for a National Women's History Week, the purpose of which was to focus on the roles women played in the history of the United States.

On her return from that historic meeting, McCormack (who was later to become president of Loretto, 1986-1994) met with Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado to ask him to proclaim Women's History Week. Indeed, he was the first state governor to do so. Then she organized a meeting of women representing some 100 organizations in Colorado. Enthusiastic about celebrating Women's History Week, they planned and implemented a two-day celebration at the Colorado Heritage Center, the first of such annual celebrations.

By the time of the first celebration five additional states had proclaimed officially National Women's History Week: Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Washington.

Action by the General Assembly on Women's Liberation

Two years later, in 1972, the Loretto Task Force on Social Justice brought another proposal for action to Assembly delegates:

SINCE the Loretto community, a group of dedicated Christian women, is committed to the education and liberation of all human beings, and
SINCE reduction of any person to function or role is dehumanizing, and

SINCE women in our culture are especially seen in terms of sex role and subservient functions in all aspects of life, and therefore can be limited in human growth and contributions, and

SINCE women are especially exploited by media and business, and in turn maintain American consumerism through such exploitation, and

SINCE this maintenance of consumerism hinders the struggle for liberation of the poor in America and the Third World,

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED: That the General Assembly of the Loretto Community encourage and support the whole and healthy liberation of all women from the oppression of sexism and consumerism through individual and communal reflection and action on ways in which our institutions support oppression of women; e.g., in curriculum, in behavioral expectations of students, ourselves, and others;

THAT the issue of the oppression of women and the above responses be referred to the Social Advocate of the Loretto Community as a priority;

THAT the accepted proposal be forwarded to the American bishops and to the LCWR.¹¹

This proposal raised the issue to a new level. First of all, the 1970 statement had been accepted by voice vote of the delegates; there was no call for an individual delegate to indicate how she received either the statement or the suggestions for action. This 1972 motion called for a recorded vote of delegates. Further, the proposal stated clearly that women are oppressed by sexism. It also indicated that to work to liberate women from sexism is a matter of justice. Additionally, the statement implicates “our institutions” (read: schools) as a factor in women’s oppression: i.e., the curriculum we were teaching, the behavioral expectations we had for students, ourselves and others.

In addition to referring this concern to the Social Advocate¹² as preeminent, the task force also asked that Loretto go public with this statement, and they recommended that the proposal be sent to the LCWR as well as to the bishops of the United States. The assumption seemed to be that official religious groups within the Roman Catholic Church would also be interested in this matter and that Loretto could build relationships with those groups to free women from the dehumanizing effects of sexism.

The General Assembly and Gender-biased Language

In 1974 the question of language came before the General Assembly. The delegates considered this proposal because of Loretto’s conviction, as a teaching community, that “the language we use helps shape our attitudes and because such language reveals and heightens our sensitivity to what pains others.”¹³

The proposal read:

- A. That the language of official communications of the Loretto Community shall conform to the following guidelines:¹⁴
 - Avoid the generic use of the word “man” both by itself and in compounds such as “mankind” and employ instead terms such as humanity, humankind, human beings, persons, people, everyone.

- Avoid masculine pronouns such as “he” or “his” when referring to men and women together, and use in their place terms such as “his and hers,” or simply shift to the plural form.
 - Avoid references to God with masculine pronouns. Instead of saying “God is all powerful. He is all knowing,” the guideline calls for using “God is all powerful. God is all knowing,” or “God is all powerful and all knowing.”
 - Avoid the use of feminine pronouns when referring to entities such as the church or Israel. Such usage normally reflects the assumption that the feminine is inferior to the masculine, as with the feminine church, or Israel *vis-à-vis* a masculine God.
 - Avoid other male-dominant phrases when more than just males are implied, such as “sons of God,” “faith of our fathers,” or “pray brethren.” Also avoid the term “to emasculate” something, which tends to imply that only the male is vigorous.
- B. That the Loretto Guidelines, *I Am The Way* shall be revised in accord with the above principles.¹⁵

There was spirited discussion prior to voting about whether the proposal called for language changes only in those communications that were from the Loretto Community itself, or whether it applied to personal correspondence as well. Some concern was expressed about referring to God with other than masculine pronouns. This opinion was also registered:

Any effort to avoid the use of the masculine pronoun for God is theologically sound, since it acknowledges that God is Being beyond merely human terms.

Thirty-nine of the 40 delegates were present and voting. The proposal passed with 29 voting for it; nine voting “no” and one delegate abstaining. Inclusive language became the order of the day for all communications from the central office and from Loretto committees. *I Am The Way* was re-worked to conform to the guidelines and reprinted.

