

One Community: A History of Loretto Co-membership

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When Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, few had any clear idea of how profoundly Catholic life would be affected by its decrees. What had once seemed an immutable institution found itself in many cases in a state of chaos and confusion as clergy and lay people alike found themselves struggling to understand how the decrees affected them and the way they would now be Catholic.

While all Catholics experienced the impact of the decrees of the Council, women religious were most profoundly affected by the *Decree on Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)* which directed religious to examine their lives according to "the charism of the order, the needs of the members, and the signs of the times." They were to go to the gospels, the initiating intent of their founders, and the social realities of the time for their criteria.¹ While this directive might have been overlooked by a casual reader, it stood out like a beacon to leadership of women's communities throughout the United States. In the next few years most congregations began to sort out just how it would affect their community's vowed life and ministry.

In the case of the Sisters of Loretto, the review of its history took them to the earliest rule that they had sent to Rome. True, it was not the rule eventually approved by the Vatican, but one of its segments dealt with "Associates of the Society Such as Take Vows for a Few Years Only."² While the issue of associate membership did not immediately rise to the top of the agenda for reform, there was precedent rooted in its very foundation for including members committed to the community in other ways than by canonical vows.

Communities have attracted women and men who wished to affiliate with particular religious congregations in spirituality and mission. Whether they are called associates, consociates, partners in mission, co-members, or by some other term, extended membership programs are experiencing steady growth. How communities involve their associates, however, varies widely. Some consider associates primarily as fund raising helpers or service providers. Others involve their co-members in nearly every aspect of community life.

The Loretto Community established co-membership in 1970. Here is the Loretto Co-membership story.

Unlike many communities where associates are seen as a distinct group, in Loretto co-members have no separate structure or constitutions. Early in its history, President Helen Sanders made clear Loretto's understanding of what co-membership

meant. "Co-members are not a body in themselves, but are related to the congregation individually."³ In fact, many Loretto Co-members will remind you that the Loretto Community is not made up of members and co-members but of vowed members (sisters) and co-members.⁴ Loretto Community members are listed in the membership directory with names intermingled, an asterisk indicating co-members. Neither group meets separately. Co-members are invited to all community events, liturgies, meetings, retreats, workshops, assemblies, and other events. Sometimes this "all togetherness" has been a source of tension in the Loretto Community. Despite personal fondness for individual co-members and appreciation for all they have added to the community, some fear that such egalitarianism threatens the existence of Loretto as a canonical congregation.⁵

Prior to the 1960s, Loretto, like most religious communities, was a closed society. While there were certainly identifiable distinctions in the many religious orders of women, to those outside, sisters and their lives behind the walls of their convents were largely mysterious. They rarely spent time interacting with other Catholics much less other members of the larger community they often had been founded to serve. Many communities felt they no longer reflected the creativity and energy of their founding and early days of mission, but knowing what changes they needed to make and how to go about making them was a mystery.

In Loretto there had been some movement in the 1950s and early 1960s to open the windows slightly to include others who would be affected by Chapter decisions. Each successive Chapter meeting introduced broader community consultation if not active participation. These efforts ranged from surveying the community on specific issues under consideration to province-wide discussion meetings. By 1964, any member who wished to submit a proposal to the General Chapter could do so.⁶ In January of 1966, Loretto's Superior General, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, one of the few women invited as an auditor to Vatican II, presented to the community a process for studying the Council document on renewal of religious life. Loretto would focus first on scripture-centered prayer life and encouraging superiors to seek consultation and cooperation of their community members in decision-making for the future.⁷

In her many years of active involvement in social justice and religious life issues, Sister Mary Luke was a woman with wide interests and exceptional leadership skills. In the years following her election in 1958, she introduced the congregation to the major writers of the day in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and theology, providing copies of their works as bases for community discussions. This groundwork prepared Loretto to move forward quickly and confidently when the Council fathers in Rome invited congregations to explore ways they might respond to the Vatican documents on renewal of religious life.

