

Transcript of Kerry Robinson address to
Women Religious Congregational Leaders and Lay Leaders Serving their Congregations
Catholic Leadership Collaborative Event – February 12, 2019

Women religious in this country have built out the church and in my view reminded us daily of its mission and its call to holiness. And also have a personal debt of gratitude to one nun in particular, Sister Margaret Farley, a religious sister of mercy, who is an ethicist and a feminist and a brilliant scholar and was my teacher and my spiritual director for many years.

And the lessons that she has taught me both in the classroom and by the example of her life, have remained with me and continue to sustain me. And one time I told her for the rest of my life I would pay it forward in service to supporting women religious. And I think many people are taking me up on that promise. And here we are today. So I just wanted to take a few moments to speak about some important examples of lay religious collaboration, and the role of the laity in particular.

Many of these are drawn from personal experience, but I'll also highlight some innovative ministries and examples just to spur our own imaginations and conversation. Is everybody clear about the agenda?

I know that it was emailed to you earlier. This is mostly for you, and we intend this to be as helpful and constructive at your table discussions first amongst yourselves and then we'll be mixing you up so that you can learn from one another about both the opportunities, the successes, the challenges, the impediments to moving forward and taking full advantage of the gift and talent of lay collaboration.

So my background, as Sister Helena alluded to, I make no apologies for being truly, passionately in love with the Catholic Church. And I first fell in love with that by virtue of being born to a family that now has a 75 year history of serving the church through the instrument of a private family foundation that was created by my great-grandparents, John and Helena, beautiful name, Raskob, almost 75 years ago.

They had two intentions in mind when they pooled their resources and created the Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities. The first was that all of their resources would be used exclusively to support the Catholic Church in all of its breadth of ministries anywhere in the world. This includes ecumenical and interfaith work, as long as there is a Catholic partner to receive the funds.

So that doesn't really limit what the foundation can fund. If you consider how intimately connected to so many important ministries all over the globe, the Catholic churches. Their second intention was that their children and their descendants would be stewards of the foundation's resources. And this also seems simple enough but John and Helena had 13 children and one of whom, my grandmother had 14 children. So this is a massive family. The fourth and fifth generations of the Raskob family are actively involved in the foundation.

It is voluntary. It is non-remunerative. And when one becomes 18 you are formally invited into service in the Raskob Foundation. You can of course decline. But if you say yes, there is an expectation that you will fully immerse yourself in the life of the church, the better to anticipate unmet and under met needs and together with your cousins, make better advised philanthropic investments in the church.

So this is had a profound impact of evangelization on our family. There are close to 100 direct descendants, not spouses, direct descendants, actively involved in the Raskob Foundation. We're spread out across the country and some overseas and actually just had our board meeting in St. Louis in November. So thank you for welcoming Raskob to your wonderful city.

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So Raskob has had a fierce commitment to the role of laity in the life of the church from its inception. It's curious to me that with such a big Catholic family, not a single relative became a priest. Now, I don't know if this can be traced to the fact that the one rule that John and Helena, did stipulate early on was that, if a descendant became a priest, which surely they could have hoped for with such a large family. But if the descendant became a priest, he was not to be involved in the Raskob Foundation.

So Raskob did help create over the decades a number of things. We always wanted to be at the table when new innovative ideas that we're breathing new life into the church came about. And among those that we had an early partnership in as a funder, was the creation of the National Association of Lay Ministry, the National Pastoral Life Center, Renew International and many others.

Another thing that Raskob did was it about 40 years ago, was one of the foundations in the country that realized they were funding many of the same initiatives but had not introduced themselves to one another. So a small group of funders got together who were supporting the Catholic Church and formed a consortium so that they would be better educated as funders in the needs of the church and the innovative activity of the church.

And that gave birth to FADICA, Foundations And Donors Interested in Catholic Activities. And one of the reasons I love FADICA so much is that is how I met Bridget and Sister Helena. Incarnate Word and Raskob are both members of FADICA, and we meet two or three times a year to better educate ourselves on the pressing needs facing the church so that we can collaborate in a thoughtful manner.