The proposal did not address the issue of liturgical language or language used in other worship. Consequently, there was no major push towards inclusive language in the religious ritual of our lives. Two notable exceptions, however, were the motherhouse and the annual Assemblies. The Loretto Motherhouse in Marion County, Kentucky, is home to many Sisters of Loretto. Through the years a number of Loretto theologians, liturgists, musicians, and artists have lived there. Some who took responsibility for planning liturgies and prayer services made a concerted effort to use only inclusive language. This is true also for the Eucharistic liturgies and daily prayer at the annual Loretto meeting where communal worship is often a highlight for those participating. The volunteer committee that plans these celebrations uses only inclusive language as well.

Loretto and the Equal Rights Amendment

A second proposal in 1974 was of an entirely different nature; it called for the Assembly to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment. In three parts, the proposal stated:

- That the Loretto Community go on record as endorsing the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.

- That letters announcing this endorsement be sent to the legislators of those states which have not yet ratified the ERA.
- That a letter be sent to the National Council of Catholic Women announcing the endorsement of ERA by the Loretto Community and urging the NCCW to cease its opposition to ERA and to work for its ratification.¹⁶

It passed with a near unanimous vote.

Subsequently, the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution came back three times for discussion at annual Loretto meetings. In 1976 the Assembly recorded their support for the Religious Committee for the ERA.¹⁷ In 1979 the Loretto Community became a supporting member of the Catholics Act for the ERA,¹⁸ and individual Loretto members were encouraged to join the group. As a result, a number of Loretto women worked actively in their locales for the issue, speaking to a variety of parochial and diocesan groups, organizing demonstrations, soliciting support of their local bishops, and developing ecumenical groups to educate the broader public on the issues.

Finally, in 1984, the year in which the statute of limitations ran out for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, Loretto members attending the annual General Assembly wrote a letter to the bishops of the United States urging them at least to refrain from taking a public position on the amendment if they did not support it.¹⁹

At the end of the campaign came the dramatic Women's Fast for Justice. On May 18, 1982, eight women began a fast in silent witness in the state capitol in Springfield, Illinois. (The state legislature was to cast a June vote.) Some three weeks into the fast, the women held a press conference at which one of the fasters, Maureen Fiedler (a Sister of Mercy later to become a Sister of Loretto) read their statement which said in part:

Why, when women fast for the rights of men, is it considered more acceptable than when women fast for the rights of women? Why is this called "political extortion" while the other is considered an "act of heroism"? It is because women's rights are not taken seriously. That is why we are here: to testify to the seriousness and sacredness of women's cause.²⁰

Five weeks later, on June 22, when a contingent of Roman Catholics from across the U.S. went to the Illinois capitol to join the fast for the final two days, seven Loretto Community members took part.²¹ This group issued a statement:

As Roman Catholics, our commitment to justice demands our witness to equality for women. Our fasting in support of these women and for the ratification of the ERA underlines the support for the amendment by 68% of the Catholic population, including some Roman Catholic bishops, 23 of whom signed a statement of support a few weeks ago.²²

As the group walked to the capitol to join the fast, many greeted them with shouts of support. Then the Catholics walked into the capitol, taking their places behind the women who

had been fasting on juice and water since mid-May and who were now seated under a large banner that read: WOMEN HUNGER FOR JUSTICE. The power of silent witness was palpable. However, resistance to equality of rights under the law was impregnable. The Illinois vote: No.

Loretto and The Mary Rhodes Award

In 1981 the Loretto Assembly, that rotates among four geographical areas, was to be held in St. Louis. Caught between a desire to support a boycott of meetings in states that had not yet ratified the ERA (Missouri was such a state) and the need to have Loretto members from that area present at the Assembly, the Loretto Women's Committee decided to use the occasion positively for education and to honor Missouri women legislators who had worked actively for passage of the amendment. Thus was born the Mary Rhodes Award, an honor bestowed annually on women who work for justice and equality for women.²³

Forty-one women have received the Mary Rhodes Award since 1981. They include among others a union-organizer, founder of a center for women workers in the *maquiladoras* world-wide, a United States congresswoman, a president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an advocate for lesbian and gay persons, a songwriter, a fine arts educator, a housing organizer and a pediatrician, to name but a few. Recipients have been Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Caucasians, and women from Guatemala and Mexico.

Each recipient received an original piece of art produced by a Loretto artist. The first award was an intaglio print of three women; the 1994 award was a sculpture titled "Angels."²⁴ Recipients' names are recorded on quilted banners, one of which hangs in the Loretto office in Denver, the other in the St. Louis office.