No one was surprised when Sister Luke was re-elected Loretto Superior General in July 1964 and then chosen by Major Superiors of Women to lead that organization a month later. It was while en route to Rome delegated by the leadership group to learn what was going on at the Vatican Council and how it

might affect women religious that Sister Luke learned that she had been invited to be one of 15 women auditors at the Council.⁸

Sister Luke's involvement at the Council and her familiarity with its documents certainly influenced the decision to call the congregation to a special renewal chapter in 1967. Prior to this meeting, Loretto leaders invited Sisters to gather regionally to brainstorm topics they felt should be addressed at the Chapter. Leadership then collated the reports and established ten commissions to develop the agenda for the Chapter aimed at moving Loretto into a post-Conciliar church.⁹ Three principles that have continued to guide Loretto emerged from commission recommendations and subsequent Chapter decisions: collegiality (communal decision-making), subsidiarity (agreement that those affected by decisions take part in the making of them), and the primacy of person over institution.¹⁰

Co-members

The idea of some type of extended membership had come up in two of the planning commissions in 1967. One report mentioned two reasons for considering an auxiliary group: a shortage of Loretto personnel and the fact that married and single persons, some of whom were former members, were interested in affiliation. Another commission had been asked to gather information on other communities' experience with associate or affiliate membership and reported its findings to the 1969 General Chapter but recommended that a decision be deferred since no one had yet requested such membership or put forth a specific proposal on how such an entity might be structured.¹¹

However, by 1970, the major issues of a rule and government structure had been resolved for the time, and the first President and Executive Committee elected. The congregation was ready to look closely at a proposal for extended membership. Several women who had expressed interest were invited to come and offer their ideas at the historic first General Assembly of the congregation. In fact, three proposals were offered for consideration. All who presented them had once been sisters. They envisioned that extended membership would appeal to women who had previously been vowed religious. One was a former Loretto Sister, another a former member of another congregation. The third proposal came from two sisters who had already announced their intention to leave vowed Loretto membership but who had not yet received dispensation. Each proposer had a slightly different idea, but common to all was the desire to remain connected in some formal way as lay persons to a community with whom they felt a close personal bond and whose values and ideals they admired.¹²

Although the proposals envisioned extended membership as a way for those leaving vowed membership to stay connected to the congregation, Loretto's first elected president, Sister Helen Sanders, had a broader view. When asked her opinion on the question prior to her election in February 1970, she said that this was a question for the congregation, not the president, to decide. She welcomed the discussion on extended

membership and noted that at some point a new term would have to be decided on. "Obviously, no man wants to be [called] a Sister of Loretto."¹³

Sisters who attended the 1970 Assembly were asked to consider whether they thought it mutually valuable to extend membership to persons other than those who wished to make public profession of the evangelical counsels. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of such membership? What would be the rights and obligations of each party?¹⁴

Only elected delegates had voting privileges, although the "participant observers," as the non-voting attendees were called, took part in discussions prior to the vote. Everyone had an opportunity to ask questions, offer opinions, and state concerns. One of the original co-members who presented her plan at the Assembly recalled, "Well, there were two very different reactions. This was kind of a surprise to a lot of people. There were some who were very angry and scared and argued that we just wanted to take the easy way out."¹⁵ At one point, sensing confusion within the Assembly on how this new form of membership might work, newly-elected President Helen Sanders drew a diagram showing Loretto as one Community with two forms of membership: Vowed and Co. Sisters who were present that day recall her using the term *co-member* rather than *associate* or some other term. She related "co" to the Latin *cum* (with). Co-members would be one *with us* rather than associates *of us*.¹⁶

On August 13, 1970, when it appeared that consensus had been reached, the chair called for a delegate vote. The proposal on co-membership passed: 37 for, 0 against, and 2 abstentions.¹⁷ Henceforth the Loretto Community would have two forms of membership: the Congregation of the Sisters of Loretto who make public profession of vows within the canonical structure, and Co-members who make a contractual arrangement on an individual basis with the congregation initially through the approval of the Executive Committee and later through approval of the Community Forum.

