

The **MAST** *Journal*

Symbols Central to Mercy Life

A Meditation on the Symbolic Utterance of Sisters of Mercy

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.

Constitutions as a Symbol of Mercy Life

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

Going Unto the Altar of God: A Glimpse of Mercy Rituals of Reception and Profession Today

Julie Upton, R.S.M.

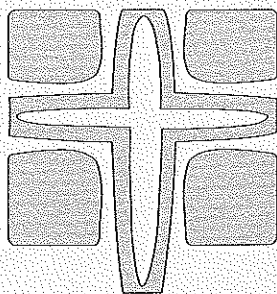
Matthew 25:31–46: A Parable of Righteous Mercy

Mary Criscione, R.S.M.

A Church's Inner Design as Symbol of Faith

Marilyn Morgan, R.S.M.

The Journal of the
Mercy Association in
Scripture and Theology



Vol. 10, No. 3
Fall 2000

Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

A woman's signature affixed to her profession of vows identifies her as party to a contract with God and with the church. The other signatures on the paper do not belong to people who give her permission to enter into the contract. Rather, they are witnesses to that fact that she is exercising her autonomy as a person who signs in her own name, as she integrates her several identities. As a member of the church, she makes her profession in a liturgical ceremony before her religious community. She announces her name as a woman who comes from a particular family, ethnic, and cultural heritage. Declaring the date and place of her vows locates her in earthly time as a citizen of a state and nation.

Women have not always had legal capacity to sign such covenants. In some ancient societies, women could not contract to hire a wet nurse or sell property unless the document stated the name of her male guardian. Without a father, brother, or husband to act as her guardian or *kyrios*, a woman might have to enlist a nephew. Despite centuries of social development, women's legal rights as wives, employees, and citizens have been slow to evolve. It was only in the lifetime of many current Sisters of Mercy that women obtained the right to vote in the U.S.A. in 1920. The signing of vows is an expression of a woman's status as a person. Her rights are those of ecclesial citizenship.

I do not know when it became the practice for Sisters of Mercy to publicly sign their vows. The historical moment is less significant than the contractual assertion itself. Religious life presents to a woman the power to initiate her own contract with God and the church. This contract is reciprocal, not univocal. The vows of a Sister do not express her private enterprise of reliance on God. Nor is her confidence in the church meant to be provisional as to time, dependent on the good will of a particular Pope or religious superior, or conditioned on a conservative or liberal season in the community's history.

For the woman who makes vows, her Sisters are witnesses, affirmers, advocates, and companions. They are also contractual parties with her. Their obligations to her are individuated and reciprocal. Sisters precedent in vows are not kyriarchal guardians of the vow maker, nor employers, nor politicians dispensing favors based on shifting terms of personal advantage. The signatory to vows is not the community's dependent minor, lessee, alien with an expirable visa, or a club member whose conduct is subject to annual review.

A community of women is meant to provide, in the name of the church, solid assurance to each vowed member that her declaration to God and to them will be held sacred as a contract. The ecclesial sisterhood agrees to protect the rights attendant on her lifelong commitment. They affirm it in both easy and difficult times. When male members of the church fail to embody this reciprocity, women reassert with greater force the church's fundamental agreement to stand at her side, protecting her commitment as their own.

A woman's signature on her vows records a sacred bond. Her vows express her contract with God and God's with her. They also make permanent the community's alliance with her to embody God's perseverance with them to the end of time.



Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Editor, *The MAST Journal*

A Meditation on the Symbolic Utterance of Sisters of Mercy

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.

The history of the Sisters of Mercy is a history of radiant public symbols: living persons, objects, events, and actions that by their symbolic character and presence proclaim the enduring and gracious mercy of God. Some of these symbols have remained constant in their vitality for 170 years; some have evolved into new symbolic forms; some have been newly retrieved from the past; and some await evolution or retrieval. Some are themselves orally mute, but nonetheless have voice. All have the graced potential to give public utterance to the central mysteries of God and, in that context, to the intended reality of our lives as Sisters of Mercy. Our very name—"of Mercy"—is such a symbol.

A Figurative Utterance of God's Promise

As a religious institute, our announced ecclesial purpose is to be the poetry and prophecy of the mysteries of God: to be a sustained metaphor of the Gospel, an abiding simile of the reign of God, an enduring symbol of the boundless love and mercy of God. Our communal purpose is thus to be a public, figurative utterance of God's promise to console and comfort our sisters and brothers in this world.

It is perhaps a measure of our recent collective poverty of imaginative symbolizing that when we and our colleagues in the church reflect on the symbols of religious life we think first, and perhaps only, of the religious habits most of us no longer wear. For well over a century, our Mercy religious habits spoke eloquently to some people, and in some places they may still speak eloquently. But the black dress, the coif, and the veil of former days were not even then the only or the most resonant of our symbolic utterances in the public sphere. Our habits had, it is true, the precious quality of public visibility, but by themselves they were not in the past, and cannot be now, a complete symbolic

utterance or an unambiguous statement of the realities of God's presence or of the deepest meanings of our lives as Sisters of Mercy. But what symbols have replaced or will replace our religious habits?

The task before us now, on the eve of the next 170 years of our corporate life, is renewed symbol-making and symbol-offering. Our present task is to discover, recover, make, remake, create and then utter in audible, visible, tangible ways the freshly radiant symbols of the inaudible, invisible, intangible realities of our purpose and meaning as Sisters of Mercy, whether these fresh and vital symbols turn out to be "old" or "new," and whether they are linguistic symbols (such as "of Mercy" in our name) or non-linguistic symbols (such as the character and location of the places where we live).

True Christian symbols are consistent, expres-

It is perhaps a measure of our recent collective poverty of imaginative symbolizing that when we and our colleagues in the church reflect on the symbols of religious life we think first, and perhaps only, of the religious habits most of us no longer wear.

sive, sensibly vivid incarnations of God's meanings in this world: they are light-giving sacramentals of God's gracious acts and commitments. Jesus of Nazareth was in his earthly life, death, and resurrection, and is now as the Christ, the absolute symbol of God, the only completely rendered symbol of

God's unconditional, merciful redemption of all creation. But we are called to follow Jesus in that symbolizing mission, however fragmentarily and partially, in total dependence on the sighs and groans of God's Spirit.¹

The Symbolic Expressions of Catherine McAuley and our Foremothers in Mercy

This is not a new task for us. From the very beginning Catherine McAuley and the first Sisters of Mercy were themselves symbolic utterances of God, and they created symbolic expressions of God's merciful presence among God's people. The resplendence of Catherine's very life in her own time, as well as the vivid memory of her life that still radiates among us, constitutes one of the most pregnant and enduring symbols of the life and mission of the Sisters of Mercy. The oft-told story of Catherine McAuley still speaks in our world, still calls, still invites, still prophetically declares the desires of God and the intended reality of her followers. Her public life was a Christian symbol in the 1830s, and the memory of her life remains an inexhaustible symbol for those who encounter her story and are moved by its luminous generosity. Her life-story itself has now become a sacramental, and her very name now symbolizes both God's merciful presence in the world and the aspirations of her disciples.

The resplendence of Catherine's
very life in her own time, as well
as the vivid memory of her life
that still radiates among us,
constitutes one of the most
pregnant and enduring symbols
of the life and mission of the
Sisters of Mercy.

The House of Mercy Catherine built on Baggot Street, her grave at Mercy International Centre, her silver ring, her portraits and statues: all these tangible realities are a silent, but public voice to

those who encounter them. They speak of a human life surrendered bravely and cheerfully to the mysterious call and promise of God. The accounts of her cloak, her priedieu, her worn shoes, the room in which she died, the candle she held as she lay dying, and the good cup of tea she offered for our comfort: all these perceptible objects have become symbols of the presence of God in her life and in our corporate life as her followers.

A living symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of intimate relationship or association. Some symbols, better called signs, are only accidental or merely conventional—simply superficial ciphers contrived to signal some reality, but not to stand for it in any existential way. Red, yellow, and green traffic lights are such signs—to be taken seriously, of course, but not experienced as conveying the intimate self of the sign maker.

True symbols are intimate expressions of the inner reality of the symbolizer, and they are, therefore, inexhaustible: there is always more to what they voice. And the "more" of truly religious symbols, however human and finite they appear to be, is always the hidden mysteries of God's voice and presence in union with the human reality of the symbolizer. Such symbols speak without speech, and reveal what is unspoken. In them we hear what is unvoiced, touch what is intangible, and see what is invisible. The Christian sacraments are such symbols of the redemptive activity of God and of the unalterable hope God's activity on the Cross has effected.

The simple bodily presence of Sisters of Mercy in the cholera hospital in Galway in 1849, and at the bedsides of wounded soldiers in Turkey and the Crimean Peninsula during the Crimean War; the sheer physical presence of Sisters of Mercy at the gate of the School of the Americas, and in Honduras during Hurricane Mitch; the perceptible presence of Sisters of Mercy at the United Nations, and in hospitals and all sorts of places where real people suffer: are not all these bodily presences radiant symbols of larger Godly realities, beyond the meager, but symbolically luminous facts of their presence?

Whether it is the silver ring on our finger, the Mercy Cross we wear, the gestures of our arms and hands, the places we choose to walk or stand, the actions we take, the new Morning and Evening Prayer we pray, the community meals we share, the vows document in our hands at death: are not all

these silent symbols expressive of our confidence in the reality of God's merciful love for all people and of the final reign of that love?

Are not the physical places we have created and where we minister—the schools, hospitals, storefronts, colleges, shelters, clinics, drop-in centers, prayer centers—are not these very buildings symbolic of the mysteries of God, sacramentals of God's persistent mercy, and visible tokens of God's unfailing love of all humankind?

The Visibility of Mercy Life

Many commentators have spoken of the recent "invisibility" of apostolic religious life. They may be only partially correct in their assessment. They may be looking for religious habits walking down the street or sitting on the bus or kneeling in a row in church. But they may also be pointing to a certain anonymity, a certain lack of public identity, a certain silence about ourselves—all of which are the humanly understandable consequences, though not necessary or desirable consequences, of changes over the last forty years in the church's often ambivalent theology about us, in the church's treatment of us, and in our own grasp of the essentials of our way of life. Our alleged "invisibility" has also been in some ways a self-protective, self-healing taking-cover—a temporary respite from full collaboration in the public mission of Jesus. After all, we say, even Jesus "took to the hills": "after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone" (Matt 14:23).

In her essay on "Community Living": Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., treats the problem of invisibility as a by-product of other choices.² Recognizing that community living can be "an especially eloquent sign of ecclesial community, that is, of the church's fundamental identity," she then notes: "Of course, being a sign of something implies a certain visibility. We have to ask: To what extent is our experience of community living visible? Who knows that sisters are present in an apartment building, a neighborhood, or a parish, and what does it say to them?"³ The loss of visibility of place, for example, is no small matter:

At one time most local communities were associated with parishes. The parish convent and the sisters in

residence there were a symbol of the compassionate face of the church, a center of hospitality and help in time of need, and a witness to the reality of our way of life. Today there is no common venue where we are present. For those who would like to know more about us, there is no place to "look" for us.⁴

Gottemoeller concludes with a central, difficult question: "How does our way of life give visible witness to simplicity, communal sharing, prayer, love for one another, zeal for the gospel?"⁵

Sociologist Patricia Wittberg, S.C., raises similar questions about the necessity of visibility at the congregational level: "A congregation without a clearly articulated, visible, and collective goal will not survive as a group, although its members may continue to perform valuable services as individuals."⁶ Nor, Wittberg argues, can a handful of members carry the "visibility" for the whole group: "If religious are to be the virtuosi whose lives articulate a spiritual response to our culture's most basic strains and discontinuities, then there will have to be a fairly large number of them. A small group is simply not visible enough to make the kind of societal impact that would need to be made."⁷

But the fact of the matter is that, even if we tried to be so, we cannot be invisible or inaudible—so long as we are in the body. The question is, rather, how will we be visible, what of us will we let be audible, what symbols of ourselves will we express in our space and time?

To what extent is our experience of community living visible? Who knows that sisters are present in an apartment building, a neighborhood, or a parish, and what does it say to them?

Symbols and the Realities of God

The symbols of our lives function as symbolic reality both for ourselves and for others. Our own selves are enfleshed in them; they are the continuation of our bodily nature. If these symbols are true of us and we are truly in them, with little or no gap between appearance and reality, they express who

and what we are. They can then be for us tangible reminders of our deepest convictions and intentions. They can then also be for others a public testimony to our faith, love, and hope; to our commitment in faith, love, and hope; and to the God who is the object and guarantor of our faith, love, and hope. Our symbolic reality is then our own self-realization, put out there in the public sphere for others to perceive and query.

What our symbols can utter are the Spirit's convictions hidden in our hearts: the reality of God's

Only the Spirit of God can
inspire others to explore,
experience, and perhaps even
comprehend the sacramentals
that we are—by the grace of
God. But none of this reception
can occur if we are not “out
there” in perceptible ways.

presence and transcendence; the faithfulness and mercifulness of God; the truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel; the indestructible power of God's compassion and inclusivity in the resurrection of Jesus; the hope and joy and endurance of God's promise; and our own human desire and effort to live in the strength of these realities.

We cannot compel others to understand and embrace what our symbols say. Only the Spirit of God can inspire others to explore, experience, and perhaps even comprehend the sacramentals that we are—by the grace of God. But none of this reception can occur if we are not “out there” in perceptible ways.

For example, if we could normally identify ourselves as “Sisters of Mercy”; if we could usually wear our Mercy cross in public; if we could speak of God and Christ at the bedsides of the dying; if we could stand up in situations of injustice; if we could bend down in situations of great suffering; if we could evince in all circumstances the bedrock joy of God's love for humankind; if we could somehow, in some way, symbolize the compassion and mercy of God

wherever we are; if we could be, somehow, bodily symbols of what in reality we trust we are: the beloved and redeemed of God—then we could even more profoundly “serve the poor, the sick, and the ignorant” in their deepest and most lonely need.

