

The **MAST** *Journal*

Reflecting the Scriptures

Mercy is One of God's Names or Captured by Compassion

—*Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M.*

Mary of Magdala: A Ministerial Partner with Jesus in John 20

—*Judith Schubert, R.S.M.*

Martha and Mary: Integrating or Disintegrating Images for Action and Contemplation

—*Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.*

Four Homilies: Prodigal Son, Baptism, Good Shepherd, Body and Blood

—*Barbara Moore, R.S.M.*

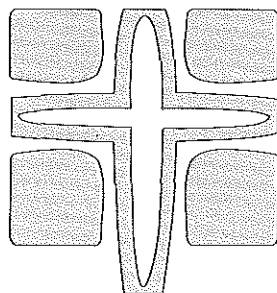
Mercy and Creative Seeing

—*Mary Ann Hieb, R.S.M.*

Art of Mercy: Images of Redemption

—*Jayme M. Hennessy*

The Journal of the
Mercy Association in
Scripture and Theology



Vol. 12, No. 3
2002

Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

For the sake of safety on the road, I needed to get a hands-free extension for my cell-phone. But a visit to Radio Shack proved it was cheaper to commit myself to a phone-service contract for another year and take the upgrade of a free new phone, rather than buy an adapter for a headset and keep my familiar phone. Despite the many advantages that came with the new model, I hated sacrificing the comfort of my dinosaur of four years. It worked just fine, even if an extension would cost a lot. I hated having to reenter all my phone numbers onto a pip-squeak pad. I didn't trust how light the new phone was at less than four ounces. A speaker lay at the side of my jaw, not in front of my mouth. I felt resistance at having to activate or deactivate the extras that were available—voice commands, caller id, numerical shortcuts, vibration vs. ringing, and a hook-up to the internet. Adapting to this wonderful new communication device, I was cranky and glad at the same time.

I felt kinship with my theological ancestors. First century evangelists had to continually adapt and upgrade the story of Jesus of Nazareth in response to demographic changes within their communities, political threats, and regional theological preoccupations. Studying the composition of the Gospels, present scholars recognize a continuous pastoral process of retelling, explaining, editing, subtracting and adding stories to the passion-resurrection narrative. Redaction of the gospels was like performing a series of upgrades. In hardly thirty-five years, from the late 60s to the end of the first century, four strikingly different versions of the story of Jesus were composed: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. These were not the only gospels, for many versions of the life and teaching of Jesus were circulating. These four eventually became authoritative, each in their uniqueness, despite differences from the other three.

However, not all theologians were satisfied with this diversity and complexity. Toward the end of the second century, about 170 CE, a theologian named Tatian created what was called a Diatessaron, a single narrative combining, mixing and harmonizing all four gospels. This harmony had advantages—a single point of view, an elimination of repetition and conflict over detail, ease of transport for preachers, and economy of production for copyists. It became the standard gospel text in Syria. It was used by missionaries and referred to by early commentators. It's interesting that no single copy of the Diatessaron survived. Tatian was expelled as a heretic by the Church in Rome. The "harmonized" gospel which submerged the evangelists' different points of view did not become authoritative for the Church.

Two centuries later, beginning about 382, Jerome began to produce a Latin translation of the entire Scriptures, including all four gospels. When it came to the Hebrew Scriptures, Jerome found he could not perform the "upgrade" by simply translating the Septuagint's Greek Old Testament into contemporary Latin. To be faithful to the traditions on which the Septuagint itself was based, he had to learn Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic. The Vulgate reflects his dialogue with the "dinosaur" commentaries, the original Hebrew, the Greek translations, and older Latin versions which preceded his.

Each generation of believers is faced with the same challenge as the evangelists and Jerome. To perform the communication upgrade required to live religious life, teach the faith, reconfigure the Institute, or carry out the mission of Mercy, two tasks must be balanced. One is to develop the competence to accurately and faithfully retrieve the tradition from its original sources. The second is to resist the sort of harmonization imagined by the Diatessaron. Rather, adaptation must preserve the diversity of story and difference of viewpoints as the four authoritative gospels themselves record of Jesus. A possible sign of successful adaptation to the upgrade is that we are cranky and glad at the same time.



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Mercy is One of God's Names

or

Captured by Compassion

Elaine M. Wainwright, R.S.M.