All recipients of the Mary Rhodes Award have worked and continue to work for justice, some locally, some nationally, some internationally. They work with women in the church and in society-at-large, with grass roots women, young women, indigenous women, working women, materially poor women, women in prison, minority women, and differently abled women. Some are Catholic, some are not. Some give direct service, some work for systemic change, some do both. They work in the United States, in Africa, in Central American, and in Mexico.

Loretto and the Women's Team

While the Loretto Assembly endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment in 1974, it was not until 1976 that the Assembly passed a resolution that showed the religious nature of equality. It stated:

That this Assembly support the principle that women are not meant by God to be subordinate to men but their full equals, and partners in the building and shaping of the world.²⁵

A second proposal asked:

That this Assembly indicate its support for the above principle by encouraging at least four of our members to work full time toward the empowerment of women in areas of special need, such as prison reform, the church, education and counseling, the physical abuse of women, single parents...²⁶

The Women's Team, as it came to be known, began in August 1977 with five Sisters of Loretto, three full time; two, part time.²⁷ The team was non-geographically based, with its members spread across the United States; Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. Each would work on projects appropriate to the site in which she was living.

One of the first actions of the team was to develop a statement on feminism, defining it in several ways as follows:

- Feminism: A world-wide social change movement which critically but lovingly rejects relationships and structures based on stereotyped roles of dominance (male) and submission (female).

- Feminism: A life-affirming movement reorganizing institutions and relationships so that women will have equal access to society's goods, services, status, power.
- Feminism: The bonding of women discovering the joy of woman-identity.
- Feminism: A perspective which asks questions such as: Are relationships cooperative or competitive? Are they circular or hierarchical? Inclusive? Interdependent? Can each person participate in those decisions which affect the individual? Can each person be responsible for the communal work? Are all parts of the work valued?
- Feminism: A process freeing women to work for liberation for themselves and other oppressed persons.²⁸

Now for the first time, the term "feminism" appeared in materials published within Loretto. While the word had undoubtedly been used in conversations or other dialogue during meetings of the General Assembly, it had not been written in any official documents to this date.

With the very first definition of the statement, feminism is identified as a movement of social change. Feminism rejects the patriarchal model of organization that has been the norm since the third millennium before the birth of Christ. Feminism demands nothing less than a seismic shift from the patriarchal paradigm of domination to the feminist prototype of equality and mutuality between women and men. The goal is autonomy, freedom, self-determination.

According to the statement crafted by the Women's Team, the goal is not replacing men in positions of power over women, children, and the whole of creation with women who will, in

turn, dominate and exploit men, children, and the earth. Rather it is equality of access and mutuality in relationships and structures that are called for.

Feminism recognizes both women and men as full participating partners in the work of building human community in the family, the church, and the world. It is a profound and earth-shaking recognition. It has the power to transform all our lives in a meaningful way. However, since such change is a major threat to the status quo and those persons who benefit most from it, the team members recognized that a transformation of social institutions and relationships would not come easily. It demands our commitment to the long haul.

Still another essential notion of feminism is the importance of women forging strong bonds with one another. No longer is the woman's worth to be derived from her relationship with someone, as daughter, wife, or mother. Women can and do also relate to other women in love and friendship rather than stand in competition with one another over men.

The Women's Team shared this statement widely, both within Loretto and with other groups. As more and more Loretto women began to participate in women's groups beyond the Loretto borders, they shared the statement on feminism (the definitions above), found it was well received, and utilized by others in their work for social change. Consequently, in 1981 the Loretto Women's Committee had the statement copyrighted.

Members of the Women's Team also worked in local areas on several projects designed to bring change. The recognition that home was the most unsafe place for many women and dependent children was just beginning to unfold. Four members of the Loretto project worked with battered women, organizing shelters and promoting legislation in several parts of the United States.