If our communities could, by their very appearance and character, say, even without words, that we are “houses of mercy”; if our properties, and stationery, and press releases could give a perceptible clue to the nature of the Life that underlies them; if we could look and sound like something deeper than corporate businesses or professional associations or career women; if our true life could be less hidden from the public—then we could hope to do for them more manifestly what our Constitutions say we wish to do: “to follow Jesus Christ in his compassion for suffering people” (art. 2); “to proclaim the gospel to all nations” (art. 3); “to witness to Christ's mission” (art. 5); “to witness to mercy” (art. 8); “to contemplate the Divine Presence in ourselves, in others and in the universe” (art. 9); “to discover God's movement in us and in our world,” and to “intercede for ourselves and for others” (art. 10).

“Bearing Some Resemblance to Christ”

While she did not explicitly speak of the symbolic character of our lives as Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley was implicitly aware of the nonverbal utterance of God that we are or can be. The Limerick Manuscript, in speaking of her instructions to the first Sisters of Mercy, notes:

her desire to resemble our Blessed Lord which was her daily resolution and the lesson she constantly repeated. “Be always striving,” she would say, “to make yourselves like your Heavenly Spouse; you should try to resemble Him in some one thing at least, so that any person who sees you may be reminded of His holy life on earth.”⁸

Catherine clearly thought of our lives as having the potential to be symbolic “reminders” of the great mystery of God's goodness, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the chapter of her Rule on “Union and Charity”—the chapter that represented for her the central public characteristic of communities of the Sisters of Mercy—she writes:

This mutual love, our Blessed Savior desires, may be so perfect as to resemble in some manner the

Love and Union which subsists between Himself and His Heavenly Father . . . and by this [his followers] were to prove themselves to be really His Disciples.⁹

While a symbol is never equivalent to the spiritual reality it represents, there can be enough of a likeness to it, a "resemblance" in some unmistakable way, that the reality itself is somehow pointed to and invoked. It was Catherine's spiritual genius to recognize this potential for symbolizing utterance and to urge her sisters to deliberate care of the metaphoric quality and symbolic character of their lives. Our bodies, the capacities of our bodies, and the gestures, silences, and material extensions of our bodies speak, willy-nilly, and it was Catherine's desire that this speaking constitute "some resemblance" to the love of God expressed in Jesus, to the faith we proclaim, and to the hope that is the world's greatest consolation. Writing to Elizabeth Moore on Easter Monday 1841 she was eager that

God impart to us all some portion of those precious gifts and graces which our Dear Redeemer has purchased by His bitter sufferings—that we may endeavor to prove our love and gratitude, by bearing some resemblance to Him, copying some of the lessons He has given us during His mortal life, particularly those of His passion.¹⁰

To "bear some resemblance" to Jesus, and so to the central mystery of God, is to be a true disciple and to acknowledge the symbolizing vocation of disciples. It is a confessional utterance, a declaring of one's faith and trust in the very way one lives and acts. The church, at least in the West, has never, to my knowledge, given the title "Confessor" to a woman, having reserved this identification for male saints who were not martyrs, but who bore "witness to the Christian faith by word and deed."¹¹ Yet the Sisters of Mercy, no less than other Christians, lay and clerical, are

To "bear some resemblance" to
Jesus, and so to the central
mystery of God, is to be a true
disciple and to acknowledge the
symbolizing vocation of
disciples.

called to be "confessors," to give "an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15), in words and, in the absence of words, by forms, practices, actions, and gestures that "resemble" (and therefore evoke memories of) the ways of God. And so, in the symbols of our lives, we invite others to "look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:18).

The Care and Creation of Symbols

Symbols do not acquire long-term radiance of meaning unless they are endowed with some temporal permanence or quasi-permanence, both in themselves and in their allusiveness. One cannot "decide" that today daisies will stand for happiness, but tomorrow they will stand for dependence on God (unless of course there is a history of multivalent meanings, including these, associated with daisies). Nor can one "decide" that tomorrow violets, not daisies, will stand for happiness. Symbols are like a pebble thrown into a pond: the ripples of meaning will keep coming for a long time, but will always be related to the impact of the same pebble. This is why a history of symbolic meaning should not be lightly abandoned; it takes time to build the significance of a new symbol, whereas the "old" symbol may still be "rippling" and luminous.

For example, we may have lost, through unwitting or deliberate abandonment, though perhaps not permanently, a powerful communal symbol that held meaning in most parts of the Mercy world for at least 130 years: a certain Good Friday custom instituted by Catherine McAuley. The biography of Catherine in the Bermondsey Annals tells us:

She had for many years of her life fasted on Good Friday without taking any refreshment whatever, until she became a Religious, and then she conformed to the custom which she established for the Community, of taking a little bread and gruel standing.¹²

This communal gesture of solemn restraint spoke for well over a century to Sisters of Mercy, and might still speak to them and to their friends, coworkers, and employees, about what it means to say that we are "founded on Calvary, there to serve a crucified Redeemer,"¹³ and that "we are disciples of a crucified Redeemer."¹⁴ Reverence for the Good Friday

hours of the Paschal mystery is necessary to our renewed realization of their utterly gratuitous culmination in the Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost realities. The bodily symbol of standing as one eats has longstanding biblical associations, and Catherine's choice of this custom reflects not only her instinct about the necessity of bodily representation of what we believe, but also her own exquisite identification with suffering:

Feeling as she did so sensibly for the sufferings of her fellow creatures, her compassion for those endured by our Blessed Lord was extreme, so much so that it was a real pain to her, as she once told a Sister in confidence, to meditate on that subject.¹⁵

My goal in this essay is not to advocate any particular symbol of our lives as Sisters of Mercy, but to lift up for our communal meditation the truth that we are, as human beings and as Christians, symbol-receiving, symbol-making, and symbol-offering people whose public visibility will speak in one way or another, whether we intend so to speak or not. Hence, our great need to care for our symbolizing that it may be truly emblematic of our deepest desires and convictions of faith, hope, and love.

In the essays which follow, on the Mercy Rituals of Reception and Profession and on the Constitutions as a symbol of Mercy life, the authors examine in detail two major symbols of our way of life. The ceremonial gestures by which we symbolize our decision to become Sisters of Mercy, and the most solemn document of our lives precisely as Sisters of Mercy, the symbol which both shapes us and is shaped by us: both of these are visible public utterances, not solely in their words, but in their character as a radiant symbolic action and object.

The Radiance of Good Example

For many years we endeavored to lead a "hidden" life, believing or being told that that was the best way to serve God and the gospel, and there is a sense in which that conviction still remains partially true. Catherine's personal preference and teaching was no doubt born of her own very gritty public experience: "She taught them to love the hidden life, laboring on silently for God alone, for she had a great dislike to noise and show in the performance of duties."¹⁶ Much of our lives is purified, healed, and

deepened in hiddenness, and there is true "resemblance" to Christ in that silence and privacy.

But the present state of humankind and of the church, and the sufferings of the people of this world and of Earth herself, now call us out of hiddenness into utterance and visibility, into strong clear symbols of identification, compassion, action, and advocacy—or, in Catherine's words, into example. Catherine McAuley, we are told, taught "more by her example than by words" and her lessons were always supported "by her own unvarying example."¹⁷ Exemplifying what she believed was her mode of symbolizing, for, as she explained, "the good example which we give by leading a most holy and Christian life has the greatest power over the minds of others." Thus "we should do first what we would induce others to do," for "the way to virtue, and to piety, is shorter by example than by precept."¹⁸

When we hang the Institute Direction Statement in our classrooms; when we share the Institute Action Plan, 1999–2005 with coworkers; when we

The present state of humankind
and of the church, and the
sufferings of the people of this
world and of Earth herself, now
call us out of hiddenness into
utterance and visibility, into
strong clear symbols of
identification, compassion,
action, and advocacy

explain our Mercy Cross to patients we attend; when we tell young women about "Project 1831" and our desire to found thirty-one new Houses of Mercy; when we invite our neighbors in for Evening Prayer; and when we offer countless other gestures, actions, objects, and events to those beyond our doors, we are laying human symbols of our lives visibly before them in the hope that these symbols may speak to them of God, of Christ, and of our profound desire to live as servants of God's mercifulness.

The enduring public symbols of Mercy life are those made visible to the wide human company of all who encounter them, in various places in the world and at various times. Sisters of Mercy going house to house during typhus epidemics in London and the United States, nursing in military hospitals in the American Civil War, following Irish emigrants on long sea voyages to Australia and New Zealand, working in refugee camps and prisons, living and ministering among oppressed people—these and thousands of other Mercy actions over the past 170 years remain in our memory as strong radiant symbols of what it has meant and still means to be a Sister of Mercy.

The enduring public symbols of Mercy life are those made visible to the wide human company of all who encounter them, in various places in the world and at various times.

"Small" Symbols of God's Presence

But in our history over these same years there have always been countless "smaller," more private symbols of God's mercifulness offered quietly to God's people wherever any Sister of Mercy has held the hand of a dying person, brought joy to a neglected child, written a letter to console someone, helped a man who came to the door, visited a lonely woman, or done any of the countless gospel acts that "resemble" Jesus' ministry. Most, if not all, of these private symbols of God's compassionate presence have been perceptible only to the person served.

I would therefore like to conclude this meditation on the symbolic utterance of the Sisters of Mercy by looking at one little-known symbolic act of Catherine McAuley—a gift she gave to a child.

In Carlow, Catherine evidently got to know young Fanny Warde, Frances Warde's niece, the child, possibly, of Frances's older brother William who had died in Wakefield, England in 1839.¹⁹ How old young Fanny was when her mother came to live in Ireland I do not know, but I suspect she was only five or six. Writing to Frances Warde on November

24, 1840, Catherine enclosed a broach and a poem for little Fanny. The poem, which Catherine titled "Little Fanny Warde," reads as follows:

*Though this is very dear to me
For reasons strong and many
I give it with fond love to Thee,
My doat'y "little Fanny."
Six kisses too from out my heart
So sweet tho' from a Granny,
With one of them you must not part
My doat'y—"little Fanny."
What shall I wish, now let me see
Which I wish, most of any
That you—a nice good child shall be
My doat'y—"little Fanny."²⁰*

"Doat'y" is evidently Catherine's version of "doating" which can mean "exceedingly fond," or of "doughty" or "douty" which means "capable, worthy, virtuous, valiant, brave."²¹ But the deepest significance of this symbol is revealed in two sentences Catherine writes near the end of her letter to Frances Warde. She says: "I promised my little Fanny a broach to fasten her collar and six kisses on the back. It was my dear Mary Teresa's."²² Catherine's beloved niece Mary Teresa Macauley had died at Baggot Street in 1833.

There are many large-scale ecclesial symbols in the history of the Sisters of Mercy, public gifts to the whole church, such as the Institute itself, but there are also innumerable small sacrificial symbols in this history, symbolic acts of love whose full meaning may be perceived by only a few. Little Fanny Warde received this broach as a symbol of a "Granny's" love, but also, we can imagine, as a sign that a great Love was in the world and cared for her like a Granny. Only God, and to some extent Frances Warde, knew the depth of Catherine's love for Mary Teresa, and thus the full human weight of this symbolic gift.

We have in our hands the large and small symbolic broaches of God's love and mercy, endowed by our past joys and griefs, but even more by God's merciful healing of all grief in the joy of Christ's resurrection. May we, like Catherine, have the public courage and simplicity to offer these radiant symbols of God's presence to the world.



Notes

- 1 A modern theology of Christian symbolizing has been fully argued by Karl Rahner, especially in his essay, "The Theology of the Symbol" in *Theological Investigations* 4:221–52 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966). Without attempting to summarize Rahner's metaphysics of the symbol, its basis in his philosophical anthropology, or its extension in his theological anthropology, I have relied on his analysis in the present essay. However, Rahner is obviously not responsible for any ways in which I may have misinterpreted his intricate arguments and distinctions. His theology of the symbol fully supports, it seems to me, our contemporary theologies of the sacraments, of sacramentals, and of the significance of the ecclesial profession of religious vows.
- 2 Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., "Community Living: Beginning the Conversation," *Review for Religious* 58 (March–April 1999): 137–49.
- 3 Gottemoeller, p. 142.
- 4 Gottemoeller, pp. 145–46.
- 5 Gottemoeller, p. 148.
- 6 Patricia Wittberg, S.C., *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 90.
- 7 Wittberg, p. 97.
- 8 Mary Vincent Harnett, "The Limerick Manuscript," in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 181.
- 9 Rule 8.1, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 303.
- 10 Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M., *The Letters of Catherine McAuley, 1827–1841* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), p. 330.
- 11 Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), p. 23.
- 12 Mary Clare Moore, "The Bermondsey Annals," in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 117.
- 13 Rule II. 6.2, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 323.
- 14 Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, art. 14.
- 15 Moore, "The Bermondsey Annals," in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 117. The sister to whom Catherine spoke in confidence may have been Mary Clare Moore herself, or her sister Mary Clare Augustine Moore.
- 16 Ibid., p. 110.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 "Spirit of the Institute," in Neumann, *The Letters of Catherine McAuley*, p. 391.
- 19 Kathleen Healy, R.S.M., *Frances Warde: American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 84. However, Healy indicates that William Warde's young children were named Mary and James. Sister Mary Paul Xavier Warde, Frances Warde's grandniece, says that Fanny Warde was her own aunt, the sister of her father John Warde and Frances Warde's niece. Fanny may have been the child of Frances's brother Daniel, or possibly of her brother John. Healy says that Daniel "seems to have sought a career in Dublin but no record of his future is extant" (13) and that John, Frances's "favorite brother," died while preparing for the priesthood at Maynooth College (16). Healy also indicates that Frances's "two nieces, Jane and Fanny Warde," came later to Pittsburgh, and were enrolled, between 1846 and 1852, "at Mt. St. Vincent Academy and completed their studies at St. Xavier Academy" and that their brother John, Mary Paul Xavier Warde's father, married in Pittsburgh. The identity of young Fanny Warde's father is thus unclear.
- 20 Autograph manuscript, Archives of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Silver Spring, Maryland.
- 21 In a typescript she prepared of this poem, Mary Paul Xavier Warde, who spells the word "doat'g," says the word means "darling." However, in Catherine McAuley's handwriting the word appears to be "doat'y." The OED is only indirectly helpful in sorting out this word and its exact meaning. Catherine often used her own spelling of words.
- 22 Mary Angela Bolster, ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827–1841* (Cork: Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Dioceses of Cork and Ross, 1989), p. 170.