Among the contributions that FADICA has made to the life of the church is the creation of SOAR, Support Our Aging Religious. And this was several decades ago, frankly, laity were properly outraged at the lack of consideration materially for elderly women religious in particular, but also men religious as well. And a group of us from FADICA went to the USCCB, the Bishop's conference and we pleaded our case and we said, "The church has been built on the backs of these wonderful women and they have given everything for the church and for others. And now in their infirmities, there is not the proper resources to care for them. And this is a moral scandal and one that should be remedied immediately."

Those of you who have worked in the church for many years know that great ideas are not immediately acted on, especially at the level of the Bishop's conference. So the answer was basically, no. It was like, thanks for bringing this to our consideration, but everybody wants us to start a new second collection for their own pet project. And when we know that this is the right course of action, we don't let a no, impede our progress. We don't burn the bridge either, but we set about finding another way to remedy it. And that really gave birth to support to SOAR, Support Our Aging Religious. The foundation community pooled resources to create an endowment, and then we utilized Catholics in the media and on Broadway and in many different sectors who had been educated by women religious in particular, all of whom have personal debt of gratitude, owed to a nun in their life and wanted to give back.

And we harnessed their collective expertise and their social capital, raised consciousness and awareness, wrote op eds in the Wall Street Journal. I think Phil Donahue was a very early proponent of this. So he talked about it on this show a lot. And soon lots of money was raised to endow SOAR, which in turns gives grants to elderly religious. The happy note and our intention all along was that this would not quite shame the Bishops into doing the right thing, but inspire the Bishops to do the right thing, which they did. And there is now a retirement collection at the USCCB.

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So two pools of funds that came from this. I thought I would make my own life, in a vocational sense, even in the field of philanthropy, particularly Catholic philanthropy. As a child I fell in love with the church because I was meeting women and men ordained religious and lay like you, who in my view were always standing at the vanguard of human suffering. And responding to that human suffering by alleviating it, by championing justice, by advocating for peace, by providing catechesis, providing healthcare, ministering to the homeless.

And really as a child, I saw you as seeing the worst of what humankind can do to one another, to each other, and to our planet. And yet every day you show up and you would extend mercy. And in the midst of all of this, which was clear that this was done from a deep personal faith, you evinced a palpable sense of joy.

And I thought, how curious to be so joyful and so purposeful when you see up close and don't look away at human suffering. And I remember growing up wanting to be like you. And thinking to myself, I'll never be that holy, I'll never be that selfless, but began to ask God in my own child's prayer, maybe I could do something with my life, that would in turn help the ministry of my moral heroines and heroes.

And I think God has answered that prayer. And I have found myself in very unlikely positions of leadership on behalf of the church, which I continue to love and advocate for and have great hopes for, even though I am not ignorant of its many failures and failings. So I thought I would make this lifetime professional role in service to the church in the field of philanthropy.

But 22 years ago I was called by the Catholic chaplain at Yale University, a Diocesan priest from Hartford who had been very happy as a pastor, Fr. Bob Beloin. Loved parish ministry. And three times his Archbishop had asked him to move over to campus ministry, he dreaded it, kept saying no, kept finding a reason not to answer that call because he thought it would be listening all day long to boyfriend, girlfriend problems.

And he just didn't want to do that. But ultimately he surrendered. He became the Catholic chaplain at Yale and although he looked out and realized that 25% of the student population was Catholic, only a handful were coming to Mass on Sunday. And although it was an example of predominantly lay governance, there was a lay board. They were hemorrhaging cash and the response to fiscal distress on the part of the board was to cut staff, cut programs, shrink down, so that there was basically only a shell of campus ministry at Yale.

And he knew nothing about fundraising but intuitively knew that he had to persuade his board to invest seriously in fundraising and in a professional way and build up the resources to draw in students.