Since there was no shelter for abused women in St. Louis, Mary Louise Denny and Virginia Williams, working with others there to fill that gap and to educate the public, arranged for the use of a vacant Loretto convent as a shelter for women and their children. Here the women were safe, had time to reflect on their situation and find the help they needed to make decisions about their futures. This first shelter continues operation some 16 years later. They also organized, with others, a federal credit union for women. They worked with issues of women's health and organized an ecumenical committee for the ERA.²⁹

Another contribution toward the empowerment of women was the work done by Pat Kenoyer in Kansas City with women just released from jail. Recognizing the need for the women to have access to counseling and to find jobs, she provided assistance in these areas as well as in education. All aspects were necessary so that these women could develop understanding of their self-worth, grow in their ability to take charge of their lives and begin to support themselves and their children.³⁰

Empowerment work by Cathy Mueller in Denver included work with the Education Task Force of the Colorado Association for Aid to Battered Women, work at the resource center for women, where she offered communications workshops and counselor training sessions for

volunteers as well as counseling for the participating women. She helped set up a statewide network of resource centers for women.³¹

Lydia Peña, an art historian, did a major retrospective on the work of artist Agnes Tait. Tait's work had never been catalogued or brought together for an exhibition until this time. Peña also brought Loretto artists together for the first time and worked actively at a shelter for battered women.³²

At the conclusion of the year, the team members gave a report to the total Loretto Community in which they presented an overview of the situation of women in 1979. In it they emphasized a number of areas where women faced significant discrimination and oppression, and they included recommendations to Loretto for action.

From 1979 to 1985, the Women's Committee and the Women's Task Force continued Loretto's involvement with women's concerns. A questionnaire was sent to the total Loretto membership to determine interest in this area of work. A sizeable number of members indicated excitement about it. Some suggested a meeting to see how they might participate, and The Loretto Women's Network came into being.

The Loretto Women's Network (LWN)

In 1978 Assembly delegates had voted unanimously to continue the Loretto Community's involvement in women's issues and had, in 1982, affirmed the importance of continuing to commit talent and resources to bring about justice for women.³³ Accordingly, in 1988 Loretto members who were committed to the women's movement, who proclaimed themselves as feminists, and who were in accord about several substantive moot issues, met to hammer out an identity statement for the group they were forming within the larger Loretto Community.³⁴ *They hoped that, in this way, they could speak out on controversial issues without involving the whole community and thus provide a religious—indeed, a Catholic—voice in the public arena.*

LWN Identity Statement

The Loretto Women's Network is a voluntary association of feminists in the Loretto Community committed to act both for the empowerment of women and for the reorganization of any relationship based on domination and subordination: whether institutional, structural or personal; whether within the Loretto Community or outside of it.

A social change movement, the Loretto Women's Network acts to affirm the rights of all women in church and society regardless of their background (racial, ethnic, class, or national), age or sexual orientation. Among these rights are:

- the right to be treated as an equal in relationships, institutions and structures;
- the right to equal access to goods, services, status and power; and
- the right to make those decisions which affect their lives, bodies, and properties.

The Loretto Women's Network stands in solidarity with others working for empowerment of women both nationally and internationally. We act in Loretto and also in the public forum. At times we work singly; at other times, in small groups or geographic clusters. We also act as network and in coalition with others.³⁵

Substantive agreements include the following:

- Women are, and of right ought to be, the primary decision-makers in matters of reproduction.
- We support gay/lesbian persons in their struggle for ecclesial and civil rights.
- We commit ourselves to work for the full equality of women and men in all aspects of civil and ecclesial life, including ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and full access to sacramental ministries in church life.
- We strongly oppose all forms of racism and classism.
- Loretto institutions—schools, health-care facilities, etc.—are obligated as any other institution to follow non-sexist policies.
- We acknowledge that the relationship with the hierarchical church is problematic. Our support for civil and ecclesial dissent, either by an individual or group, in the tradition of free speech, includes examining and protesting the action and attitude of the hierarchical church toward women.³⁶

After the identity statement and substantive agreements were forged, an invitation was extended to all Loretto members to join the Loretto Women's Network. At this time, 25 per cent of Loretto membership are network members. Semi-annual network meetings are open to all. Ordinarily four elements are part of each meeting: discussion of some issues that "affect us profoundly and which often lack a forum"; praying together; continuing education for members on the ways in which women are excluded from the mainstream; decisions and actions the network will take. As a result, we have, among other things, examined our childhood faith and tested it against our adult understanding, engaged in discussions and exercises on human sexuality, violence, and racism, taken part in fresh and original rituals (e.g., on grief, survival), talked with residents of a *colonia* in Texas where U.S. Hispanic citizens have lived for years without access to running water, and endorsed and supported numerous social justice actions of various groups.

Also, network members are encouraged to act individually to speak out on these issues. Each member has stationery carrying the network logo for that purpose. Thus, the network provides an opportunity for many persons to take an active role in keeping Loretto involved in working for justice for women and the social change necessary to bring that into reality.