THE MAST JOURNAL, begun in 1990, is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Sisters Eloise Rosenblatt, Editor (Burlingame), Doris Gottemoeller (Cincinnati), Kathleen McAlpin (Merion), Carol Rittner (Dallas), Mary Sullivan (Rochester), and Patricia Talone (Merion). Subscriptions correspondence to Marilee Howard, R.S.M. (Auburn), Managing Editor, at 740 41st Street, Sacramento, CA 95819, e-mail mhoward@chw.edu. Editorial correspondence to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., at 1121 Starbird Circle #4, San Jose, CA 95117, e-mail erosen1121@cs.com. Layout, design, and printing by BIBAL Press, an imprint of D. & F. Scott Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 821653, North Richland Hills, TX 76182. Back issues at \$5.00 may be ordered from BIBAL Press at (888) 788-2280 or sales@dfscott.com.

Constitutions as Symbol of Mercy Life

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

In the beginning, the Spirit moved over the waters of Catherine's heart, and the small community of Mercy was born. We know its history well. Catherine was "convinced Almighty God required her to make some lasting efforts for the relief of the suffering and instruction of the ignorant."¹ As the women of mercy moved out to the poor and sick "with hearts

novitiate at Georges' Hill, and with their profession on 12 December 1831 the Religious Sisters of Mercy became a reality.

Why were Catherine and her first companions so intent on having formal approval of the church for the works of mercy they were already engaged in? She had been reluctant to take on the identity of becoming a religious community, since she un-

Since as humans we exist as
spirit-mind-body persons, the materiality of
our being both expresses who we are and
makes of us interpreters of all the world
around us.

centered in God," their life took on the look of a conventual group. What they had begun at Baggot Street astonished their friend Archbishop Murray, who declared he had had no idea of a convent springing up of itself. But he supported their discernment that the works should have stability.² For that, they would need approval of the church. Their search through all the rules then available led them to choose that of the Presentation Sisters as most compatible with their emerging charism. The first three women made their

derstood the stricture of enclosure to belong to its essence. When finally she was led by the Spirit to discern that their identity was meant to be a public and ecclesial one, she willingly engaged in the shaping of a constitutions that would authentically express what they had become. Papal approval of this document conferred on the group a particular identity as women of the church, vowed by public consecration to a distinctive way of following Jesus Christ and to bearing a visible witness to a deep, personal experience of Christ.³

Since as humans we exist as spirit-mind-body persons, the materiality of our being both expresses who we are and makes of us interpreters of all the world around us. We create signs and symbols to convey meaning, which are interpreted by others who read the meaning. Thus the communal aspect of humanity binds us by our use of visible symbols, rituals, gestures, language. In the important symbols we craft our identity, and bear witness to who we are.⁴

Language is one of these symbols. But language, oral or written, is never static. A text comes to life when the reader becomes involved in it and can be influenced by it.⁵ Thus,

The rule and constitutions provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship in accordance with a specific charism confirmed by the church. A greater regard for the rule will not fail to offer consecrated persons a reliable criterion in their search for appropriate forms of a witness which is capable of responding to the needs of the times without departing from an institute's initial inspiration.⁶

First Phase: Life as Criterion for Rule

Since the first Sisters of Mercy didn't have a rule of their own

that would be a tangible symbol of their new life, the Archbishop suggested living by the Presentation chapter on "Union and Charity" until they could revise the Presentation Rule satisfactorily. Thus the content of that chapter became and remains a core expression of the essence of what they had become.

In 1833, the Reverend J[ohn] Rice, a venerable Augustinian Friar, brother to the holy man who founded the Christian Brothers in Ireland, on his way to Rome visited the convent in Baggot St., and being much pleased with what he saw, asked if he could render any service to the Institute. Our Reverend Mother told him how anxious she was to receive the formal approbation of the Holy See, and he promised to remember her wishes.⁷

Catherine sent to Rome two original chapters which she had composed for the new rule, on the visitation of the sick and the protection of distressed women. On 24 March 1835, the *Decretum laudis* not only gave formal approval for the community itself and for the two new chapters, but praised their works of helping the poor, the sick, and distressed women, adding, "from an institute of this kind, the greatest benefit will result both in civil society and to religion."⁸

It took six or seven years to draw up a new rule. During that time, they meticulously went over significant changes and made many omissions necessary to shape the Presentation text to their life. Since it had to be an authentic external expression of the charism that was already alive in the group, Catherine did not want to ask a confirmation

from Rome until they had "reduced it to practice,"⁹ until it should truly convey in a clearly recognizable form what their Mercy life had become under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "Many alterations cost [Catherine] immense labor and incessant prayer. She often observed to the Sisters, that every word of the Rule they practiced was the fruit of prayer."¹⁰ Archbishop Murray carefully revised Catherine's text with her approbation. This first version of the original Rule and Constitutions, states Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., is "the most comprehensive written expression of Catherine's thought now available."¹¹ A fair copy was sent to Rome in late

Second Phase: Rule as Criterion for life

For about eighty years, each convent of Mercy lived by the same Rule. New generations of sisters learned the way of life by contemplating and practicing it according to this Rule. This movement is analogous to what happens in the Gospels: the early Christians experienced the risen Jesus in their midst, and out of their communal reflection on this experience the Gospels were written. Then later Christians, we among them, contemplate these Gospels, internalize their spirit, and come to the same experience of the risen Jesus present among us.¹³ Likewise, Pope Pius XII enunciated very simply a basic

Pope Pius XII enunciated very simply a basic principle about the twofold effect of liturgy: it expresses the authentic prayer of the church, and it also teaches the community of believers how to pray.

1839 or early 1840, accompanied by letters from each of the bishops of the dioceses where the sisters served. In July 1840, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith unanimously favored it and sent it to Pope Gregory XVI. On June 6, 1841, just five months before Catherine's death, the pope granted full approval, and the Sisters of Mercy became publicly incorporated into the church's ministry.¹² The Rule stood as tangible symbol of this reality.

principle about the twofold effect of liturgy: it expresses the authentic prayer of the church, and it also teaches the community of believers how to pray.¹⁴ Analogously, as Catherine and the first sisters composed the Rule as an expression of their way of life, so later members came to learn and internalize the spirit of that charism by the faithful practice of the Rule.

Foundational documents were not meant to crystallize forms and practices so that they

became unchangeable. They were meant to express clearly the faith-vision of the group and to express the ways that could assure continuity. . . . Internalized by each member, constitutions were a guarantee of the evangelical quality of the life and service of the community.¹⁵

The constitutions or rule of life of a community mediates the faith-vision of its founder to subsequent generations; this is clearly the aim of Catherine and the first community who were so concerned for the continuity of the works of mercy beyond their personal lifetimes.

In 1918, the massive accumulation of canon law was codified. Canons pertaining to religious were to be inserted into the rules and constitutions. These canons reduced all women of "ac-

ing it as sacred next to the scriptures, the attitude of sisters of my vintage was formed.

Third Phase: Renewal of Life as Criterion for Renewal of Constitutions

Then came the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit through the doors of Vatican II, after which the church will never be the same. The grounding of our lives—in the gospel of Jesus Christ, our particular charism, and the signs of the times—was to be re-expressed in a new constitutions. For some who had entered before Vatican II (1963–1965), this was a challenging and in some respects an upsetting adventure; the external lodestone, so held in honor, was taken away.

In 1918, the massive accumulation of canon law was codified. Canons pertaining to religious were to be inserted into the rules and constitutions . . . The constitutions then became an awkward juxtaposition of legal terminology and the original inspirational wording.

tive" congregations to the same category, thus effectively wiping out the consideration of specific charisms. The constitutions then became an awkward juxtaposition of legal terminology and the original inspirational wording. When I entered the novitiate, we revered this text by reading it in chapel on our knees. By treat-

Individual congregations began to make individual, none-too-successful attempts at writing new constitutions. Sisters who came in the wake of the change experienced twenty years or more of having no stable rule to live by. And we lived together. Soon we realized that a united effort was needed.

One of the effects of this great upheaval, which cleared the ground for new beginnings, was a rediscovery and growing enthusiasm for the Mercy charism, our special gift in the church given for others. Catherine McAuley emerged as a real person in our collective consciousness. Studies and contemplation of her spirituality nourished our spirit, workshops explored the implications of our charism in relation to the signs of the times, new books appeared. In the spring of 1980, a meeting was called at Bethesda, Maryland, to which a sister from each of the American congregations was invited. The purpose was to begin working on a common constitutions. Many meetings, many congregational consultations, and many drafts later, based on much prayer, a text was produced that could be offered to Rome as a symbol of the reality of contemporary Mercy life.

We came to realize that we were doing what Catherine and the first sisters had done, but with the advantage of our wondrous heritage to build on. We were reflecting on the essence of Mercy life and trying to express it in a form that would be both true to our charism, contemporary in authentic theology, and sensitive to the needs of our times.

Meanwhile, the movement toward a united congregation was growing toward fruition, and in July 1991, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas came into being. On the 12th of December of that same year, 160 years after our founding in Dublin, the Constitutions of the new Institute was formally approved.¹⁶

Fourth Phase: Revised Constitutions as Criterion for Mercy Life

The hermeneutic circle continues. As written text, religious constitutions comprise three forms of literature: proclamation of beliefs and convictions which constitute the specific charism; canonical norms for action, such as conditions for membership, rights, and duties of members, responsibilities and powers of those in authority; and exhortatory statements which portray the ideals to which we aspire. The task of interpretation binds together the whole membership as interpreters, the text and tradition being interpreted, and those for whom the interpretation is intended.

All are involved in a cyclic movement of interaction not only with the text but with the lived experience that produced the text; in turn, the lived experience of those who receive and carry on the tradition echoes and is revitalized by the text.¹⁷

We, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas have proclaimed:

In living these Constitutions we express fidelity to our vocation.

We rely on God, on the support of one another and on the long tradition established by Catherine McAuley

to serve the needy with courage and compassion.¹⁸

With the ecclesial authentication of these constitutions, we are challenged anew to become thoroughly familiar with their content, like Mary to treasure in our

hearts what this external symbol stands for, and to express the charism in our current lives with all the depth of commitment and spiritual energy that is the heritage of our tradition.



Notes

- 1 Mary Clare Moore, R.S.M., "Annals of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Bermondsey, 1841," in Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 102.
- 2 "Seeing us increase so rapidly, and all going on in the greatest order almost of itself, great anxiety was expressed to give it stability. We who began were prepared to do whatever was recommended . . . for the purpose of firmly establishing it." Letter from Catherine McAuley to Elizabeth Moore, 13 January 1839, in M. Angela Bolster, R.S.M., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1989), p. 84.
- 3 Cf. David F. O'Connor, "The Public and Witness Dimension of Religious Life," *Review for Religious* 46 (Sept.-Oct. 1987), p. 663.
- 4 Cf. Mary Collins, OSB, "Spirituality Needs a Body," *The Way Supplement* No. 94 (Fall 1999), 54-68.
- 5 Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), p. 78.
- 6 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata, Apostolic Exhortation*, No. 37, March 25, 1996, in *Origins* 25 (April 4, 1996).
- 7 Moore, op. cit., p. 113.
- 8 Bolster, op. cit., p. 17.
- 9 Letter from Catherine McAuley to M. Angela Dunne, Charleville, 20 January 1841, in Bolster, op. cit., p. 193.
- 10 "Reverend Mother often said that every word of the rule was the result of prayer as were also those retrenchments she made in some parts of the Presentation Rule." Mary Vincent Harnett, *Life of Rev. Mother Catherine McAuley* (Dublin: Fowler, 1864), p. 90. Quoted in Austin Carroll, R.S.M., *Life of Catherine McAuley* (New York: Sadlier, 1877), p. 239.
- 11 Sullivan, op. cit., p. 258. After 1918, the terminology of "Rule and Constitutions" designated a Part I as "Rule" and Part II, the government, as "Constitutions." The current term "Constitutions" refers to the whole.
- 12 Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 259-285. This study is the most detailed and comprehensive presentation of the phases which the formation of the Rule went through.
- 13 David M. Stanley, S.J., "Contemplation of the Gospels, Ignatius Loyola, and the Contemporary Christian," *Theological Studies* (September 1968), 417-443; also Werner G. Jeanrond, op. cit., p. 180.
- 14 Pius XII, *Mediator Dei, Encyclical on the Sacred Liturgy*, 20 November 1947, passim.
- 15 Mary Milligan, R.S.H.M., "Charism and Constitutions," *The Way Supplement* No. 36 (Summer 1979), 51.
- 16 Decree of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Prot.n. B 220-1/91, Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, p. 31.
- 17 Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J., and Kathleen Hughes, R.S.C.J., "Constitutional Hermeneutics: On the Interpretation of Constitutions," *Review for Religious* 45 (Jan.-Feb. 1986), 64.
- 18 Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (1991), #83.

Going Unto the Altar of God

A Glimpse of Mercy Rituals of Reception and Profession Today

Julie Upton, R.S.M., Ph.D.

Our discussions of Mercy Rituals of Incorporation date back to the very beginnings of *The Mast Journal* with an essay entitled "Ritual and Symbolism in Religious Communities," which appeared in the February 1990 issue of *Mercy Life*, intended to serve as a discussion-starter that would launch the journal the following year. A 1991 article that appeared in this journal was entitled "Rituals for This New Day," but its narrow perspective betrays the fact that it was written in the last century. It is now ten years later, and with the added decade's gift of technology, our present discussion benefits from a worldwide consultation, giving us a global perspective on the subject for the first time.¹ Also, in 1998 the Institute Leadership Conference approved a set of common Rituals of Incorporation for use across the Institute, which are referenced throughout this article.²

Understanding Ritual

Before we delve into the subject at hand, there are a few concepts that need to be developed, because when theologians discuss rituals, we have something quite specialized in mind, using the constructs made available through the study of theological anthropology. Anthropologists have observed that for human beings time is neither homogeneous nor continuous, but either sacred or profane, and that by means of special rites, one can pass from profane time to sacred time.³ One way to imagine this is as two parallel realms, since sacred and profane time have a continuity of their own. Rather than sacred incursions into profane time, then, rituals are actual passages from one realm to the other.