The two titles to this reflection represent some of my own journeying as I prepared it. I began exploring a general topic "Mercy in Scripture, Catherine, and us" for a Mercy pilgrimage to Dublin lead by Sister Anne Hetherington for partners in ministry.¹ This lead me to think about the topic a little differently, to ask how we have the story of mercy in the Scriptures but also how someone like Catherine McAuley was captured by mercy so that over time it became the passion which informed and shaped her life. Sisters of Mercy, their associates, and their partners in ministry have too, in many different ways, been captured by mercy, and it is shaping lives in a variety of ways. Contemporary readings of the Scriptures and of Catherine are affected by our reading of stories that others have written out of experience that differs from ours. We read, however, because those stories have been preserved as living memories among different communities in different ages, communities who stand within an ongoing, living tradition to which we too belong. These stories help give meaning to our own. My reflections move between three intersecting or spiraling layers of storytelling—the biblical story, the Catherine story, and our story.

Helen Marie Burns says about the "living memory" aspect of encountering our sacred stories, that "[it] is about incarnation rather than replication. Living memory requires continual exchange among dynamic realities."² I want to explore traditions of mercy within our sacred stories that inform, enliven, even inflame our incarnating, our embodying of those traditions today.

Catherine's Education in Mercy

As I envisaged Catherine captured by mercy, I found myself asking what it was that caused her heart to be moved by the plight of the poor. What impelled her to respond with her whole life in a way that lead her along a most extraordinary life journey so different to anything she had imagined. As I explored this question, one answer emerged which I think is very significant: she learned compassionate attentiveness from others who were steeped in mercy and who lived compassion and justice. The first of these was her own father. These words of Carol Wheeler have continued to echo in my consciousness since first I read them:

Catherine had learned [concern for the poor] at her father's knee during the first five years of her life. He taught her "a different pattern in dealing with the poor from that which prevailed in upper class society." He taught her that condescending distribution of alms was not adequate. On Sundays and holidays, James McAuley gathered the children of the poor into his home, extended them good manners, treated them kindly, taught them about the faith, ministered to their needs. Indeed, it is suspected that he embarrassed other members of the household with this behavior. Catherine never forgot this.³

We can only imagine how this shaped Catherine's mind and heart. During her twenty years with the Callaghans, she both learned from them and was engaged with them in their care for the poor on their estate and the nearby village of Coolock. It would seem that hearts that have been touched with compassion communicate this to others, caught in a spiral of compassion. Catherine both received love and compassion from her father and the Callaghans as well as learnt that this love and compassion extended out beyond the intimacy of these relationships to others, especially the needy poor of mid-nineteenth century Dublin. While we don't know how her

father and the Callaghans learned their compassion, we do know that each knew intimately in their lives, albeit in different ways, the centrality of God. Theirs were lives incarnating the God whom they knew and loved.

Naming the Biblical God as Mercy

From interrogating the process of being captured by mercy/compassion in Catherine's experience, I found myself then turning to another story, the biblical story, which seeks to name the experience of other peoples in much earlier eras, experience reflected upon and then narrated. This experience intimately connected life and the divine-human encounter. They then narrated this experience in their story, and named the divine. Mercy/compassion, closely related to justice, are dynamics by which Israel described its encounter with God. When I considered Catherine's education in mercy from compassionate persons around her, who enveloped her and others in love, I found myself pondering how it was that Israel's storytellers were captured by mercy to such a degree that they would name the divine with this attribute. Unfortunately, we cannot know their experiences, but from the way they narrate their sacred story, we may be able to catch glimpses of what they learned from life and from their divine-human encounters.

I want to turn first to the story which is at the heart of Israelite and Jewish storytelling. It is the exodus story, a story of

liberation from oppressive slavery. Here, a people tells its story of liberation as merciful and compassionate liberation by a God who is then named as mercy in many different ways. But as I let this story intersect with Catherine's story, I found myself asking why Israel would have recognized a God of mercy if they had not encountered mercy in their lives. And as I turned to the beginning of their story, I encountered again stories of compassion that opened out into the story of a liberating compassionate God. It seems that incarnate mercy experienced enabled Israel to know the compassionate heart of their liberating God.

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The exodus story begins with the narration of human experience and it is experience of extraordinary oppression, an oppression which wears down a people. It is, the oppressors increase the suffering relentlessly and almost maliciously:

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.

They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exod 1:8-14)

In the storytelling, the most immediate response to this oppres-

sion does not come from God, however. It comes from two Hebrew midwives whose names are remembered: Shiphrah and Puah. Their actions are a response to Pharaoh's command to them to kill the Hebrew boy children as they are being born. Pharaoh's action was clearly the last straw for this oppressed people: to destroy children who were not only the love and joy of their parents despite oppression but also the hope of the nation. The command of Pharaoh struck at the heart of the midwives own commitment to facilitate birth rather than death. What courageous women Shiphrah and Puah were!