It was my pleasure for 10 years on that fateful call 20 years ago, to be asked by him to move to the other side of the philanthropic coin, and instead of advising people how to give away money, I was suddenly in charge of raising it. It Was something I did not want to do. I loathed the thought every fiber in my being. I thought it was going to be incredibly thankless work and demanding and not appreciated. And I had no business even being considered, having had no experience. He entreated me to pray about it for five days. I readily agreed because I knew that five days of praying about this would make my no so eloquent.

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Lo and behold, for 10, of the most demanding, most beautiful years of my life, I worked with him as an example of lay-clergy collaboration. We were completely equal partners in this. And we advanced Catholic life at Yale, raised \$75 million dollars, with no staff and with no playbook. We were just committed to creating and bringing to fruition that Catholic, intellectual and spiritual center of consequence. Because we knew what a 25% of the most brilliant members of this generation and generations to come would otherwise leave Yale with an eighth-grade catechetical understanding of their faith. And the world would be deprived of their big build leadership because we would have failed to inculcate them an adult mature faith that can sustain and inspire them and help them take that out into the world.

And finally, Leadership Roundtable. Halfway through the capital campaign for the Catholic Center at Yale. The sexual abuse revelations in 2002 came about. At the time, Father Bob and I had been traveling the country meeting with Yale Catholic alumni, proudly talking about how one of our ministries was to elevate and celebrate Catholic intellectual discourse. Taking the topics of the day, whatever they were, illuminating them from the perspective of faith and inviting really smart young adults to wrestle with the topics of the day and to see where the intersection of faith mattered.

And invite them in rich debate and discussion. The better for them to own their faith and develop a moral vocabulary. So suddenly the topic of the day was our own church's, tremendous crisis and failure, and crime. And my board, although they were happy that we were raising a lot of money, their attitude was essentially Kerry, you didn't cause this. You have nothing to do with it. We're not implicated in this. Don't worry about it. Don't get distracted, just keep raising money.

And Father Bob and I felt that that was fundamentally unfaithful. That if you give -- the church is your family, you do everything possible to step up to the plate and affect healing and reconciliation. And that we had a moral obligation to be part of the solution and certainly to answer students questions about this.

So we persuaded the board to let us post a three day conference called Governance Accountability and the Future of the Catholic Church. 500 people attended. The material was wrenching, and yet everybody left hopeful with a sense of this is my church. I am not abandoning it. I am staying and committing to call it to greater levels of accountability, transparency and holiness.

And this gave birth, essentially to Leadership Roundtable, which has now existed since 2002, effectively, formally since 2005. It was founded by Geoff Boisi, who was a cradle Catholic, deeply involved in his faith from the world of finance, had been chair of the board at Boston College when Father Don Monan was president, and had the experience of seeing Boston College, one of the great universities in our country, if not a world, almost collapse, until the Jesuits made the smart judicious decision to allow laity onto the board in collaboration with Jesuits.

Everything changed from that one decision. They chose laity wisely and laity brought their considerable skills, expertise and experience to bear on governing Boston College. And reversed the direction that it was headed. And now it certainly has a phenomenal theology department and has a great endowment and it's hard to get into. I mean they did a wonderful job. So Geoff had this in his memory and when he saw the news of the sex abuse crisis, he thought, I know nothing about sex abuse, but I know a lot about

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best managerial practices, about accountability, about utilizing the talents of laity in collaboration with religious and ordained. And thus Leadership Roundtable was born.

It focuses solely on the temporal affairs of the church, the management of people, facilities and finances. We do not weigh in on any doctrinal matters. We effectively stay clear of the neuralgic issues that tend to divide and separate us.

We are intentionally a network of leaders who are across the theological and political spectrum. But it is very difficult to tell whether we lean left or right and that is by intention. Now, anyone who knows me just off record knows where I lean on that theological spectrum, I'll leave you to guess. But, they put up with me anyway. But as a network, we are there to harness the collective expertise at our disposal. To be exemplary stewards on behalf of the Church of its resources. And again, and again throughout my life, what I've noticed is the most underappreciated underutilized resource is laity. And not laity because they can fill the collection basket but laity because they have extraordinary expertise and financial acumen and problem solving capability and entrepreneurial rigor. And when we recognize them for what they do best and invite them in service to the church, into strengthening our religious communities, our big communities, the consequences for them is evangelization.