Profane time is that realm of ordinary temporal duration during which one engages in acts that have no particular religious significance. This is the time during which most of our day-to-day affairs

are conducted. Sacred or heirophanic time, by contrast, is qualitatively different and may be understood as: the time during which ritual takes place; mythical or significant time that is retained by a ritual; or that time during which one is acutely aware of the rhythms of the cosmos.⁴ These qualities of heirophanic time allow it to be indefinitely recoverable and infinitely repeatable.⁵

Sacred time or heirophanic time, as mentioned earlier, is made accessible to us by means of rituals—organized patterns of words, symbols and actions, which enable us to be immersed in that sacred, indestructible time, to celebrate for ourselves and hand on to others our understanding of reality. This immersion allows us to deepen our experience of the sacred time or sacred events, and to carry that heightened awareness back into profane time, consequently altering our experience of profane time. Although not a ritual, per se, a beautiful sunset can move a person from profane time into the realm of sacred time. There the person is refreshed, relaxed, and allowed to revel in the majesty and magnificence of creation. Regardless of how subtle the transformation, the person returns to profane time changed, if only temporarily. The religious system, therefore, allows us to do the impossible—to transcend the overwhelming sense

Anthropologists have observed that for human beings time is neither homogeneous nor continuous, but either sacred or profane, and that by means of special rites, one can pass from profane time to sacred time.

of transience and stop time. Simultaneously, it allows for the possibility of using such an experience for future growth.

Because they offer us a means of transcending profane time, rituals have a sacred quality and need to be approached as such. Theologians and anthropologists view rituals as means for plunging humans into primordial time. The time of origin of a reality has a paradigmatic value and function, by giving one a sense of rootedness, a purpose for being, and an opportunity to contact the ground of that reality's being. Mercy rituals of reception and profession, for example, take us back to mid-nineteenth century Ireland where Catherine McAuley and her companions founded our congregation in their vowing to persevere in this way of life. Without our consciously intending for this to happen, it happens. Ritual takes us there.

**Because they offer us a means
of transcending profane time,
rituals have a sacred quality and
need to be approached as such.**

This year the people in our parish were asked to bring last year's blessed palm to Mass on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. At the conclusion of each Eucharistic celebration, the entire congregation processed outside the church to burn the palm in a huge cauldron. The pastor urged us to put into the cauldron all that we wanted God to help burn away in us this Lent. Many stood praying and watching the flames leap up, burning away our dross. Because he knows I am a liturgical theologian, the pastor told me what happened at an earlier Mass that day. While people stood quietly praying, he noticed that the two altar servers spontaneously began to do an Irish step dance around the cauldron. The children, unencumbered by concerns about what others might think, were immersed in primordial time.

Victor Turner, who specialized in the study of religious anthropology, delineated specific elements which constitute those rituals that enable

one to pass from the profane to the sacred time dimension. Action and awareness are experienced as a merged flow, as nondualistic, which is made possible by centering one's attention on a limited stimulus field. Consequently, one experiences a loss of ego, and finds oneself in control of both one's actions and one's environment. The ritual usually contains coherent, noncontradictory demands for action, while providing clear, unambiguous feedback to one's actions. Finally, the ritual is autotelic in that it has no goals or rewards apart from itself.⁶ These rituals or flow experiences, as Turner refers to them, both protect and express the very truths which liberate individuals from their status incumbencies. The rituals, therefore, actually free the participants to contemplate, to pray, to speculate, and even to invent.⁷

It is a mistake to presume that these rituals merely repeat the ritual that preceded them. Rather, one is linked to the other and continues it, giving a more cyclic quality of liturgical time. In other words, by professing our vows as Sisters of Mercy we do not merely repeat what Catherine McAuley and her first companions in Mercy did; we actually continue what she did by linking our promise to hers. This means that the individual is ever able to deepen the awareness and experience of sacred time, because the ritual itself both allows and encourages this possibility.

Rituals in the Mercy Community

Our rituals of reception and profession in the Mercy community plunge us into sacred time and immerse us in the experience of our sisters who trod this road before us. Because our Mercy rituals have always been rooted in the rites of the Church, however, differences in rituals over the course of time reflect changes in the liturgy celebrated by the Church. Those who entered the community prior to 1970, for example, were received and professed using rituals different from the ones we celebrate today. Following the reforms of Vatican Council II, on February 2, 1970, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued the Latin typical edition of *Ordo professionis religiosae*, available in English in 1974. The impetus for this change is found in Article 80 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy:

... the rite of religious profession and renewal of vows shall be drawn up, in order to achieve greater unity, sobriety, and dignity. Apart from exceptions in particular law, this rite should be adopted by those who make their profession or renewal of vows within the Mass.

It would be praiseworthy for religious professions to be made during Mass.

Keep in the back of your mind the fact that the Bishops gathered at Vatican Council II also urged us to "prudently consider which elements from the genius and conditions of individual peoples might appropriately be admitted into divine worship."⁸ In our struggle to find such examples of "genius" in the United States of America we have sometimes incorporated less than prudent and often inappropriate elements into our worship. As you read on, however, you will see several wonderful examples of inculturation from our sisters in other countries that bring their rituals to life.

In recent years, even given the fact that we were all celebrating the rites of the Church, there were still differences in symbols and actions within the rituals themselves across the Institute. Members of incorporation teams worked for many years to reconcile these differences. Often that meant surrendering ritual elements individual regional communities had come to value for the sake of greater unity, but they finally came to consensus and a common format was approved by the Institute Leadership Conference for use throughout the Institute. The Institute Incorporation Rituals are the final product of a Ritual/Symbol Committee formed several years ago at an annual meeting of the Mercy Conference of New Membership Personnel [MCNMP]. Serving on the committee were Linda Bechen, R.S.M., Maria Cristina Caballero, R.S.M., Marina Culp, R.S.M., Carolyn McWatters, R.S.M., Patricia Otillo, R.S.M. and Anna Marie Saltzman, R.S.M. At the same time that they were developing the rituals, the MCNMP was also developing a theology of Incorporation that is reflected in the rituals.

At the annual meeting of the MCNMP each year, discussion was held to pull together what was being done across the Institute so there would be some recognizable unity in our celebrations. First, a symbol was agreed upon for each stage of the process. Then significant elements of the ritual were identified. The suggested format indicates that regional communities will adapt these rituals, but

that the symbol and significant elements would be the same across the Institute. As I mentioned earlier, however, the adaptations outside the United States of America are both challenging and instructive for us. A brief excursion to Guam, Guyana, and Peru will illustrate what I mean.

In recent years, even given the fact that we were all celebrating the rites of the Church, there were still differences in symbols and actions within the rituals themselves across the Institute. Members of incorporation teams worked for many years to reconcile these differences.

Learning from Guam

Sister Mary Angela Perez pointed out that there are four different cultures that need to be taken into consideration in the incorporation process in Guam—namely, Chamorro (indigenous to Guam), Filipinas, Chuukese, and Stateside (U.S.). Although they use the same ritual for all with regards to the vows, questioning, etc. that are included in the handbook, they also inculturate with language, hymns, and other rituals which are unique or significant to the culture of the candidate, novice or temporary professed. "The culture is further expressed in the feasting, dinner reception, or celebration following the liturgy and rituals. This was most evident when our two Chuukese sisters, Sisters Grace Joseph and Erencia Saipweirik, made their final vows in their island of Chuuk."

These were described by S. Maria Rosario who wrote:

I remember that we pretty much followed the community's ritual for profession. The only difference was how the parts of the Mass were executed. At offertory time, the representative from both Grace's and Erencia's families came up to present the gifts together with our sisters who brought up typically

the gifts and symbols led by the Mercy Cross carried by one of the sisters. But the families also brought up rolls of sleeping mats, home-spun ropes made of coconut fiber, and the leis and mwarmwars which they placed around the necks and heads of the celebrant, all the priests concelebrating, and other ministers. The Bible was taken from its place on the opposite side of the sanctuary from where the tabernacle was and carried by the reader to the podium when it was time for the reading.

Both Grace and Erencia said the preamble to the official vow formula in their language, which, of course, they translated. And this was because many of their people didn't understand English.

At the ending of the Mass, the recession was really different, and this is only because of the people from Pollap where Sr. Grace is from. They are very vivacious in their musical compositions and they included clapping of hands to the sides of their arms, especially the men, plus dancing motions with spoken exclamations in between.

If it will be considered part of the ritual, the celebration after the Mass was really where the cultural expression took place. The dances, speeches and songs alternated throughout the program. Especially significant was a specially composed song which was taught to all the two family members honoring in story form the two sisters professed within the context of their island communities. This is the characteristic of their oral tradition. They recount important events in songs, and this is how they remember the event and persons over the years."

Glimpsing Guyana

Julie Matthews, R.S.M., Regional Coordinator of the Sisters of Mercy in Guyana, described their celebrations, which are always filled with music and dance.

At the beginning of the ceremony, there is a rolling of drums (a call to prayer). It is also an Afro-Guyanese tradition of calling forth the spirit of God and the spirits of our ancestors (family, Sisters of Mercy, etc.)

The entrance procession is very festive and celebratory. There is music with steel pans, guitars, drums, etc., and dancing. The dancers may use incense as they dance in front of the lectionary as it is brought in.

At the offertory, we have dancers carrying incense in bowls. They dance up the centre of the aisle—incensing the people. They then do movements around the altar and the priest and altar servers. This is done to African drums.

There is an East Indian Religious Festival called "Diwali" which celebrates the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness. It is celebrated by Hindu Guyanese on what is supposedly the darkest night in the year. In the evening of this festival, *dias* (made of mud and the wick is immersed in ghee) are lighted and placed on the steps and bridges of the houses. These *dias* can be used at the ceremony in the place of candles.

Most of the rituals or symbols that we use are drawn from the various cultural backgrounds of our peoples. We have not yet explored other rituals from the other three races that we have. I hope to do so in the future.

Profession in Peru

Marilú Holguin Cruz, R.S.M., celebrated her Final Profession of vows on July 11, 1998 in Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Chulucanas, Perú. On the following day eighteen sisters, accompanied by Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., then President of the Institute, traveled to Pacaipampa, Marilú's hometown in the Northern Sierra, for a Mass of Thanksgiving. In preparing for this article, I was able to view the videotape of Marilú's profession, which reflected the same kind of jubilant cultural expression described by our sisters in Guyana and Guam. One notable difference was that Marilú prostrated on a mat during the singing of the Litany of the Saints, with four women kneeling at the four edges of the mat. Concluding that element of the ritual might have some cultural significance, I asked Theresa Saetta, R.S.M., to explain its meaning.

The *jerga* on which Marilú prostrated is a very special symbol of hospitality and welcome in the northern sierra. When you visit a home in our area, the *jerga* is placed down on a bench or chair or wherever the guest is being offered a seat. It is hand-woven on callua, which is a type of loom used in the sierra, whereby the women tie the loom to their waist. They choose colors both dark and light symbolizing the contrasts of our lives. The shadows and the lights are interwoven into something beautiful and whole.

Marilú prostrated during the litany of saints accompanied by her two witnesses, Sisters Mercedes Donohue and Pat Mulderick, and one other sister from the community, Pat Kennedy. The fourth person was Marilú's sister, Analilia, representing the family. The sense of accompaniment is very

important in Perú although this is not normally a part of profession rituals in the States.

When Leslie Porecca, R.S.M., made her final profession in September 1999, she also prostrated on a *jerga*. Leslie had attended Marilú's profession in Peru, and during her visit was given a *jerga*. Valuing it as a symbol of hospitality, and desiring to connect the community gathered in Merion with their sisters in Peru, Leslie incorporated both the *jerga* and Peruvian music into her profession ritual.

Theresa also explained that the first profession ritual in Peru, like the States, is much simpler. Although it also takes place within the eucharistic liturgy, there is no litany of saints or prostration, and no ring is given.

In recent vow ceremonies, some form of folk dancing has accompanied the presentation of gifts—in our case, the *Marinera*, a northern Perú folk dance. Recently, we had our first combined reception (January 25, 2000) in Chacacayo after the International Formation Conference, which took place from January 15–23, 2000 near Lima. By “combined” I mean that for the first time, two regional communities from the Institute gathered together to receive their new novices, two from Burlingame, Nidia Huanacuni Quispe and Delia Callomamani Arocutipá, and Jeny Crisanto Salazar from Merion. This reception saw the melding of the two rituals, since Chulucanas/Merion's reception ceremony is usually very simple, only the community members invited, and the Puno/Burlingame community had invited even family members. It was also a blending of two cultures . . . the Aymara culture from the south (Puno) and the northern coast (Chulucanas). Here in Perú our pre-novices and canonical novices live together in the collaborative house of formation. However, our pre-novices have usually had a year living in community in their own local area. Previously, novices have been received in March; this year we had it in January to coincide with the presence of other sisters from our own regional communities and all parts of the world.

Many sisters from the 21 countries present for the conference were able to stay for the reception. Dinner and some dancing followed.

Ritual and Cultural Adaptation

It might seem ironic to you that I took you all over the world to see Mercy Rituals of Reception and Profession and made only passing reference to those rituals in the United States. Ironic or not, it is

the case that cultural elements which give such vitality to religious rituals in other countries are still largely missing from liturgy in the United States, unless they are borrowed from another country.