They acted contrary to the command of the great Pharaoh but they also cleverly defied him when he interrogated them. In response to his question as to why they had allowed the boys to live, they replied: "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them" (Exod 1:18). Their compassionate hearts would not allow them to destroy life and their courage enabled them to act for justice, to take non-violent action against the regime and to withhold obedience. These women stand as a "critique of the ideology" of the empire.⁴ In the face of their actions, oppression is no longer absolute. They begin within and among their own people a process of critique, hidden though it may be and perhaps not even understood. The wisdom of the ancient storyteller, however, narrates courageous human compassion in response to powerful and inhuman oppression in a way that it stands as a critique.

These women stand as a "critique of the ideology" of the empire. In the face of their actions, oppression is no longer absolute.

Theirs is the first great act of compassion in the exodus story of liberation. And it sets in motion a circle or a spiral of other courageous and compassionate responses. It seems that the midwives' action gives not only courage but a new imagination to other women. Thus, we hear the

story of one mother, later named as Jochebed (Exod 6:20), whose courageous compassion lead her to hide her son in a basket among the reeds of the river. Her daughter, Miriam, stands at a distance watching the child. These acts we might explain away and say they are typical familial responses. But these courageous acts spiral out to include the daughter of Pharaoh the oppressor, along with her women servants. When she discovers the child whom she recognizes immediately as a child of the Hebrews, the narrative says that she had pity, had compassion on the child (Exod 2:6). Her heart was moved. It was moved beyond the barriers of ethnicity, of class and prestige, a compassion welling up within her which lead her to act. Like the midwives challenging the regime, hers was subversive activity against her own father. She acted in solidarity with the oppressed Israelites and she raised the child.

The statement in Exod 2:6 that she had mercy or pity on the

them by those who are most vulnerable: newly born infants. These cannot even beg for mercy as others will do in later stories. These children evoke a response which begins the spiral of mercy. Their silence is like that of the poor children, endangered women, and the sick and the dying of Catherine's Dublin. They are the voiceless and the vulnerable in an immense system of injustice and they symbolize the extent of the injustice.

Time seems to allow the Israelites, in the language of Walter Brueggemann, to "process their pain," a processing which is as he says, "an intentional and communal act of expressing grievance which is unheard of and risky under an absolutist regime."⁵ Out of the depths of their experience of oppression, they find voice. They "groaned under their slavery, and cried out" (Exod 2:23). The text continues: "Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God." In this unfolding story, it is courageous acts of compassion amongst some of the people, namely Shiphrah, Puah, Jochabed, Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh, which lead the people to find their voice to cry out to God, and it is then that the people are open to the divine response. Exodus 2:24 continues: God heard their groaning and God remembered the covenant. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them. The experience and naming of human compassion by the oppressed, which liberates them from pain, creates a foundation for understanding God as the source of compassion. Brueggemann says that "the relinquish-

child (using the Hebrew root *chml*) is the first narrating of mercy in this story of liberation and it spreads out to give meaning to the actions and stance of a much wider group of women. They are the first to respond to the oppression and it seems that the response is evoked from

ment of system comes before the embrace of the Holy One."⁶ God is drawn into this spiral of mercy, this spiral of unfolding compassion. We will see a similar pattern in the subversive actions of Catherine, Mary Anne Doyle and the others who joined them in those closing years of the 1820s when the Irish groaned under the British yoke.

Israel's Proclamation: Experience of Liberation

The exodus story follows this unfolding with a proclaiming and naming of God. As we might imagine, one of its earliest such proclamations is of divine compassion in response to Israel's time of greatest pain: Then God said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry, on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (Exod 3:7-9)

Proclamation has a significant place, therefore, within narrative, proclamation which will be sung and which will shape the imaginations of generations into the future. Two aspects of this proclamation, however, deserve attention before we proceed. The first is that such proclamation emerges out of particular

experiences that are reflected upon in particular circumstances. To take such proclamations out of their context in life and in narrative can divorce the naming of divine compassion from the divine-human encounter and the profound incarnation of critical and courageous compassion in women and men of compassion.

Such separation results in the proclamation of divine compassion becoming a fixed formula. It can also result in an obscuring of the human response which takes a stand against injustice, a stand which enables the oppressed to find their own voice against the oppressor and to raise this voice toward God.