What the Assembly action had done was establish a way to allow continued relationships in Loretto for formerly professed members and others who would request co-membership. It created a name, Loretto Community, to identify this new arrangement. It was not the intent of the Assembly to authorize or organize a new entity. It did not spell out any specific guidelines or structures on how the Sisters and Co-members of Loretto would become one community. That work was still to come, and is still coming.¹⁸ As the community became familiar with and comfortable in using annual Assemblies both to educate and to legislate, major adjustments have come about only after extensive discussion followed by a time-limited period of living with changes to see how they work. Proposals identify goals but rarely specify exactly how they will be carried out, thus allowing a great deal of leeway for determining what is or is not needed, what does or does not work. Imprecise language has sometimes caused problems but more often has worked to advantage. Co-membership is a prime example.

The women who presented proposals at the 1970 assembly were the first to become Loretto Co-members. By January of 1971 the Executive Committee had accepted five women.¹⁹ As Jeannine Swift, a charter co-member stated, "We never left the community. We changed from vowed membership to co-membership. That was our proposal." On the day they received dispensation from their vows, she and Judy Ford became co-members.²⁰

In the following months and years the Executive Committee began to flesh out the concept of co-membership and provide guidelines for its implementation. When most of those applying for co-membership were former vowed members or persons who had long been associated with Loretto Sisters, the need for education in Loretto history, values, and mission had not been an issue. As others requested co-membership, the personnel committee developed ways to incorporate co-members into the life of the community. They were invited to retreats, workshops, social gatherings, and meetings. Over time, co-members with interest and appropriate expertise also became involved in committee work and were appointed to staff positions.

In 1971, after one year of co-membership, there was discussion at the Assembly to air concerns, but no proposal was offered or decision made. Most of those attending felt one year was not long enough to evaluate the structure with any fairness. The Proceedings noted, however, "There is still some apprehension about its place.... We are still ambiguous in our attitude."²¹

Over the next few years, the Executive Committee began accepting the first co-members who were not former vowed members. In 1975 a former vowed member and her husband requested co-membership. Because he was a divorced man and of another Christian denomination, the Executive Committee received some objections to granting co-membership to this couple. Considerable discussion preceded their decision. In the end the vote was affirmative.²²

The 1977 Assembly approved a task force composed of both vowed and co-members to explore the status of the program. Using responses to a questionnaire sent to all members, that committee made several recommendations including a process for new co-members, the appointment of a co-membership director, and finally an Assembly re-affirmation of its 1970 decision establishing co-membership.²³ All three recommendations passed.

The dilemma of how to provide the broadest participation of all members of the Loretto Community in decision-making without risking canonical status continues to challenge the community. As one sister said at a 1989 Loretto in the Future workshop, "I think we want to be one community; we just don't know how to do it."²⁴ Still we try. Over the years, several practices aimed at allowing wider participation to co-members have become part of the community's operating procedure.

Beginning in 1978, all community members attending Assemblies were assigned

to what came to be known as a *stable table*, joining an elected delegate and facilitator. Although only elected sister delegates could vote, everyone could participate in discussion. Delegates agreed to experiment with using consensus to determine the community's position on some issues and later, that Assembly discussions would be as participatory as possible, with decisions being made both by delegate vote and group consensus. This generally meant that proposals around canonical issues went to the delegate assembly but decisions regarding other items, for example, Loretto's position on peace and justice issues, would be voted on by all present.²⁵

Decision-Making Experiment

In 1986 delegates approved a decision to include "all Loretto Community members who come to participate" in decisions at the 1987 and 1988 Assemblies. The 1988 Assembly included the election of five Executive Committee members. Co-members and non-delegate vowed members participated in proposing names of possible Executive Committee members, discussed the candidates, and recommended their choices to the delegate body, which then voted. Everyone voted on proposals, some of which involved financial matters.