In the Eucharist, Jesus entrusted us with “a sacrament of love.” That is the reason why the Bishops gathered at Vatican Council II insisted that when the community is assembled at this mystery of faith, we “should not be there as strangers or silent spectators.”⁹ In all probability, that was the most strongly affirmed and enacted reform of the Council. Thirty-five years ago we appeared to be totally passive at this, the most significant celebration of our faith. Although our hearts were engaged in the action, little else was permitted us. Truly, the People of God have now taken their rightful “ownership” of the eucharistic liturgy, both through their participation in the ritual action and in the ministerial roles permitted them. This is not surprising, for “the sacraments are in a tongue unloosed now, and can be celebrated with an imagination and an integrity that releases more of their grace and power than before.”¹⁰

Asked to assess what of the council's agenda was yet to be adequately addressed, pioneer and scholar Godfrey Diekmann pointed to his disappointment that the “cultural adaptation” had yet to be adequately addressed in a country with the cultural pluralism that virtually begs for its implementation.

Asked to assess what of the council's agenda was yet to be adequately addressed, pioneer and scholar Godfrey Diekmann pointed to his disappointment that the “cultural adaptation” had yet to be adequately addressed in a country with the cultural pluralism that virtually begs for its implemen-

tation. I concur with him that cultural adaptation is one of the unfulfilled promises of the Council.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states:

Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is maintained, the revision of liturgical books should allow for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands. Where opportune, the same rule applies to the structuring of rites and devising of rubrics.¹¹

Such movement to incorporate cultural elements, particularly from non-Western cultures, has been very slow and tentative, which is surprising when we look to the history of the liturgy.

If you study the early sacramentaries, you see that both the language in the prayer texts and the rubrics themselves were clear, direct, and uncluttered. It was only when this classical form of the Roman liturgy began to migrate, particularly to the Franco-Germanic world, that it began to take on the characteristic high drama and sentimentality of the North. That hybrid liturgy returned to Rome in the tenth century, displacing the previous classical form. In the last thirty-five years, as a result of the study and direction provided by the Liturgical Movement, the Roman liturgy has been significantly (although not completely) cleansed of its Franco-Germanic accretions, and consequently made more available for cultural adaptation.¹²

Paulist Father Thomas Kane has traveled the world documenting cultural adaptation video-graphically. His work in *The Dancing Church* clearly demonstrates the possibilities in cultures far different from our own.¹³ However, making similar adaptations in a "Western" culture still seems to have us stumped. "Since liturgy is essentially performative, action takes precedence over material elements";¹⁴ in order for the liturgy to be liturgy, in fact, it must become part of the lives of the celebrating community. Otherwise, it will remain merely a curiosity. Often we make feeble attempts to inculturate by pasting onto a liturgical or paraliturgical celebration some kind of ritual element that seems to work in the moment. You have probably had this or some similar experience: we all wave ribbons on a given occasion and then never see the ribbons again; or do a circle dance once and never do such a dance again. The work that lies ahead requires allowing the liturgy to live comfortably in various cultures, as it

becomes adapted to a particular people in their celebration. By its very nature, cultural adaptation cannot be imposed on a people. It will grow in time if it is cultivated by concern for the theological principles that underlie the liturgy. Who knows, maybe Sisters of Mercy will lead the way.



Notes

- 1 Consultants who participated in the preparation of this article include: Julie Matthews, R.S.M. (Guyana); Maria Rosario Gaite, R.S.M., Mary Angela Perez, R.S.M., and Cabrini Taitano, R.S.M. (Guam); Guadalupe Lumantas, R.S.M. (Philippines); Theresa Saetta, R.S.M. (Peru). The author is also grateful to Pat Galli, R.S.M. (Burlingame), Janet Lamb, R.S.M., Leslie Porecca, R.S.M., and Pat Talone, R.S.M. (Merion) for conversations which helped to refine this work.
- 2 These rituals are the final product of the five-year-long collaborative work of the Ritual/Symbol Committee of the Mercy Conference of New Membership Personnel (MCNMP).
- 3 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959) p. 68.
- 4 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) p. 388.
- 5 Ibid., p. 391.
- 6 Victor Turner, "Ritual, Tribal and Catholic," *Worship* 50 (1976): 250-252.
- 7 Victor Turner, "Passages, Margins and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas," *Worship* 46 (1972): 391.
- 8 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* [SC], no. 40.
- 9 SC, no. 48. "Silent spectators" was the pejorative expression used by Pius XI in the *Apostolic Constitution Divini cultus*, 20 December 1928: *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 21 (1928): 33-41. "It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies . . . they should not be merely detached and silent spectators . . ." This became a watchword of the liturgical movement in the United States.
- 10 Frederick McManus, "The Sacred Liturgy: Tradition and Change," in *Remembering the Future: Vatican II and Tomorrow's Liturgical Agenda*, edited by Carl Last (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) p. 13.
- 11 SC, no. 38.
- 12 Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B., "The Sacred Liturgy: The Unfinished Task," in *Remembering the Future*, 80-84.
- 13 See also Frederick McManus, "The Genius of the Roman Rite Revisited," *Worship* 54 (1980): 360-379.
- 14 Chupungco, p. 88.

Matthew 25:31–46:

A Parable of Righteous Mercy

Mary Criscione, R.S.M.

Introduction: Who Are “the Least” and “the Nations”?

“I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me drink...Whatever you did for one of these least, you did it for me.” The separation of the sheep from goats, the signature criterion of ministering to “the least,” the identity of the King revealed as the surprising object of ministry—such elements as these make the final judgment parable in Matt 25:31–46 among the most well known and oft-quoted passages in the New Testament. It has served as the inspiration for popular piety and apostolic ministry, as well as the citation text in official church pronouncements on aiding those in need.¹

Both popular and ecclesial interpretations of this passage today feature a universalizing of the characters, so that “all the nations” means “the whole world,” and the “least brother/sister” is anyone in need. But scholarship is not so sure.

In recent decades, New Testament scholarship has been divided in interpreting this passage. The basic questions involve both the identity of the characters and the target audience of the passage. Since the same Greek word (*ethnos*) can mean foreigners, people, na-

tions, pagans, Gentiles, who exactly are all the nations (Gk: *pantá ta ethná*)? And since “little ones” is used earlier in Matthew 10 and Matthew 18 to refer to members of the Christian community, does “the least” (Gk: *elachistos*, superlative for *mikros*, “little”) also refer only to certain Christians, e.g., missionaries or persecuted members, rather than to any needy anywhere?

Is the aim of the passage to encourage care for the needy neighbor or care for missionaries and other fellow Christians? Is it meant to warn the community of believers to practice charity, or to bolster community confidence in their final triumph and justification vis-à-vis unbelievers? Such questions have prompted a variety of responses in recent interpretation.² In proposing some possible answers to these questions, my brief analysis here will consider the larger

context of Matthew’s Gospel, similar vocabulary and themes found in other Matthean passages, and the particular connection of righteousness and mercy in Matthew.³

The Context of Matthew’s Gospel

In terms of the larger context, Matt 25:31–46 concludes the fifth and final discourse in a Gospel carefully tailored to present five extensive blocks of Jesus’ authoritative teaching. If, as it seems, Matthew’s Gospel was written for a community composed primarily of Jesus-believing Jews at odds with fellow Jews who did not see Jesus as the Messiah, then a certain contrasting parallel can be seen in this choice of “five.” Just as the teacher Moses gave the five books of the Torah, so Jesus, the “one teacher” for Matthew’s community (Matt 23:8), offers a “new

Both popular and ecclesial interpretations of this passage today feature a universalizing of the characters, so that “all the nations” means “the whole world,” and the “least brother/ sister” is anyone in need. But scholarship is not so sure.

Torah," a fivefold exposition of the way to "surpassing righteousness" (Matt 5:20): chs. 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount), ch. 10 (Instructions for Mission), ch. 13 (Parables of the Kingdom), ch. 18 (Discipleship and Forgiveness), chs. 24-25 (Preparation for the End). Each of these five major discourses ends with a warning and/or a promise that final judgment will be based on doing, on effectively putting into practice what Jesus has taught.⁴ While Matthew's Jesus is particularly characterized by authoritative speech, this Gospel emphasizes obedient doing on the part of Jesus' followers. "Doing the will" of the God of Jesus is what is essential (7:21; 12:50; 21:31). Our passage then fittingly seals not only this final teaching block, but also the entire pattern of Jesus' instruction in this Gospel.

Motif of Two Choices: Ignorance or Readiness in Action

For the dividing line pronounced between the sheep and the goats is doing or not: "you did/did not do it to the least/to me" (25:40, 45). The separation here between the righteous and the accursed is one of concrete practice, not prayer, piety, or doctrine. Those who are pronounced "righteous" were no more aware of the king's identity than those who are condemned. Both are ignorant: "Lord, when did we see you?" (25:37, 44). Actually attending to the needs of the least rather than invoking pious reasons for doing so is here emphasized.

The motif of ignorance found here is also operative in the passages immediately preceding. No one knows the day or hour of the End's approach (24:36-51). Neither the bridesmaids (25:1-13) nor the slaves (25:14-30) knew the exact time for which to be ready. The insis-

for choosing wrong practice: doors are shut for good (25:11-12) and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" await (24:51; 25:30). So, too, our passage as the final parable in this series features two choices, two modes of practice: ministering to the needy (and so to the Christ) or

The separation here between the righteous
and the accursed is one of concrete
practice, not prayer, piety, or doctrine . . .
Actually attending to the needs of the least
rather than invoking pious reasons for doing
so is here emphasized.

tence then is on constant readiness, constant fidelity in practice. Jesus' final teaching to his disciples in these two chapters is laced with apocalyptic imagery and urgency, underscoring the solemnity and finality of judgment. The parables in 24:45 - 25:46 each present the model and counter-model for vigilant, faithful practice in the meantime before the End.

The disciples who are Jesus' audience within the text (24:3) have to choose between the ways of the "faithful and wise" slave who duly attends to his fellow slaves (24:45-47) or the "wicked" slave who is abusive and arrogant (24:48-51), between the five wise bridesmaids who were prepared or the five foolish who were not (25:1-13), between the "good and trustworthy" slaves or the fearful, "worthless" one (25:14-30). Dire consequences follow in each parable

not. Likewise involved is the direst of consequences for unrighteous practice, "eternal punishment" (25:41, 46).⁵

Two Choices Presented in Parables

Previous parables in this Gospel also portrayed a separation between two opposites and so prepared for these later teachings. In 7:24-27, the one who "hears Jesus' words and acts on them" was likened to the wise person who builds a house on rock. In contrast, the one who "hears but does not act" was compared to the fool who builds a house on sand—"and great was its fall!" This emphasis on doing, on putting into practice that was sounded in Jesus' first discourse (chs. 5-7) is then echoed in the conclusion to his final discourse in ch. 25. The dividing of the righteous from the nonright-

teous featured in this concluding speech in ch. 25 repeats the motif already heard in the parables of separation in ch. 13: the weeds and the wheat (13:24–30, 36–43) and the net of good and worthless fish (13:47–50).

But while the angels do the separating in these two parables in ch. 13, it is the king himself who divides the righteous from the nonrighteous in ch. 25. The direct involvement of the king here matches the emphasis on the royal identity of the one who was truly served or not.

Vocabulary for Gracious Righteousness and Mercy

Not only does Jesus' teaching previous to ch. 25 prepare for its impact, but also Jesus' own practice defines what it means to be "righteous" as the "sheep" are called (25:37, 46). "Righteousness" (*dikaïosynē* sometimes translated justice) is of central interest to Matthew's Gospel, and its cognates occur over twenty times in this narrative. Rich in meanings and associations, *righteousness* involves both gift and demand, the gift of being set right with God due to God's gracious and faithful mercy, and the demand of living out this relationship by emulating divine mercy and justice in relating with others.

For Matthew's community, Jesus demands and exemplifies a particular kind of righteousness, one that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20). This "surpassing righteousness" is shown to be closely aligned with mercy. Only this Gospel's Jesus twice quotes Hos 6:6

("Mercy I desire and not sacrifice") and both contexts involve breaking the religious law. In 9:13, after having called the tax collector, Matthew, and then eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus responds to the Pharisees by saying, "Go and learn what this means: 'Mercy I desire and not sacrifice.'" By summoning a known sinner to be one of his followers and then by sharing table with those whose sinfulness defiles their meal companions, Jesus exhibits the practice of law-breaking mercy as the higher righteousness.

With Jesus who "fulfills the law and the prophets" (5:17), the eschatological community embraces the outcast and the defiled and gives them a place at the table. Similarly, in 12:7, after his disciples have violated Sabbath law by plucking and eating grain, Jesus' defense includes

Mercy trumps religious rule and ritual. In his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus includes mercy along with justice and faith as the "weightier matters of the law," and he castigates the religious teachers for not practicing these (23:23; again, the emphasis on doing). Matthew's Jesus is far from being an antinomian (see 5:18–20), but the surpassing righteousness that he teaches and demonstrates is inseparable from a mercy that goes beyond strict observance. Because of mercy and the righteousness configured by it, expectations are upended and status roles reversed: "the last shall be first and the first last" (19:30; 20:16). Bracketing the parable of the gracious landowner and the grumbling laborers (20:1–15), a parable found only in Matthew, this "last-first" phrase interprets this story of

Jesus demands and exemplifies a particular kind of righteousness, one that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20). This "surpassing righteousness" is shown to be closely aligned with mercy.

Hosea's mercy-not-sacrifice quotation, after stating that "something greater than the temple is here" (12:6). The "something greater" is mercy.⁶ For a Jesus who proclaims that "tax collectors and prostitutes" enter the kingdom before chief priests and elders (21:31–32), human need—whether for forgiveness or food—takes precedence.

happily surprising (for the last), enraging (for the first) graciousness in action.

Merciful Healings of Jesus

Jesus' practice of mercy involves physical healings as well. Matthew features as a hallmark of supplicants the request, "Son of David, have mercy."⁷ Whether

Whoever the “least” are, the ones who served them practiced effectively the righteousness that does mercy, and by so doing served the king himself.

the blind requesting on their own behalf (9:27; 20:30–31), or parents asking on behalf of a child (15:22; 17:15), those who come for healing ask for mercy. In the case of the “Canaanite” (i.e., non-Jewish) woman who asks for her daughter’s healing (15:21–28), Jesus’ own limitation to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24) is broken open by the woman’s persistence, wit, and faith. She is the first to see that the righteousness that does mercy is not limited to Jesus’ ethnic and religious own. Jesus eventually recognizes her vision and responds, “O woman, great is your faith!” (15:28), the only time in this Gospel that anyone’s faith is qualified as “great,” and this of a gentile woman who was initially shunned. (By contrast, the disciples’ “little faith” is often noted: 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8.) The power of righteous mercy again is boundary breaking and reverses status roles.