To enter more deeply into one is to enter more deeply into the other. The naming and narrating must be ongoing in new cultural contexts. Engaged workers of mercy stand in the biblical tradition and are engaged in such naming.

The dynamism of the divine-human encounter in compassion is lost and proclamation is removed from the ongoing engagement with injustice and justice, passion and compassion. And so I want to hold together, as our sacred story does, human compassion which shapes a spiral of mercy and divine compassion which is caught in this spiral. To enter more deeply into one is to enter more deeply into the other. The naming and narrating must be ongoing in new cultural contexts. Engaged

workers of mercy stand in the biblical tradition and are engaged in such naming.

A second aspect of this proclamation also deserves our critical attention. It is the recognition that our naming of divine mercy will always be out of our limited and contextual human consciousness. Israel experienced and named divine compassion but in doing so they made of themselves a privileged people who in liberation would bring about the oppression of others by driving them from the land that they believed their liberating God had given to them. This is a profound challenge to mercy vision and storytelling. The ethic of mercy needs con-

stant critical engagement so that the liberation of one does not mean the oppression of another.

Womb Compassion and Steadfast Love

As Israel reflected back on and theologized its experience of liberation, further proclamations of divine compassion began to emerge. In these we begin to hear some of the multiple facets of divine compassion, the multiple naming of the God

who heard the cry of the oppressed. In Exod 33:19, the reader encounters the divine voice proclaiming: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

The covenants of *rachamim* (womb compassion) and *chesed* (covenant fidelity) are evoked in terms of mercy which is restorative of as well as creative of relationship.

To the *chamal*, the pity or compassion of Pharaoh's daughter is now added the *rachamim* of the divine in the spiral of mercy which includes naming the divine. This word, *rachamim*, is a significant one in Hebrew. It is from the root *rchm* and one of its noun forms is *rechem*, the word for "womb." And so the *rachamim* of God evokes the womb compassion of the midwives and Jochebed, mother of Moses, encountered earlier in the story.

As metaphor it will also, as Phyllis Tribble claims, journey through Israel's sacred story and it will be refracted through many other names.⁷ Already here in Exod 33:19, it is linked to the graciousness, the *chen* (*chnn*) of God. And almost on the tail of this proclamation comes another in Exod 34:6-7, proclamation of: "a God merciful/womb compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Here four key

refractions of mercy come together: *rachamim* or womb compassion is linked again to graciousness (*chen/chnn*) and to it is added *chesed* (steadfast covenant love) and *emet* (faithfulness).

The new element emerging here in Israel's naming of the God of mercy is the *chesed* of God. This is often translated as

"steadfast love" or "mercy." It introduces a new element into the exodus story, that of an ongoing and binding relationship of fidelity grounded in love. Out of the initial encounter of compassion, a relationship develops between Israel and their God and this relationship structures what Brueggemann calls a "new social imagination," "a covenant."⁸ This new social imagination shapes the people's relationships among themselves and their relationship with God. Both of these covenantal relationships can be broken. The covenants of *rachamim* (womb compassion) and *chesed* (covenant fidelity) are evoked in terms of mercy which is restorative of as well as creative of relationship.

Before the end of the Pentateuch, both Numbers (14:19) and Deuteronomy (30:3) will make these claims. The closing verses of Deuteronomy have God restoring Israel and show-

ing *rachamim* or womb compassion toward them as they are offered the opportunity to choose life rather than death (Deut 30:10-20). No doubt this insight into the fidelity of God's covenanted love contrasted with the awareness of the difficulty of living such fidelity in their human community. The Pentateuch's insight into divine mercy spirals back into Israel's unfolding story and unfolding life journey as believers sought to connect a vision of divine compassion with the culture of the community. They sought to structure their lives on their experience of womb compassion and steadfast love. And this structure was a new social experiment, a courageous political act, a shaping of spirit.