LWN and couRAGE

In 1987, the network began publication of a subscription newsletter. Conceived of during a Woman-Church conference on "Claiming Our Power," the newsletter was to be underground ("a place where we could speak the truth as we saw it, poke a little fun, and RESIST PATRIARCHY"). It was to be called *couRAGE*, as its first editorial proclaimed, because the

core of courage is rage. It would be financed by subscriptions so as to afford the independence for speaking out without compromising other community members who would be uncomfortable subsidizing such an effort. *couRAGE*, identified by the *National Catholic Reporter* as one of the best women's underground papers, has now some 500 subscribers and reaches beyond the network to others in the Loretto Community and a wide range of women and men beyond.³⁷

Loretto Women's Network and the Official Church

The Loretto Women's Network is committed specifically "to work for the full equality of women and men in all aspects of civil and ecclesial life." It also acts to reorder all relationships based on domination. Consequently, the Women's Network endorses several positions that put it at odds with the official church.

For example, the network supports the ordination of women to a renewed priestly ministry despite the Vatican's stance that it is not possible to ordain women in the Catholic communion. Again, the network upholds full civil rights for lesbians and gays notwithstanding opposition to this by many U.S. bishops. These are merely two examples of patriarchal tradition within the Roman Catholic Church. Challenging any aspect of patriarchy within the church brings to the surface widespread tensions with the Loretto Community.

Patriarchy is of Greco-Roman origin. Originally applied to the organization of the family and the relationships therein, it gave the father total authority over the mother and all minor children. By extension, patriarchy is an organizational system that structures the relationships of modern social institutions. It is a way of ordering the world by institutionalizing the domination and superiority of one group or class of human beings (male) over another class (females), regarded as subordinate and inferior. As a system it is evil and violent because it denies the equality of women with men and contravenes the full personhood of women. The patriarchal system must be overturned if the full development of all human persons is to be possible.

This analysis of the prevailing situation has produced rifts within the community. One Sister of Loretto observes unhappily, "The Feminist Movement has become so all-consuming and all-pervasive for some of our members that...[it] has led to the Loretto Community's openly espousing causes which are at variance with the teachings of the Church, and sometimes with the moral conscience of the nation in general." But another, on the same issue, applauds bold action: "This day and age is not the time for only reflection and silent prayer; it is a time to make and take a stand and be heard."³⁸

In the early 1980s, the bishops of the United States announced their plan to write a pastoral letter on women, a project they worked on for almost 10 years. From the start Loretto women wrote the bishops to say that, if pastoral letters are to deal with problems, women are not the problem. The problem is patriarchy. At the same time, if the bishops were determined to proceed, we suggested that they consult feminist theologians (we gave their names) and set up hearings with women across the country. Hearings were held, and a number of us participated in person or by written testimony.

When the first draft of the pastoral was published, each member of the network received a copy. At a subsequent meeting, the network drafted a critique and sent it to the bishops' committee working on the pastoral. The bishops worked on. Second and third drafts appeared and were made available to the LWN membership. Meanwhile, individual network members talked with bishops personally about their concerns.

When the bishops' fourth and final draft became public, the network wrote a letter to each of the bishops asking him not to endorse the letter but to drop the project altogether. That letter said:

Dear Bishop, our Brother:

We write to ask you to drop "ONE in CHRIST JESUS, the 4th Draft/Response to Women's Concerns." We are convinced that if this draft is approved and promulgated as the teaching of the Bishops of the United States, the damage to the church may well be irreparable. We state this because the letter fails to address patriarchy and how deeply the patriarchal system is imbedded in the structures of the church and the belief systems which support these structures.

If the church is to carry out its mission to spread the Good News, this system must be challenged and rooted out of all church structures, teachings, and relationships. The men of the church need to act on these truths:

- All men and women are made in the image and likeness of God.
- All women and men are full human persons and responsible moral agents.
- All women and men are called by Jesus to fullness of life and freedom in equality and mutuality.

This is the unbroken Christian tradition and this is what must be considered normative. Only then can we together shape the life of the church even as was begun in the time of Jesus.³⁹

At the same time, the Loretto Women's Network tries to maintain a respectful relationship with church officials, and some of its members have met with and/or written bishops to commend their actions. We supported those bishops who spoke publicly urging their colleagues to drop the pastoral on women. We thanked Rembert Weakland, archbishop of Milwaukee, for facilitating a dialogue among people of the diocese where they could speak honestly about abortion with no fear of intimidation or reprisal. The Women's Network also issued a proclamation honoring Charles A. Buswell, retired bishop of Pueblo, Colorado, for the ways in which he "called forth women's gifts, trusted their wisdom, listened to their voices, and supported their call to full and equal partnership in the church."⁴⁰

LWN and Networking

The Loretto Women's Network belongs to the Ecumenical Decade, a project of the World Council of Churches that aims to enable Christian churches to free themselves from racism, sexism, and classism and to encourage the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.