They become much more deeply involved and invested in the life of the church. So, conscious of the time, I just went to a flag three other organizations. I won't go into detail about them, but they were important and may stimulate your own table discussion.

One that Raskob was very involved with from the beginning was EPS, Education for Parish Service. This was created by a sister Joan Bland, a sister of Notre Dame. Her observation was that many lay women in particular, but also lay men, but a preponderance of lay women were volunteering at the parish level to do important parish ministry. And they were commenting to her that they wish they had a more sophisticated command of basic theology, church history, scripture. So she created this whole program of formation for laity who were actively involved in the life of the church. And that's, I think a key to some of our discussions, is what are the avenues to adequately equip laity.

Another is ESTEEM. Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission. This is a national young adult leadership formation program in collaboration with Leadership Roundtable and Saint Thomas Moore at Yale. Two of my great loves. And it was observing this phenomenon that young adults who have a positive experience of church because they're at a Catholic college or they are fortunate to have a vibrant Newman Center as a non-Catholic College. They're actively involved in the life of the church. They have a positive view of it and then they graduate, they move to a city, they go to their neighboring parish if we're lucky. They even take that step and they find it so different than what they just left on campus.

And we often lose them. I've heard all of my life Kerry, don't worry, this is just the age. We'll lose them for a time. They'll come back when they want to get married, have a child or experienced a devastating life crisis. I finally said, "This is a bad strategy." And it's also just fundamentally unfair and isn't working because they're not necessarily getting married in the church. They're not necessarily desiring to baptize their children in the faith. And to wait until they have a devastating life crisis just seems cruel.

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So we formed a curriculum for a year that can be rolled out at the college level. It's not for college credit, but those participating universities across the country personally invite the best of the best. That those young adults who they know are eager and involved and active and have a lot of promise and they give them this yearlong curriculum, which is basically a crash course in what is a diocese, what are the avenues for lay leadership in the church?

And you'd be amazed that so many young adults think that they don't have a place, certainly in terms of leadership in the church unless they discern vocation to religious life or the priesthood. And we know that there are many opportunities and we are encouraging them through that program. Our vision for ESTEEM is to seek two young adults, meaning in their 20s, on every Catholic board from Villanova to the local soup kitchen. And then you change the landscape even visibly of the role of young adults in leadership.

And finally just a shout out to Catholic Women Preach, which has been created by one of our colleagues at FADICA, Betty Ann Donnelly. This was an observation that one contribution to the Catholic Church would be to provide a resource to ordained men who had to preach every Sunday, and give them an idea featuring theologically trained and formed women from all over the globe. It's in English, but it's translated into Spanish. So far that's the only translation.

And every week there is a new woman featured who is commenting, breaking open the word for the coming Sunday and important feast days. I can't tell you how many priests go to this site and tell me how helpful it has been, but it also illuminates for all people because many women who preach outside of the Eucharist, they're invited to run retreats, et cetera. How helpful this resource is. But it also is just filling and kind of fueling a need.

So collaboration is a key ingredient to the most effective and creative ministries. Across the whole of my life I've seen that. The importance of baptism and its rights and responsibilities, that is the tie that binds us. Catholics have risen to levels of influence and affluence in the US and count among the highest echelons of leadership across every sector. Many want to contribute what they do best to the church. We need to provide, we need to recognize that and invite it and provide the catalyst for that.

Diversity matters. Who is at the table of deliberations and decision making matters. It's important that we pay attention to who is at the tables of decision making. The more diverse, the better the analysis, the more accurate the analysis and the better the solution. It's very important to be a better steward of the resources at our disposal beyond just money. Laity are often overlooked and underutilized.

So I went a few minutes over the time that I had given myself, but I hope that that will just stimulate some of the discussion. Before we turn into our table discussions. Are there any questions at this point about what I said or any reactions? You probably take a few minutes if there are. Particularly if there's anything that wasn't clear.