The “Sheep” as Practitioners of Mercy

Given this connection of righteousness and mercy found throughout the Gospel, it should come as no surprise that in 25:31–46 the “sheep,” as the ones who have practiced mercy, are twice pronounced “the

righteous” (25:37, 46). Their ongoing practice of generous mercy is indicated by the needs enumerated: the hungry and thirsty, stranger and naked, sick and imprisoned all received their attention. Like the vigilant in the preceding parables, they have been constant in their readiness.

In the countermodel, the unrighteous have been similarly habitual in their refusal to serve. That the righteous were as unaware of the hidden identity of the king as the unrighteous makes the their practice one of straightforward care for their fellow creatures rather than piety looking for reward, or devotion to a hidden Savior they knew was there all along. So the identity of *pantá ta ethná* (all the nations) seems to include half humanity, as the ones arrayed before the ultimate throne of glory (cf. 24:30; 28:18–19).

Those Who Serve are Righteous

The motif of surprise, of unwittingly having served the king, would suggest that the righteous here could include nonbelievers as well as believers. Those among the righteous who are “Christian” have properly understood that the demands of

the higher righteousness involve gracious service of the least.⁸ Rather than “despising the little ones” (18:10), they have done just the opposite. Those righteous who are not “Christian” have nevertheless “done the will” of the gracious Creator in attending to the needy least. Whoever the “least” are, the ones who served them practiced effectively the righteousness that does mercy, and by so doing served the king himself.

In contrast, the “accursed” did not serve either the least or the king. In their question in 25:44, the various works of giving food and drink, welcoming and clothing, visiting the sick and imprisoned are collapsed into the single verb, to serve (*diakonein*): “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not serve you?” (cf. 25:38). Originally associated with waiting at table, *diakonein* (verb)/*diakonia* (noun) came to mean to serve or to minister to someone in the more general sense, and so the sense of Christian “ministry.” In the Gospel of Matthew, the verb is used five times, paralleling Mark’s usage in every instance but in this passage unique to Matthew.⁹ Jesus is the object of ministering done by angels (Matt 4:11), by Peter’s mother-in-law (8:15), by the women followers (27:55), and here (implied) by the righteous.

Jesus himself understands this model of serving/ministering as defining his own mission and as the example his followers should emulate: “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your

servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*diakonein*) and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:26–28). Female characters in the Gospel (8:15; 27:55) practice the type of ministering that Jesus counsels in 20:26–28 and shows rewarded in the parable 25:31–46. Directly opposite to "lording it over" someone (20:25), this type of ministering is not self-exalting but self-effacing: "the greatest among you will be your servant (*diakonos*); all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (23:11–12).

In the parable of the sheep and goats, the nonrighteous, the "goats," did not practice this self-effacing ministry . . . The pattern of status reversal repeated throughout this Gospel is what distinguishes righteous mercy from benevolent charity.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, the nonrighteous, the "goats," did not practice this self-effacing ministry to the king in need, and so are condemned. No mercy, no righteousness. The pattern of status reversal repeated throughout this Gospel is what distinguishes righteous mercy from benevolent charity: the former is done by a "servant," the latter by a "master." Ministry in the pattern of the Servant Christ is not an exercise by the elite, but rather a practice by a "fellow servant."

Righteousness, Mercy, and Matthew's Readers

While the opening of this parable presents a universal vision (all the nations before the throne of glory), the placement of this passage at the conclusion of chs. 24–25 aims it toward the disciples as the immediate audience within the narrative (24:3), and so toward Christian readers/hearers as the audience outside the narrative.¹⁰ As with the previous discourses, this one ends with an implicit encouragement/warning aimed at promoting righteous practice. The question is: towards whom?

Some commentators insist that the "least" are either all

For those who argue for the specifically "missionary" definition of these "least," the mention of persecution in 10:16–23 and giving a cup of cold water in 10:42 suggests that the hardships presented in 25:31–46 (hunger, thirst, etc.) are the experiences of disciples in mission. On the other hand, a more universalist reading of the "least" (as anyone in need) also has foundation. While it is true that "brothers/sisters" in Matthew is language used to describe the community of disciples,¹² the door is opened to a wider interpretation by the insistence on doing God's will as the defining characteristic of the new family (12:50), as opposed to performing in Jesus' name (7:21–23).

Graciousness of All to All

As shown previously, God's will of mercy over sacrifice breaks rather than respects boundaries. The inclusion of Gentiles, sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes signals the inbreaking of a divine kingdom/reign marked by graciousness towards the outcast and denial of those convinced of pride of place. So, too, the "Golden Rule" in 7:12 ("do unto others") together with the command to love the enemy (5:43–48) and to love the neighbor (doubly mentioned: 19:19; 22:39) point to an ethic that transcends narrow restrictions.

The God who showers bounty upon both good and evil (5:45–48) is a God whose children likewise share in "the divine nature that is marked by stunning and indiscriminate acts of

Christians or those Christians who are in need due to persecution or ministry. They suggest that the New Testament use of "brothers/sisters" as in 25:40¹¹ refers without exception only to members of one's own believing community, never to all fellow human beings. These scholars argue further that the "little ones" in 10:42 and 18:6, 10, 14 are members of the believing community. So the "least of these my brothers/sisters" would be members of the Christian community.

generosity to all.”¹³ Finally, the fact that the righteous in 25:31–46 do not welcome the needy as disciples (as in 10:42) nor recognize them as Christ calls into question the restrictive definition of the least.

Conclusion: Practical Care of Needy and Small Mercies

Given the immediate context of this parable as well as the larger themes operative in this Gospel, this parable of the final judgment, like the parables that precede it, is meant to shake audience complacency.¹⁴ Rather than resting comfortably in the assurance of final vindication, the audience both within and without the narrative is summoned to constant vigilant practice, the actual doing of mercy and justice. Not only is the day and hour not known, neither is the hidden identity of the Christ. In the meantime, works of practical mercy and self-effacing service are demanded. Like the audience of Isa 58:6–10, the audience of Matt 25:31–46 is urged to practical care of the needy rather than to legal/ritual observance devoid of mercy and justice.¹⁵ While Jesus Emmanuel (God-with-us, 1:23) has promised to be with the community in its prayerful adjudication (18:20) and in its ongoing mission (10:40; 28:20), his presence in the child (18:5) and in the “least” (25:40, 45) inserts the constant element of surprise.

As shown in the Hebrew Scriptures and continued in the story of Jesus, reversal of status is forever a feature of the God of the lowly and the least. So

ministry aligned with this God must be open to addressing in love the concrete need of the neighbor, to doing righteous mercy, to subverting status expectations, and—while counting on the God-with-us—not knowing in what surprising places this God will be revealed as the recipient of our small mercies.



Notes

- 1 See e.g., *Gaudium et Spes* (*Church in the Modern World*) par. 27.
- 2 For a history of interpretation of this passage from the second century on, see Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–46. A History of Interpretation*. SBLDS 114. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989. A concise review of the interpretive problems can also be found in John R. Donahue, “The ‘Parable’ of the Sheep and the Goats: A Challenge to Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986):3–31.
- 3 I use the term “Matthew” to refer to the Gospel narrative as a whole, rather than to the “author.”
- 4 See 7:21–27, the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount; 10:37–42, the end of the mission instructions; 13:47–50, the final kingdom parable; 18:23–35, the final word on forgiveness; and our passage, 25:31–46, which closes out Jesus’ discourse on preparing for the end of days.
- 5 Some scholars maintain that this passage is not in fact a parable. But clearly it has enough parabolic elements to function as a metaphorical comparison, and it invites diverse rather than literal interpretation—as the debate over its precise meaning attests! See also John Paul Heil, “The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998):13 n. 20.
- 6 Mary Hinkle Edin, “Learning What Righteousness Means: Hosea 6:6 and the Ethic of Mercy in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Word & World* 18 (1998,4):357.
- 7 See Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30–31.
- 8 The actual term “Christian” is not found in any of the Gospels. It appears only in Acts 11:26 and 26:28 (both times as a term used by those outside the community), and in 1 Pet 4:16. I use it here as a shorthand reference to believers in Jesus, members of the community of disciples.
- 9 Matt 4:11//Mark 1:13; Matt 8:15//Mark 1:31; Matt 20:28//Mark 10:45; Matt 27:55//Mark 15:41, and here Matt 25:44.
- 10 As noted by Kathleen Weber, “The Image of Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31–46,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997):675–678. See also the reader-response interpretation in Heil, “The Double Meaning,” pp. 3–14.
- 11 The Greek word, *adelphoi*, “brothers,” is not used here in the gender-specific sense and so is better translated as inclusive of “sisters,” or, as in some translations, “members of my family.”
- 12 5:22–24, 47; 7:3; 12:48–50; 18:15, 21; 23:8; 25:40; 28:10.
- 13 Robert H. Smith, “The End in Matthew (5:48 and 28:20): How to Preach It and How Not To,” *Word & World* 19(1999,3):307.
- 14 Weber, “Image of Sheep and Goats,” p. 677.
- 15 Robert H. Gundry proposes this Matthean passage as a targum of Isa 58:7, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) p. 513.

A Church's Inner Design as Symbol of Faith

Marilyn Morgan, R.S.M.

Defining the Sacred Space

Stonehenge stands on a hill near Bath in England. People come from all over to gaze upon the giant stones set into a circle. Parts of it are older than the oldest pyramid. They form a remarkably accurate celestial calendar. If you take the time to let this monument speak to you, you can feel its sacredness. You are drawn inward to the center of the circle where some stones of an altar remain. Stonehenge is very much a connection between the wonders of the earth, namely the movement of the sun, and sacred worship. The very precision of the placement of the stones makes you aware of the connection of nature and the worship of the God of the universe.

The earth is sacred. It is a medium of communication with the God who created it. So, what makes a place sacred? What makes it a sanctuary, a place apart?

Every sacred place implies a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred that separates a particular spot from its surroundings, making it qualitatively different."¹

The Old Testament contains divine directions for building. In Numbers 1, there are directions for organizing the living arrangements in the camps. In Exodus 26–27, there are directives for building the wilderness tent of dwelling. Nehemiah 12:27–47 tells about the time after the exile, when the walls of the city of Jerusalem were rededicated. In Ezra 3, the temple was rebuilt. Construction was considered a religious act. Israel's world was created anew by its construction.

The Sanctuary as Treasury of Memories

The sanctuary becomes a place of transformation. The architecture of a space reinforces images of creation. The more the space is in harmony with the

milieu out of which it arises, the greater the revelation of the One who has created heaven and earth.

Our worship spaces are sacred, not because we make them that way, but because, by the way we make them, we help to uncover the sacredness that is there. Our sacred spaces reflect who we are as a Christian people. If we have chosen to build our spaces in such a way that they are harmonious with the world we live in, they will be a continuation of the beauty of the earth. We are at once respectful of the earth and good stewards of its natural resources. The sacred will be revealed to us in time; we must let the symbols of our worship space speak the Truth to us. Our worship space will become a sacred treasury of stories of a particular people on a journey from death to new life. It will be a place of transformation. And the glory of God shall shine forth.

Each worship space holds a treasury of stories about different events and memories of people's lives. "All of my children have been baptized at this parish." "I made my first communion at this altar." "I was married in this church." "This is where I made my vows." When contemplating building a new worship space or renovating an existing one, people resist touching anything that would change what they have. It is because of the connections we make with places and objects that make it so hard to adapt to something new.

Challenges to Renovation

People need to sort out what are nostalgic memories that they hold dear but don't need to pass on to future generations and make a distinction between them and what is of value to their faith that should be passed on to future generations. There is a time to grieve and be angry and a time to let go and move on. The church of our youth reflects a theology where the priest did everything. The role of the

assembly was to watch what was happening. They were spectators, with no expectation that they would be involved.

For many people, the main symbol of the sacred was the tabernacle. It occupied a central place in the church. People came to church to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. With the twentieth century, came a change in thinking about sacred spaces. Instead of shaping a church around the sanctuary for the priest and the Blessed Sacrament as the central object of devotion, churches began to shape their spaces around the altar and the ambo. These are places of action for the assembly. The emphasis shifted from a focus on an individual and his/her faith life to a focus on the assembly.

... a space must serve not only as a place for individual encounter with the Holy, but also, and primarily, as a place for the enactment of public ritual. Christian liturgical space is rendered sacred first of all by the action of the community.²

With the twentieth century,
came a change in thinking about
sacred spaces. Instead of
shaping a church around the
sanctuary for the priest and the
Blessed Sacrament as the
central object of devotion,
churches began to shape their
spaces around the altar and the
ambo.

Centrality of Tabernacle in Pre-Vatican II Devotion

There is great fear and anxiety among many Catholics today that the shift of emphasis from the tabernacle to the altar and the ambo is a great lack of respect for the Blessed Sacrament. For many of them, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament has been central to their faith. Moving the tabernacle out of a central position is deemed disrespectful to the

Blessed Sacrament. "They say that the removal of the tabernacle is tantamount to forsaking the sacrament. It is easy to understand the seriousness of this claim because adoration of the reserved sacrament was once considered more important than eating and drinking the eucharistic elements."³

Many Catholics yearn for the mystery that enshrouded the pre-Vatican II liturgies. Thirteenth-century European churches have magnificent stained glass windows with light pouring into the nave. To the people who created these great churches, light was a symbol of the transcendence of God. Their prayers were lifted up to God in these great spaces. The focus in these churches was the tabernacle, where Jesus was present. The high altars had intricately carved reredos. It was at these altars where the priests of old whispered the words of consecration. Bells rang out at the consecration to signal to the people that the important time of the Mass was happening.