The Loretto Women's Network is also an active participant in Women-Church Convergence, a coalition of autonomous Catholic-rooted organizations that raises a feminist voice within the religious community and is committed to a church that is participative, egalitarian and self-governing. The Women-Church Convergence has sponsored to date three national conferences, whose titles indicate the overriding concerns: Women-Church Speaks; Women-Church: Claiming Our Power; and Women-Church: Weavers of Change.

The women-church movement, encompassing as it does women from many churches, is broader than Woman-Church Convergence. Women of faith gather in women-church to resist, to celebrate, and to take part in rituals that sustain and challenge us. We gather to give thanks for the commitment to build the "kindom"⁴¹ of God in our time and to model equality and mutuality. It is a place to break bread and to remember, a place where we live into hope and act in community. This may also be the first time women together have claimed to be "church" while also claiming to be in the tradition of the exodus community, a community seeking liberation from patriarchy.

Loretto is not unique in having a network to work for justice for women. Many other religious congregations have networks or committees as well. LWN has worked with some of them in two nationwide gatherings in which abortion and patriarchy were subjects of discussion.

Educating Ourselves

The move toward feminism within Loretto has been slow but steady. The path is not always clear and, in the words of a Latin American proverb, we make the road by walking. We have utilized a number of traditional educational processes to help us find the way. We have had speakers on topics of spirituality, religious life, women and the church, heterosexism/homophobia, and ecofeminism. Early in our woman-consciousness, in 1973, one speaker, Elise Boulding, at the conclusion of her talks on spirituality, shared with us how disquieting she found it to listen to our music. How was it, she wondered, that we sang hymns such as "Happy the Man" or "Sons of God" with such gusto when the words were all male and the Sisters of Loretto was a women's community.

Some who heard Boulding's remarks were galvanized into action, urging "that we take seriously the admonition to concern ourselves about the poor and the powerless, as advocates and empowerers. Not least among this group are women the world over. But to concern ourselves about the dilemmas of women we must first be conscious of the ways in which women—we ourselves—are among the poor and the powerless."⁴²

Numerous workshops have been an ongoing source of learning. Topics have included sexism in education; Catholic women and the women's movement in the U.S.; feminist

spirituality/sexuality; issues of language; assertiveness training; woman-space, woman-time; women and human rights; the global woman's movement.

The community has also tried to implement feminist (according to Loretto's definitions) ways of operating in our meetings: to speak out, agree, disagree, challenge, question, share, and discuss in a non-hierarchical manner. Helping people to make "I" statements, to speak for themselves rather than for others is crucial. We continue to try to build consensus on an issue before we conclude discussion or take action.

A Loretto tradition, educative for us, is that members whose ministry is in another country keep in touch through letters to the community. Frequently, these comment on the conditions women experience in a specific culture. Also, members who have participated in international meetings share their reflections with the group. Since we have had one or two delegates at each of the UN Women's Decade meetings, we have gained some understanding of what women in other countries are undergoing and what they are working toward.

Also, Loretto committees make an annual report of their activities, and the way in which each works to further Loretto priorities becomes clear. For example, the Investment committee has worked with corporations in which the community holds stock to ensure that policies and practices regarding their employees are fair, equitable, and free of gender-bias, especially in areas of pay, promotion, health benefits, and leave-time.

Another consistent and major factor in our learning has been the community newsletter, *Interchange*. From its inception in 1970, the editors have consistently written about members' participation in works and events that relate to Loretto's mission "to work for justice and act for peace."⁴³ As the members become more involved in ministries with women—economically poor, battered, incarcerated—our community understanding of these problems continues to develop.

Learnings

What have we learned from all this? I think we have grown and been educated in ways we could not have imagined in 1970. But even as I say that, it is clear to me that using the word "we" is somewhat dangerous. My experience is never identical to another's, and when I say "we" have had this or that community experience, I know it is more accurate to say that we have had similar or related experiences. It is in this sense that I use the term "we."

Not surprisingly, many of the learnings we had are somewhat religious in nature. I think we have learned that, despite religious and scriptural language, God is not male and that the male is not God. To say otherwise is to make an idol of both God and man. Actually, we may not have even known that we thought God and male were interchangeable terms. We seemed to have learned it by osmosis from our long-term participation in the liturgy and other prayers of the church.