Mercy as Catherine's Work and Name for God

It is as if this same spiral characterized Catherine's journey into mercy. What she learnt from her father, from the Callaghans and from her engagement with the poor children, women at risk and the sick and dying of Dublin took her on a journey into compassion poured out and received from a loving God whom she came to know on that journey. Her subversive action of opening a house/school in Baggot Street in 1827, two years before Daniel O'Connell secured Catholic emancipation in 1829, was a subversive act like that of Shiprah and Puah. It was drawn forth from Catherine because of the plight of Catholic children and young women at risk. And like

the Israelites, it was in looking back on, reflecting on her experience that she was able to name the extraordinary faithful love of God for these poor. It was, in fact, Mary Ann Doyle who actually named the House opened in Dublin on 24 September 1827, the House of Mercy. Clearly this name reflected what was in her own heart and what she had perceived of and received from Catherine. Mercy as a naming of God or of her work, however, does not emerge explicitly in the earlier writings of Catherine or the memories of a younger Catherine. Rather what is named and remembered from those years prior to 24 September 1827 is her courageous compassion among those in desperate need. Mary Ann Doyle's naming of their work as merciful compassion spirals into a naming of the God who accompanied them in this work as mercy. Like Israel, Catherine takes up this divine name and makes it the hallmark of the congregation and of their divine-human encounter: "This is the true spirit of the Order, indeed, the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us."⁹

In this unfolding compassion, Catherine asked those engaged with her in mercy to shape a new social imagination, a new dream out of the experience of oppression. She gave the instruction that they "should be particularly kind, the kindest people on earth, with the tenderest pity and compassion for the poor."¹⁰ Within Catherine's growing body of women working among Dublin's oppressed Catholics of the mid-nineteenth century as in Israel, the human-human and the

divine-human encounter were caught up in a type of perichoresis or intimate dance, as one gave meaning to the other. Catherine's experience of encountering the pain of an oppressed people and the enabling of this to find expression in the wordless cry of the poor children and young women she encountered called forth the mercy of God and led to a new social imagination. She prepared a Rule and Constitutions just as today leaders in mercy prepare policies and statements of vision. In her documenting of her new social imagination, Catherine proclaimed mercy as "the principal

sionate dream for the human and earth communities.

Prophetic Vision of God's Mercy

The prophets in Israel were those who critically read the signs of their times and the living of the sacred tradition for their contemporaries. They evaluated the social imagination envisioned by their ancestors as it found expression in new and different times. They critiqued infidelity and re-articulated the tradition for their era. They were poets of the vision that had captured Israel as a result of their experi-

The prophets in Israel were those who critically read the signs of their times and the living of the sacred tradition for their contemporaries. They evaluated the social imagination envisioned by their ancestors as it found expression in new and different times.

path pointed out by Jesus Christ." She did not have access to the Hebrew Bible or Jewish Scriptures as we do today nor may she have been conscious of the process of unfolding compassion that we have just explored. Rather, it was the Jesus story which inspired and informed her vision of mercy. However, in order to explore this vision more fully, I will focus briefly on the prophetic vision from the Hebrew Bible which shaped Jesus, the prophet of God's compas-

ence of oppression and liberation. Divine compassion, therefore, was at the heart of their dream. We hear it in Jeremiah's pain: For the wound of my people is my heart wounded (Jer 8:21). He hears the cry of the poor, near to the heart of God¹¹ and from that place he takes up the prophetic task:

to pluck up and to pull down
to destroy and to overthrow
to build and to plant (Jer 1:10).

In Jeremiah as later in Jesus, we are taken to the heart of the prophetic mission to be compassion to the world. It entails the difficult road of critiquing the very core of one's own tradition, one's own context, one's own people. And Jeremiah gives us an insight into this calling in a way that we don't hear in other prophets:

O God, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; (earlier translations were even stronger: You have seduced me and I was seduced) you have overpowered me, and you have

ery as they strain toward the vision of divine compassion that they have known, like Jeremiah, near to the heart of the Compassionate One. They call on the created universe and human experience to give expression to what they have come to know.

And so Isaiah invites:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For God has comforted God's people, and will have compassion on the suffering ones. (Isa 49:13)

The prophet's role is to critique the ideologies which subvert and silence this cry, to enable the processing of the pain of the oppressed and to bring forth a new imagination.

prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of God has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention God, or speak any more in God's name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." (Jer 20:7-10)

In the prophets and in the psalmists, we hear poetic imag-

The psalmist extends the imagery of the womb compassion of God to encompass male and female. As a father has compassion for his children, so our God has compassion for those who reverence God (Ps 103:13).

It is also a psalmist who provides what will be the last of these poetic images explored in this paper. It is that of perichoresis or dynamic divine embrace:

Steadfast love (*chesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*) will meet;

Righteousness (*zedek*) and peace (*shalom*) will embrace.