Post-Vatican II Changes in Orientation

After Vatican II, in an effort to "modernize" churches, many parishes removed statues, changed the configuration of the seating, brought out baptismal fonts and removed ornamentation from the walls, leaving churches with more of an atmosphere of starkness rather than creating a sanctuary leading people to prayer. What was left out of this movement was an effort to catechize the people to help them understand the changes. All they saw was churches being divested of the things that were precious in their eyes and held tremendous meaning for their faith, with no explanation.

Did Vatican II change the symbols of our faith? The work of the Second Vatican Council offered a shift in the focus of our worship. The assembly has become the primary symbol of the liturgy. "Among the symbols with which liturgy deals, none is more important than this assembly of believers."⁴

This shift in emphasis from a focus on Christ in the Blessed Sacrament to seeing Christ present in the members of the assembly as equally important is a major stumbling block for many people. Some people don't want to be distracted by the faces of those with whom they worship. They want to go to church and pray quietly before Mass. They do not want to be disturbed by those who try to greet them

before Mass begins. Some of these people are happy to stand around and mix with people after Mass, but not before. To them, the liturgy remains a private affair.

It is with this in mind that new churches are changing the entryways of the church buildings. Older churches had small, dark vestibules that weren't meant for gatherings. They were merely passageways as people went to pray as individuals with a group of people.

Importance of the Gathering Space

Most churches built today include a space where people can gather before and after the liturgies. The journey to worship includes a period of transition from the secular to the sacred. The journey begins at home in the preparations for worship and continues in the parking lot. Our buildings help people to make the transition.

The church's gathering place is to be designed in such a way that it elicits from the participant an anticipation of what is to come and facilitates the gradual assimilation into the larger group. Then the transformation of the many individuals into the body of Christ has begun.⁵

Some churches situate the entrance to the gathering space in such ways that people have to journey for a bit before they enter into the space. The gathering space should be large enough for the whole community to gather. Upon entering this space, one takes the initial steps into the zone of the sacred. It should be a welcoming place, setting the tone and atmosphere that helps people to make the transition from one realm into another. Many secular spaces provide a model for wonderful gathering spaces. Some homes have large porches that wrap around the front of the house and provide a grand entrance. Hotel lobbies are decorated with artwork and beautiful vases of fresh flowers. Chairs and couches are provided for people to mix and mingle. Lighting is an important element in creating ambiance. It helps to create a place where people want to linger and converse. The overall purpose of the gathering space is to act as an invitation to what lies beyond.

When people meet each other before worship they have the opportunity to break down the barriers of individualism which is so much a part of the

American identity. They begin to form a community. People who care about each other will be more likely to participate more wholeheartedly and will not sit back as spectators waiting to be entertained.

Planning for a convergence of pathways to the liturgical space in a concourse or a foyer or other place adequate for gathering before or after liturgies is recommended. In some climates, this might be outdoors. Such a gathering space can encourage introductions, conversations, the sharing of refreshments after a liturgy, the building of the kind of community sense and feeling recognized now to be a prerequisite of good celebration.⁶

While there may be many doors to the gathering space, ideally there should be only one main entrance into the nave. The doors to the nave should be beautifully made because they mark a transition. They are "an opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human life."⁷

By having one set of doors into the nave the individuals coming from many different paths are funneled together as they journey to form a community gathered together in Christ's name. The doors arouse anticipation of what is beyond them.

In the same way that vital information passes through the openings of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, architecture touches the surroundings through the openings of windows and doors—places where our private lives and the universe overlap. This overlapping of a building's inner and outer worlds is altered by the character of the openings we create.⁸

When people meet each other before worship they have the opportunity to break down the barriers of individualism which is so much a part of the American identity. They begin to form a community.

Entrance to Community through Way of Baptism

The entrance to the worship space has a particular significance in relation to baptism as the first step in our "entrance" or initiation into the people of

God. All life in the Christian community stems from baptism, the sacrament of initiation. All who are baptized have equal status in the community. The role of the community is very important in the sacrament of baptism. People are baptized into the life of community. It is the community that shares its faith with the newly baptized. They promise to give witness to what it means to be a Catholic.

It is at the portal of the church where the ministers, parents, godparents welcome those seeking to be members of the Christian community through baptism and members of the community. This is the first step on the journey of the Christian life. Ideally there is room for members of the community to gather for the reception of the child, the family and the godparents. The baptismal font is considered to be the "womb of the church" from where Christians are reborn through water and the Holy Spirit.

Good symbols don't need explanations. Good symbols are multivalent. They reveal an inner mystery that appeals to the heart. Signs offer a clear message that informs. Symbols invite contemplation.

Current liturgical reform encourages a fuller use of primary symbols such as water, oil, bread, and wine. Water and oil that is poured in abundance provides a more powerful image of death and resurrection than water that is trickled upon a person's head or oil that is dabbed upon one's forehead. Baptism by immersion ritualizes the fact that Christian living is messy and deals with realities more far-reaching than superficialities. Baptism—a time of ritual bathing—has mystic significance. Concerns about efficiency and pragmatism have led us to minimalism in terms of the signs of the sacrament.

Above all, we need to let our symbols speak for themselves. There are some who explain what our symbols mean. In doing this, they offer one meaning, one insight. Good symbols don't need explanations. Good symbols are multivalent. They reveal

an inner mystery that appeals to the heart. Signs offer a clear message that informs. Symbols invite contemplation.

Considering the Symbol of Baptismal Waters

There are many that do not understand all this "fuss" about wanting to baptize by immersion. It doesn't seem practical. Why would you want to get people all wet? For too long we have been miserly about our symbols. We have become in some cases too intellectual in our faith. We need to be afraid to die in the waters of baptism and that will not happen with a cupful of water. We need to feel the water poured over our bodies because we are human beings who need to embrace the experience with our whole beings. Parish communities struggle with this whole concept. To many of them, it is a question of, "Is someone going to fall into the font?" Or, "Why on earth would you pour water all over someone when pouring it on their forehead will do just fine?"

A question to ask when building or renovating a worship space is, "How can we arrange the seating of the community so that they can be visually part of this important event?" Instead of looking at a church building as a space with a "back" and a "front," we need to look at it from other angles, such as places within the space which are focal points of our attention. These are not spaces to enshrine things, but are places of action. Many communities put important things such as the baptismal font "up front" so they can see what is happening. In doing this, the priest is the only one who comes into contact with the font on a regular basis. By this choice, the assembly foregoes the weekly contact they will have with the font.

We are a human people, needing not only intellectual nourishment but also tactile ways to express our faith. It is a weekly reminder to place the water upon our foreheads and renew our commitment to Christ in his death and resurrection. Since baptism is the work of the entire Christian community assembled at worship, all participate in the action, whether or not they can actually see the pouring of water. Perhaps a better question to ask is "How can we arrange the way we are seated so that people can direct their attention to where the action is taking place?" Or, "How can we arrange our

space so that the community can gather around the font during baptisms?"

Blessing and Flow of Water

When the community is gathered at the font for the rite of baptism, the priest blesses the water. The blessing offers much insight into the meaning of baptism.

Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. In baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament. At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them a wellspring of all holiness.⁹

A wellspring is a "continuous supply." It connotes overflowing abundance. Other images in the blessing prayer are that of parting of the Red Sea where the Israelites were freed from slavery, so baptism sets us free from the slavery of sin. The baptism of Jesus in Jordan, the flowing of water and blood from the side of Jesus on the cross are recalled. God is asked to unseal for the Church the fountain of baptism.

By the power of the Spirit give to the water of this font the grace of your Son.¹⁰

The baptismal font is a place of cleansing from sin and a birth to innocence. These are the powerful images of death and life. They call for a vessel of water that connotes a "wellspring" of life. A font with water flowing into a pool invites people to partake. It calls for people to touch the water, not with the tip of one's finger, but to reach in and generously let it touch and renew us to the depths. The rite calls for a vessel that people can experience the death and resurrection called for in the rite of baptism.

"Baptism into Christ demands enough water to die in."¹¹

Adult and Infant Baptism

The shape of the font should be designed in such a way that it is suitable for the baptism of adults as well as infants. A round font symbolizes birth and a womb. One is born and begins life anew through the waters of baptism. A cruciform font is a reminder of the cross with all its implications. The one to be baptized steps into the font and embraces the cross.

Thus the newly baptized can rise with Christ in resurrection. A tomb-shaped font is a symbol of Christ's death and resurrection, and, by virtue of our baptism, our own death and resurrection. This shape makes it very clear that we are dying to an old way of life, ready to embrace a new one. A hexagonal font refers to the sixth day of the Jewish week, the day our Lord had won the world's salvation. An octagonal font celebrates the eighth day.

Ambrose of Milan (339–397 CE), who baptized Augustine, noted that "not only is the font octagonal, but the baptistry as well, because on the eighth day, by rising, Christ loosens the bondage of death and receives the dead from their graves (*a tumulis suscipit exanimis*)."¹²

The baptismal font is a place of cleansing from sin and a birth to innocence. These are the powerful images of death and life. They call for a vessel of water that connotes a "wellspring" of life.

When the baptismal font is in the entryway as people enter into the nave of the worship space, the community has the opportunity to interact with the water each time they enter and leave the church. They have the opportunity not only to see the water but also to interact with it thereby participating with another of their senses.

Font in Entryway for the Living and the Dead

By placing the baptismal font in the entryway of the nave it becomes something that people have to encounter each time they enter. It is not something insignificant. It is not "in the way" of funeral processions or the entrance of the bridal party. It is a symbol of our entrance into the Christian community. Funeral liturgies can emphasize this in the celebration of the rites. The funeral procession pauses at the baptismal font. The coffin is sprinkled with

water from the font as a reminder that in dying with Christ, we are born to new life in Christ.

Vigils for those who have died can be held around the font, again as a reminder that the waters of baptism hold the promise of eternal life. This is where Christian life begins, not ends. Couples who are celebrating the sacrament of marriage can gather at the font to be sprinkled with water from the font before continuing their journey. Thus the baptismal font is an integral symbol in our Christian life and in the celebration of our rituals. The placement of the font facilitates full congregational participation. There is no audience, no passive element in the liturgical celebration.

Human beings are more than their eyes and ears. Ritual and its space is reflective of the fullness of people at work and at play. Such work and play is in the realm of mystery, where participation is predicated on the sensual interplay of symbol, memory and hope.¹³

Paschal Candle and Oils

The Paschal Candle, symbol of the Light of Christ, is placed near the font. The Holy Oils should also be enshrined near the font. This is a relatively new change for most churches. Previously the Paschal Candle was kept in somewhere in the church where it could be brought out for baptisms and funerals. Now it is put by the font since we receive the light of Christ at our baptism. Most churches kept the holy oils in the sacristy in oil stocks for the priest's use for baptisms and anointing. Now churches are displaying the oils in decanters near the font because two of them are used for the sacraments of initiation.

Seating for the Abled and Disabled Community

The Christian life is a journey. The rituals of the Church are created with this in mind. As one enters the sacred space, passing by the first symbol of initiation into the church one enters deeper into the heart of the Christian community. The Christian community is called to "full, conscious, active participation." (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #14) The arrangement of seating for the community is

very important. The seating arrangement determines the placement of the altar, ambo, and the presidential chair. An assembly sitting in rows all facing the same way will expect to be entertained and instructed. They will watch the action taking place in front of them becoming spectators, passively observing. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* tells us that it is in the assembly that we first meet Christ in the liturgy. If Christ is present in the assembly, then the space they occupy is holy.

Seating that provides the opportunity for the members of the assembly to see each other's faces brings the community together. An assembly seated in a semicircle or facing one another will expect to participate and to exercise ministry. A curved seating arrangement brings people together. Are people looking at the backs of people's heads or are they looking at people's faces? Can they make eye contact with each other?

An assembly sitting in rows all facing the same way will expect to be entertained and instructed . . . Seating that provides the opportunity for the members of the assembly to see each other's faces brings the community together.

The seating arrangement should enhance the possibility of ease of movement for the assembly. The pews or chairs used for the assembly should allow the assembly to be able to move out of them for different rituals within the rites of the liturgy rather than confine them in the space. In creating worship spaces that are barrier free, all members of the assembly have access to all parts of the worship space. Wheelchairs should be able to maneuver about and not be relegated only to the back of church. The disabled should be free to sit with their families and have a choice about where they want to sit.

The assembly seating arrangement is determined by the needs of the actions that take place within that space and how much room those actions

require. The assembly needs to know how they want to be involved with all the actions that place within the rituals. The rituals of the RCIA call for the community to be involved. If the space provides for this, the community can participate and not just watch what is happening. Weddings and funerals require different kinds of spaces. Both those involved and the members of the assembly will perceive an action that happens with the community surrounding it as being a "communal" event rather than something that is happening to other people. With this in mind is difficult to judge a space without seeing how the people use it.

Liturgy of Word: The Ambo

The second place we meet Christ in the liturgy is in the proclamation of the Word. Christ is not present in the lectionary but in the proclamation of the Word. The proclamation reveals a relationship that exists between the one who speaks and the one spoken to. The ambo is a place of action. The ambo is "the footstool of the prophet." The role of the community is to be actively listening to the Word of God. The ambo should be situated in a place where people can be engaged. If they are seated too far away, and cannot see the reader, they will lose not only the visual connection but also the interaction between speaker and listener. In some parishes the presider sits amongst the assembly to listen to the Word. This is a visual reminder that all attention is focused upon the lector or the deacon who is reading.

The *Document on Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* calls for the ambo to be "beautifully designed, constructed of fine materials, proportioned carefully and simply for its function. The ambo represents the dignity and uniqueness of the Word of God and of reflection upon that Word."¹⁴

There is a relationship between the altar and the ambo and this should be evident in the two pieces of furniture. The ambo is to be freestanding, so that it can be encircled or allow for ritual movement. The ambo should also be barrier free so that all have the opportunity to participate in the ministry of lector.

The ambo is reserved for reading of the scriptures, the singing of the responsorial psalm, the homily, the general intercessions, and the Easter proclamation. By reserving the ambo in such a way,

the importance of the Word of God is highlighted. The place of proclamation is a special place, not to be trivialized by announcements, the leading of song, other than the responsorial psalm, or anything else. It is not a place to put unnecessary things.