We learned that we need to open our minds to the reality of what we see and what we hear because what we thought we saw was not what we really saw, and what we thought we

heard was not what we really heard. Take, for example, the altar rail. It separates the chancel from the body of the church. It was where we received communion, the body of Christ. We were taught that the space beyond this rail was sacred and holy. It was a place where God resided in a special way. Only the priest or his male server was to be in this area.

Reflecting on that now, I believe it has another meaning. It also serves as a line of demarcation. Clearly, women are not welcome within this holy space; further, women are not to approach God directly. Rather, we must wait at the rail for God to be brought to us. The scriptures are proclaimed and interpreted from the other side of the rail, a work for which women are not suitable. Thus the altar rail is a symbol of women's systemic marginalization and dependence on the male cleric within the church.

The use of exclusive (male-only) language in the official worship of the church is another example of not hearing the reality. Many of us grew up in a time when we were not so aware of this gender bias because services and hymns were in Latin. However, while many still say that the word "men" includes men and women, one has only to say, "Let us substitute 'women' and it will stand for both women and men" to know that this substitution will not fly. Language is not a trivial issue. It shapes us in deep and powerful ways.

We came to know ourselves as women, not just human beings or persons but as women, sexual beings, who have relationships, experiences, knowledge from many sources. Individually, we began to uncover and claim our personal stories. And as we shared these with other women, we came to realize the stories are often gender-specific. We learned that women, regardless of lifestyle or work, have much in common even across lines of ethnicity, race, and nation. Despite dissimilar experiences and inequality of access to societal structures, we are more alike than different.

Perhaps one of our most profound understandings is that we women tend to be deeply spiritual, that we can name, claim, and describe our experience of the holy, the sacred. We can and do have a direct relationship with God. We have learned we do not need the mediation of another, whether female or male, to be in direct relationship with God.

We have learned that it does us no favors to say, as papal statements so often do, that we women have a special nature. What is it? Either we are full human persons with authority for our lives and capable of making moral decisions or we are not. To place us on a pedestal or to say ours is a special vocation is not helpful. These are all boxes that stunt our growth, direct our decisions, and restrict our potential. As human persons we have full moral authority for our lives and the capability and primary responsibility for making necessary decisions.

We have also understood what is meant by the feminist claim that "the personal is political"; that what happens to one woman is often what happens with most. We learned to make the connections between our personal lives and our lives in church and society; to see that questions of rape, abuse, war, inclusive language, ordination of women, and women's economic, psychological and physical well-being—all these are systemically related.

We learned that a statement we wrote in 1973 was only partly correct. It said “Religious sisters have not been as oppressed as other women.”⁴⁴ While it is true that Sisters have had advantages of education and job opportunities (and this is helpful to seeing and understanding the reality of the status quo), at the same time, systemic oppression of women is found in all social institutions, including the convent. Men are not the sole patriarchs. Any system in which one person is considered superior and the others inferior is a construct of the patriarchal system.

We learned that we do have power; we do not have to be victims. We also learned we are willing to use it. We are creative, and we know how to mobilize our resources to act, to organize, to speak out for change. We learned to be pro-active, to develop alternative ways to care for ourselves and our deepest needs. We learned that resistance is an act of power and that domination can never be entire or without boundaries so long as we refuse to participate in it.

We have learned not to allow ourselves to be silenced and not to silence ourselves or each other. We have learned to trust our experience, to describe it, and to share it with others so we all can make the connections. We have learned to network, to act collaboratively and in coalition with others who also work for transforming change.

For the most part we are educators, not organizers. We don’t think in terms of systems or systemic problems. However, we have learned that the church, as we know it, is a bedrock solid bastion of patriarchy, which the church hierarchy claims is of divine origin. This realization has shaken us to the core. Consequently, we are also learning that un-learning is tough, gut-wrenching.

Most of us are cradle Catholics. The church has been for us life, love, home, hope, culture, and faith. It’s where we first learned of ourselves as made in God’s image and likeness. We are pleased that the parish priest and the bishop and the pope are genuinely good human persons. But we also know now that while persons come and go, structures and the systems that support them remain. To realize that the church that taught us about this radical equality of women and men really meant that equity should be practiced everywhere except in the church is incredible. It is this systemic patriarchy that we seek to root out of our church, out of our social structures, out of our own lives, out of ourselves. However, what we originally learned in the church—all those lessons about justice, mercy, compassion—we now know from our life experience to be valuable and true. So we continue to challenge the church to be the place where people know themselves called to fullness of life and freedom. Nothing less will do.