In 1989 elected delegates decided, though not unanimously, to continue community-wide decision-making at Assemblies until the government study then underway was concluded. They affirmed that only vowed members could vote on canonical and financial matters of the congregation.²⁶ To further clarify procedure, 1992 delegates unanimously passed a proposal establishing a three-step process for voting on formal decisions: First, all present would be asked to indicate their preference. Second, if the question dealt with canonical matters, the vowed members would be polled for their preference. Third, informed by this discussion, the delegates would vote.²⁷ Although some still had reservations about the process because delegates had no opportunity to meet privately, most of the Loretto Community felt this was a reasonable compromise. It allowed input by all who wished, but on canonical issues, the delegate body made decisions.²⁸

Today, co-members, like vowed members, are more or less actively involved in community activities as their circumstances and interests dictate. Some serve on staff and committees. Many co-members provide financial support, although not until 1995 were co-members invited to pledge financial assistance.²⁹ Others contribute their time or professional expertise. Regardless of their level of involvement, all members of the Loretto Community are either active or supportive members of a Community Group of her/his choice. These Community Groups, begun in 1991, are "the basic unit of the Loretto Community" and meet twice a year to learn, to pray together, to discuss community issues, to supply input to the Executive Committees or other committees or individuals who have asked.³⁰

Pilot Project of Wider Participation

By 1996, the long process of having *I Am the Way*, the Constitutions of the Sisters of Loretto, approved by the Vatican, was coming to an end. The one remaining sticking point seemed to be the inclusion of co-members as part of the Loretto Community. It was clear that the Vatican would not endorse this arrangement. After much discussion and consultation, the Executive Committee decided to remove any mention of co-members from the Constitutions. Since co-membership was not a canonical entity, the rationale went, it did not require canonical approval.³¹ This turn of events was reported early in 1996 in a letter to the community about proposed revisions, with a request that concerns be communicated to the Executive Committee within the month. Nonetheless, the decision to forward the final text to Rome with co-membership deleted seemed to come as a surprise to many when it was announced in late March. In response to concerns expressed at that time, Loretto President Mary Ann Coyle invited several vowed and co-members to come together to see how the integral nature of vowed and co-membership could be articulated.³² *Loretto Life*, a publication that features the many ways vowed and co-members share Loretto Life was one of the outcomes.

Earlier discussion of co-members' involvement in decision-making led to what came to be known as the Pilot Project of Wider Participation. At the 1997 Assembly elections to the Executive Committee were on the agenda. Although anyone could nominate, canon law and Loretto constitutions required that all nominees be professed sisters with final vows.³³ As a way of "pushing the envelope," two members nominated co-members, and a heated discussion followed although the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The discussion, however, prompted the Executive Committee to explore ways that both non-finally vowed sisters and co-members could participate without violating the constitutions. A canon lawyer with whom they had worked in the process of getting the constitutions approved, advised that Canon 633 would permit the delegate assembly to create a new "organ of participation" which could include the Executive Committee and others. The duties restricted to the Executive Committee by canon law and constitutions would remain there, but an expanded group could consider other issues.³⁴

Prior to the 2000 election Assembly, regional gatherings of Loretto Community members reviewed and discussed "Imaginings," vision statements to guide the community in the next six years. Three of these "imaginings" dealt with ideas for wider participation and were sent to the Assembly as proposals. The Assembly asked the originators to try to bring forward a single proposal. The proposal they offered would authorize the creation of two new entities: the *Community Forum* and the *Community Perspective Committee (CPC)*. The first (Community Forum) would add three additional representatives to meet with the Executive Committee on non-canonical agenda items. Two of these would be co-members and the third either another co-member or a non-finally vowed sister. The second entity (CPC) would be a body of representatives chosen by each Community Group. These could be vowed or co-members. The CPC was to meet twice a year to share information among them and with Loretto leadership.³⁵