The Altar as Sacred Table, Symbol of Christ

The altar is a place of action. In the Rite of Dedication of a Church the ambo is dedicated by the action of proclaiming the Word from it for the first time.

May the word of God always be heard in this place, as it unfolds the mystery of Christ before you and achieves your salvation within the Church.¹⁵

It is not an icon or shrine, but rather a holy table. It is not a table of convenience for eyeglasses, flowers, candles, or papers. The community is invited to sit around the table of the Lord. Gathering around the altar helps the assembly to enact the communal celebration of the paschal mystery. The altar should be "the most noble, the most beautifully designed and constructed table the community can provide. It is the common table of the assembly, a symbol of the Lord . . ."¹⁶

The altar should be "the most noble, the most beautifully designed and constructed table the community can provide. It is the common table of the assembly, a symbol of the Lord."

When it is not being used, the altar should not be covered, but rather, because of its beauty, should be unadorned. Because of its importance, the altar is not a place where extraneous things such as papers, flowers, candles, or anything else not pertaining to the liturgy of the Eucharist, are placed. The altar should be capable of being approached from all sides. Nothing should obstruct the approach to the altar. The symbol of gathering around the altar is so strong that communities should consider this as part of their discernment of their seating arrangement.

Relics are no longer placed on the altar, but may be placed beneath it. Some parishes place their record books of baptisms and deaths beneath the altar to keep in mind the community of saints who are present in all celebrations. At the dedication of an altar, the altar is treated as one to be initiated into the church. It is anointed with sacred chrism.

The anointing with chrism makes the altar a symbol of Christ, who, before all others, is and is called "The Anointed One;" for the Father anointed him with the Holy Spirit and constituted him the High Priest so that on the altar of his body he might "offer the sacrifice of his life for the salvation of all" (cf. Heb 1:9 and Psalm 44).

After the altar is incensed and anointed with the oil of sacred chrism, it is then clothed with a cloth. This follows the ritual used in baptism where the newly baptized is anointed with chrism and then clothed in a white garment.

The presider's chair is another focal point in the seating area of the assembly. The chair should be placed so that the presider can preside over the liturgy. The chair expresses the office of the presider.

The importance of the personal symbol and function of the one who presides in liturgical celebration should not be underrated or underplayed, because it is essential for good celebration.¹⁷

Public Liturgy and Personal Devotion: "Beloved Mother"

With the renewal of the liturgy we have come to a new understanding of the differing needs of celebrating the liturgy and of the needs of private

With the renewal of the liturgy
we have come to a new
understanding of the differing
needs of celebrating the liturgy
and of the needs of private
devotions . . . These needs
cannot coexist in the same
space.

devotions. When the church gathers for liturgy, there is a need for action. There is gathering, singing, reading, listening, eating, drinking, and processions. When people come for private devotions, there is a need for reflective quiet, for meditation, for a small group to say the rosary together. These needs cannot coexist in the same space.

These are some examples of both civic religion and popular piety connected to our faith. What is the role of devotion in our lives? Who do we choose to honor? How do we do it? The function of images we use is to mediate between the worlds of matter and spirit. What is the power of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe? She calls to herself the hurting, the disfigured, and the disinherited. She offers hope to the poor.

Many titles have been given to her over the ages, but I do not know of any that is uttered more universally and with greater love and confidence than "Madrecita Querida" (Beloved Mother). Regardless of how dogmatic theologians explain it, for the people at large, she is the beloved maternal presence of God."¹⁸ It is like the message of Jesus who came for the poor, the hopeless, the margined people of his time. "She stimulates new ways to think about God . . ." ¹⁹

Those who pray before an image of the Blessed Mother or one of the saints come with concerns asking that someone in the spiritual world intercede for their needs. They come interceding for others in need and also to offer thanks for favors received.

Sanctuario de Chimayo is a devotional shrine outside of Santa Fe in New Mexico. Pilgrims come by the thousands to pray there. Outside the chapel, people mix with other pilgrims waiting to get inside. People enter the courtyard through a gate. Inside the courtyard are several tombs. The communion of saints is very much a part of the milieu where people are invited to make a connection with the saints who have gone before us. Off to the side of the chapel is a small room with a hole in the ground. People believe that a cross found buried in the earth and now enshrined in the chapel has miraculous powers. They come to Chimayo to pray and to take home some dirt from the hole in the ground. To them the earth is a blessing, a source of healing, a sign of God's presence. People come to Chimayo to touch the mystery of God. They bring statues to leave as gifts in thanksgiving for favors received.

Placement of Shrines for Personal Devotions

Before Vatican II, churches were built to house images. The tabernacle became a shrine. This practice obscured the reason people come together—to celebrate the Eucharist. The church exists to house the actions of the liturgy. It is not a gallery of statues. Shrines should be located in separate and distinct areas that are conducive to private devotions. Shrines can be outdoors, off the entranceway, in alcoves or in other corners of the church complex. Meditation gardens can provide a place for quiet devotion. They can offer a connection with the beauty of the earth and our need to be unified with the universe in our praise of God. Shrines should have enough room for the interaction of people and images, but these spaces shouldn't impede the actions of the liturgy nor compete for attention.

Shrines and images are important to our prayer life. The placement of shrines can help create an atmosphere that is conducive to private prayer. Many times people just want to sit before an image with their private thoughts and prayers. Separating spaces for devotion from the place where the community gathers for communal prayer does not lessen their importance, such as casting them off in a corner. Rather it provides the kind of space that is needed for devotional prayer. Simplicity and good art go a long way in offering people a way to get in touch with the mystery of the sacred. Communities should spend time with an artist, articulating their thoughts about a particular saint. In working together, both the community and the artist create an image that will speak to the faith of a particular community. The image will lead the people beyond itself to the world of spiritual reality. It is an awesome task to let beauty unfold so that the mystery of the sacred is revealed.

Conclusion:

Exploring the Dimensions of Mystery

The mystery of our faith is a wondrous thing. We are called to plumb the depths of this mystery and to explore it from its center to its outer boundaries, then return to center and start all over again from a new depth. We are people with a human body. It is through the fullness of our very humanity that we will come to discover the sacred. The more we can

be involved in our rituals the better we will understand them. To the extent that we use our symbols of faith, we will come to discover the mystery of faith. It is in our seeing, eating, drinking, singing, touching, smelling, and processing, that our God is revealed to us. As the oil seeps down our forehead and the fragrance permeates the room, as water cascades over our heads and bodies, we will understand. As the light of a candle illuminates our faces, as we are nourished by the food we eat and drink, then our eyes will be opened. By our gathering with our sisters and brothers, by seeing the light of God's miraculous love at work in their lives as evidenced by the glow of light in their faces, then we will know that it is God we see. It is not a static God, carefully encompassed in a small box, but a God who is alive, breathing within us and around us. Come, let us enter into the celebration.



Notes

- 1 Dianne Bergant, *The Earth is the Lord's: The Bible, Ecology and Worship* (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991) p. 25.
- 2 Edward Foley, *From Age to Age* (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL, 1991) p. 148.
- 3 Richard Vosko, *FDLC Newsletter*, December 1999–January 2000, Vol. 26, No. 6.
- 4 *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (United States Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C.) #28.
- 5 Marchita Mauk, *Shaping a House for the Church* (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL, 1990) p.14.
- 6 *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #54.
- 7 Anthony Lawlor, *The Temple in the House* (G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1994) p. 19.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 9 *Easter Vigil, The Sacramentary* (Catholic Book Publishing Co.: New York, 1985) #4.2
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism* (Pueblo Publishing Co.: New York, 1978) p. 179.
- 12 Regina Kuehn, *A Place for Baptism* (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL, 1992) p. 55.
- 13 Christopher Stroik, *Path, Portal, Path* (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL 1999) p. 59.
- 14 *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #74.
- 15 Thomas Simons, *Holy People Holy Place* (Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL, 1998) p. 49.
- 16 *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, #71.
- 17 *Ibid.* #70.
- 18 Virgil Elizondo, *Guadalupe* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York: 1997) p. 69.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 124.



Contributors


Mary Criscione, R.S.M. (Burlingame) holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the Graduate Theological Union, with a dissertation on the gospel of Mark. She has been a religious education instructor and administrator in secondary schools, and taught graduate courses in New Testament at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley. Presently she teaches in the theology departments of Notre Dame College in Belmont, CA, and the University of San Francisco.

Marilyn Ann Morgan, R.S.M. (Burlingame) has an M.A. in theology from the University of Notre Dame, IN. She also holds a certification as liturgical design consultant from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, IL. She has had many years of experience in parishes as associate for religious education and liturgy. Presently, she works as liturgical design consultant, advising parishes which are renovating existing worship spaces or building new ones. Her e-mail is mamrsm@pacbell.net.

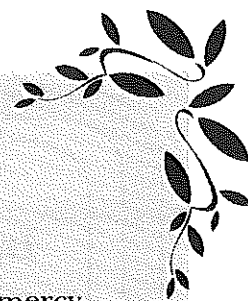
Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M. (Burlingame) has been a Sister of Mercy for more than fifty years. She holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, has done postdoctoral studies in spirituality at Graduate Theology Union in Berkeley, and belongs to the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. After finishing many years of teaching philosophy, she continues her research, writing, and presentations on Catherine McAuley and the Mercy tradition. She served on the committee of writers who prepared the text for our present Constitutions.

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M. (Rochester) holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Notre Dame and an M.Th. in systematic theology from the University of London. She published *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (University of Notre Dame Press) in 1995 (paperback edition, 2000); her *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore* was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1999.

Julie Upton, R.S.M., Ph.D., (Brooklyn) is provost at St. John's University (NY). She is also a professor of theology with extensive experience in teaching and writing in liturgical and sacramental theology. Julie has served on the Liturgical Commission of the diocese of Brooklyn for twenty years. Her latest book is *A Time for Embracing: Reclaiming Sacramental Reconciliation* (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1999).



Discussion Questions



Criscione:

One traditional meaning of the parable is that recipients of the works of mercy are the economically destitute and socially inferior, while benefactors who show mercy are of higher status. What are the implications of the passage when the descriptors of "hungry . . . thirsty . . . in prison" apply to a) members of one's own believing community and b) all human beings? Does the relationship between gracious giver and recipient change when the model for the transaction is service rather than philanthropy?

Morgan:

What do you remember about the "devotional message" of the church's interior which you attended in your younger years? What aspects of your spirituality were nurtured there and still reflect this interior design? Now in your adult and evolving faith life, what architectural details in contemporary church design embody spiritual values you cherish?

Rouleau:

What is your experience of constitutions: Before Vatican II? During transition? Attempts at interim experimental ones? The 1991 Institute Constitutions?

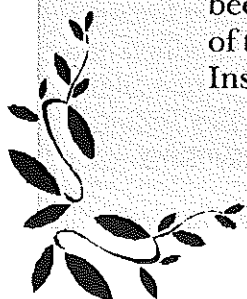
What aspects of change for the better in religious life do you notice when you re-read the 1991 Constitutions prayerfully?

Sullivan:

"The accounts of her cloak, her priedieu, her worn shoes, the room in which she died, the candle she held as she lay dying, and the good cup of tea she offered for our comfort: all these perceptible objects have become symbols of the presence of God in her life and in our corporate life as her followers." In what ways are the places and objects connected with your personal life as a Sister of Mercy functioning as a "public utterance," and as a visible symbol of the desires and ways of God? In what nonverbal ways does the life of our Institute "speak" of God's presence and mission in this world?

Upton:

How have the Mercy rituals of reception and profession of vows been celebrated in your community? What special meaning is called forth in the presentation of the Mercy cross (reception) and silver ring (final profession)? Have these rituals been adapted to the cultural situation in which they are celebrated? What values of the respective cultures of Sisters can be incorporated in our celebrations of the Institute Incorporation Rituals?



Information for New Subscribers and Current Readers

New Subscription: *The MAST Journal* is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. To subscribe, please fill out the coupon below or a copy of it. Make your check payable to *The MAST Journal* and send to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 2223 L St., Sacramento, CA 95816.

Back Issues: If you are interested in obtaining a back issue of *The MAST Journal*, contact BIBAL Press at 888-788-2280 or sales@dfscott.com. Back issues are \$5.00 each, but are often on sale. You can also order online at web address:

<http://www.dfscott.com/bibal%20books/mast.asp>

Address Change: If your address is incorrect, or if you have changed your mailing address, please send that information to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 2223 L Street, Sacramento, CA 95816.

Issue Didn't Arrive: If your subscription is up to date and your issue of the journal did not arrive (and you know the issue has been published, the grapevine says!), then write to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 2223 L Street, Sacramento, CA 95816-4926.

Want to Write: If you have an idea for an article, or you have a talk or article you would like published in *The MAST Journal*, please send the article or inquiry to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., MAST Office, 1121 Starbird Circle #4, San Jose, CA 95117. Please include a complete return mailing address on all correspondence or contact her by e-mail at erosen1121@cs.com.

I wish to subscribe to *The MAST Journal* for:

One year _____
(\$15.00 U.S.; \$25.00 outside U.S.)

Two years _____
(\$30.00 U.S.; \$50.00 outside U.S.)

Name _____

Address _____

Please make payment by international money order, check drawn on U.S. bank, or U.S. currency.



MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

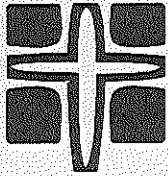
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Julie Upton, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 3 to 6, 2001, prior to the CTSA, June 7-10, 2001. Contact Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., for reservations at Bethany House of Prayer, 272 Meeting House Lane, Merion Station, PA 19066.

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

Membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 750 41st Street, Sacramento, CA 95819. E-mail: mhoward@chw.edu.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Julia Upton, R.S.M., Executive Director, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439 (718) 990-1861, or email to Uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.



Marian Retreat Center
535 Sacramento Street
Auburn, CA 95603

No222n-Profit
Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Auburn, CA
PERMIT No. 183