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NOTES

- ¹ Anna C. Minogue, *Loretto Annals of the Century* (New York: The America Press), 1912. Introduction, John J. Glennon, Archbishop of St. Louis, p. vi.
- ² Loretto Constitutions, *I Am The Way*, “Vocation,” 1.
- ³ See Buckler, “And the Learning,” pp. 13-22.
- ⁴ Loretto Article 100 Task Force questionnaire, 1993.
- ⁵ *Proceedings of the 1970 General Assembly*, p. 5.

6 Ibid, 5-6.

7 Mary Ann Cunningham, Mary Louise Denny, Cathy Smith, Ann Patrick Ware,
Virginia Williams.

8 Proposed in 1981, this amendment called for the right of individual states to legislate on
abortion and would have overridden the power of Congress to set national abortion policy.

9 See Marian McAvoy's chapter, "The Only Way Available to Us," *infra*, pp. 209-210.

10 Rose Colley and Sylvia Sedillo have served on the Core Commission; Maureen Fiedler is a
member of the Board of Directors. Agnes Ann Schum is coordinator of the 1995 Conference;
Mary Peter Bruce is co-chair of the Program Committee; Kathy Wright chairs the Finance
Committee. Mary Luke Tobin was the Baltimore Conference keynote speaker on the
importance of women's ordination.

11 *Proceedings of the 1972 General Assembly*, p. 9-10.

12 The Social Advocate staff position was established in 1972 to stimulate and coordinate Loretto
efforts for social justice.

13 *Proceedings of the 1974 General Assembly*, p. 9.

14 Taken from the editorial policy of *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

15 *Proceedings of the 1974 Assembly*.

16 Ibid., 10.

17 *Proceedings of the 1976 General Assembly*, p. 8.

18 *Proceedings of the 1979 General Assembly*, p. 6.

19 *Proceedings of the 1984 General Assembly*, p. 13.

20 "Catholics Act for the ERA" Press Release, Silver Spring, MD, June 1982.

21 They were Jane Boyer, Mary Louise Denny, Carole Eschen, Nancy Finneran, Pat Kenoyer,
Sylvia Sedillo, Virginia Williams.

22 Press Release, June 1982. Bishop Charles Buswell, who became a co-member of Loretto in
1993; Mary E. Hunt, a 1993 Mary Rhodes Recipient; and Marjorie Tuite, OP, a 1985 Mary
Rhodes Recipient, were part of this delegation.

23 The award was presented to three women: Gwen Giles, the first African-American elected
to the Missouri Senate; Della Hadley, a former member of the Missouri State Legislature
and a member of the Kansas City (MO) Commission on the Status of Women; Sue Shear,
a member of the Missouri State Legislature since the 1970s. Shear introduced the Equal
Rights Amendment in Missouri. She continues her legislative work for equality for
Women. Giles died in 1986.

24 Loretto artists who have produced Mary Rhodes Awards over the years are Sandra Ardoyno,
Dorothy Bauer, Jeanne Dueber, Gabriel Mary Hoare, Lydia Peña, Alicia Ramirez,
Bernice Strawn, Susan Swain, and Lucina Tighe.

25 *Proceedings of the 1976 General Assembly*, p. 7.

26 Ibid., 8.

27 They were Mary Louise Denny, Pat Kenoyer, Catherine Mueller, Lydia Peña,
Virginia Williams.

28 Loretto Women's Team, *Statement on Feminism*, published internally, 1977;
copyrighted, 1981.

29 Report of the Loretto Women's Project, Part III, Projects in the Different Cities;
July 1978.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 *Proceedings of the 1982 General Assembly*, p. 10.

34 *Interchange*, Vol. 3, No. 19, March 1988, p. 5.

35 Loretto Women's Network Meeting Notes, February 1988.

- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Information received from *courAGE* editor, Mary Ann Cunningham, April 1994
- ³⁸ Responses to Article 100 questionnaire, 1993.
- ³⁹ November 9, 1992 letter to U.S. bishops from Virginia Williams of Loretto Women's Network Coordinating Committee.
- ⁴⁰ Proclamation from the Loretto Women's Network to Charles Buswell, Bishop of Pueblo, at the liturgy celebrating commitment on July 26, 1989.
- ⁴¹ Georgene Wilson, OSF, coined the word "kindom" to describe the relationship of the Community of Believers instead of the notion of king and subjects that "kingdom" suggests.
- ⁴² Unpublished letter circulated to Loretto members through *Interchange*, August 1973.
- ⁴³ *I Am The Way*, Mission Section, 30.
- ⁴⁴ *Interchange*, Letter to Loretto members, August 1973.