The proposal also included a study component and an evaluation design. Extensive discussion ensued. Some believed the community to be biting off too much at one time without being very clear on details, such as how members would be selected, how long they would serve, how often they would meet. But, in a sense, this was the Loretto way—get it going and see what works—and the proposal passed as a three-year experiment to be evaluated at Assembly 2003.³⁶

In the interval between Assemblies, the Community Forum and the CPC began meeting. At the first meeting of the Community Forum, the Loretto Community President invited any members in the area who wished to come and observe the Forum to do so. Although not included in the proposal, this practice has continued and the “participant observers” as they have come to be called, are often asked for input during meetings. Those able to attend have a much more positive attitude on the Forum than those who have not attended. A few questioned the canonical validity of the Forum, but most took a “wait and see” attitude. Shortly before the 2003 Assembly, the evaluation team completed its work and found that about half of the community groups were uncertain whether the Community Forum had fulfilled its purpose of expanding co-membership involvement but were willing to give it more time to develop. The CPC had only four meetings and was still finding its voice. Over two-thirds of Community Groups supported its continuation.³⁷ At Assembly 2003, delegates voted to give both the Forum and CPC another three years before deciding whether or not to continue both or either, a decision to be made at Assembly 2006.³⁸

In June 2005, Mary Catherine Rabbitt, President of the Loretto Community, announced that the Executive Committee, following consultation with Community Groups, the Community Perspective Committee (CPC), and Community Forum, had voted to expand the role and function of the Community Forum, which includes the Executive Committee and three other community-elected members, two of whom are co-members. While the Executive Committee alone votes on all matters of a canonical nature or congregation finances, for the duration of the current administration (until December 31, 2006), the Community Forum reviews and recommends accepting or denying the applications of prospective co-members. In addition, the Forum evaluates, appoints members to, and determines the continuation or dissolution (based on Community Group recommendation) of specified Loretto standing committees, which deal with mission-related issues. These functions were initiated at the April 30, 2005, Forum meeting.³⁹

This journey has brought us to the present in the evolution of Loretto Co-membership. There is no question that it is here to stay. It is widely supported, yet nagging questions remain. We can only speculate what the future may bring.

As with most American religious communities, Loretto’s vowed members (median age 77)* are dying at a much faster rate than new members are entering the program. Currently there are 281* vowed members. Co-membership moves forward at a steady pace with 211* co-members and about 60 more in various stages of the process. It

seems reasonable to assume that within the next few years vowed and co- will be at parity. As this comes closer to being so, there arises a certain level of fear, often unspoken. Some members are, understandably, worried about some very basic life issues. Most of the sisters never envisioned a time when there would not be enough able-bodied sisters to provide for those who had earned the right to retire. In the future who will pay the bills, fund the missions, care for our elderly? Co-members do not make the same life commitment to the institute. To what level can co-members be involved without endangering canonical status?

Concerns include two extremes. Will the worst fears of the one end of the community spectrum come to pass and co-members "take over" the congregation? Will the fondest dream of the other end come true and co-members achieve complete equality in the community? In my view, neither is likely to happen. Most of us, vowed and co, are not really hung up on the issues that trouble a few. In fact, there is some frustration that after so many years, we still haven't put the issue to rest. Recently, in evaluating a regional workshop on decision-making, one member commented, "I don't want to talk about co-membership any more. We have it. It's ours. It's great. Move on!"⁴⁰ While we may sometimes disagree among ourselves, as family members do, we love and support one another, and even if it means we build the road as we go, we will do so together.

The Loretto Community doesn't lack vocations. They are just different vocations. I believe there will always be a core of vowed members, Sisters of Loretto, else what would we be "co" of? But it seems quite likely that co-members will increasingly move into ministries and missions now served by vowed members. It is already happening. It will likely accelerate. And in the not too distant future, should co-members outnumber vowed, we will honor and cherish those who went before us and be good stewards of their legacy. Loretto will be Loretto forever, as our founders prayed, but it may not look the way they envisioned.

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- Figures current as of last revision, June 17, 2006.

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