Faithfulness (*emet*) shall spring up from the ground

and justice (*zedek*) shall look down from heaven (Ps 85:10-11)

As we listen to these prophetic voices, we are drawn again into the spiral of mercy. The prophet, the poet who sees, hears and is touched by the cry of the most vulnerable is, indeed near to the heart of God because God also sees, hears and is touched by that same cry. The prophet's role is to critique the ideologies which subvert and silence this cry, to enable the processing of the pain of the oppressed and to bring forth a new imagination. Israel's prophets did this creatively in poetry and imagery which shaped a new religious imagination that in its turn sustained compassionate justice. The task of leaders in mercy today is to discern the prophets and the poets, the ones whose compassionate heart has brought them near to the heart of our God. From this place they will offer metaphors and images of that divine compassion that will ignite the flame in others and

Just two verses later, the most intimate of human love, the love of a mother as we saw in Jochabed becomes the lens:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isa 49:15)

Then the experience of the fidelity and longevity of the earth itself enable the prophet to proclaim the *chesed* and the *rachamim* of God circling a vision of *shalom*, the outcome of justice:

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says your God, who has compassion on you. (Isa 54:10)

sustain them for the difficult journey of enacting compassionate justice in a way that is transformative of our world.

Later Prophets of Mercy: Jesus and Catherine

As we look out from this place where we have now arrived in our storytelling, we see two other persons in our sacred stories, Jesus and Catherine, both of whom incarnate divine compassion. Both of them courageously trod the prophetic path.

As we listen to the stories of Jesus and Catherine, we find both of them firmly planted geographically (Palestine and Ireland's Dublin) and located historically (the first and nineteenth centuries of the common era). Both of their lives were affected politically (both in contexts of occupation and its attendant oppression making the lives of the occupied and poor especially vulnerable) and culturally (Hellenised Judaism and Anglicized Irish Catholicism). Each read the signs of the times in light of a compassionate God who was moved by the plight of the suffering poor. A prophetic vision shaped the mission and ministry of each. It seems from the gospels of Matthew and Mark that Jesus was impelled by the vision of a new *basileia* (reign or empire). The *basileia* that he and the Palestinian Jews of his day knew was that of the empire Rome. Jesus subversively used the language of empire, and like Shiphrah and Puah, critiqued the political ideology of his day. The *basileia* which Jesus proclaimed to be at hand was that of God or of the

heavens. It was an alternative to Rome. It was a vision inspired by the prophets of Israel, a vision that was associated with the compassionate divine presence. It was the vision of justice, peace and steadfast love in an embrace that would transform the lives of the poor whom Jesus encountered daily in his home town of Nazareth and as he walked the roads of Galilee. He went about, Matthew's gospel says, proclaiming that this *basileia* was at hand and inviting people to change their lives, to process their pain and with him to imagine a new community.

As the vision of Jesus was shaped by the prophets of his tradition, Catherine's was shaped by Jesus, the embodiment of prophetic transformation. In the second paragraph of the Rule and Constitutions, the document

(Rule and Constitutions 3.1) and says that in their "tender love for the poor (Rule and Constitutions 2:1) and in undertaking their task "to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor" (Rule and Constitutions 3;1), workers of mercy are continuing the work of Jesus. Jesus' *basileia* vision embodied in first century Palestine found new expression in Catherine's nineteenth century Dublin as mercy poured out.

Singled Out for Compassion

What is it that the prophet Jesus did to enact the *basileia* vision in remote Galilee in the early decades of the first century of the common era? The Gospels show Jesus teaching/preaching and healing. Repeatedly, the Gospels speak of Jesus being moved with compassion. The Greek

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which expresses her new social imagination, as well as in the first paragraph of chapter 3, she articulates what could be considered the vision that shaped her life. It was the Jesus who said whatever you do to the least shall be considered done to me (Matt 25:40). The significance of this text lies in its being used twice by Catherine who draws on actual scriptural texts quite sparingly. She names mercy as "the principal path pointed out by Jesus"

verb *splangdizomai* carries connotations of being moved in the depth of ones being, one's entrails, echoes of the divine womb compassion of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus sees the crowds "harassed and helpless," being offered no vision, no leadership in their struggle under Roman oppression, and Jesus is moved with compassion (Matt 9:36). These are the crowds that Jesus teaches, offering them a vision encapsulated in the beatitudes.

Education was seen by this prophet of divine compassion as a way out of oppression. By subversive action, a way of publicly processing pain, a new social imagination could be shaped. Jesus was also moved to compassion by the plight of the sick. Many texts speak generally of his healing of all sorts of diseases and sicknesses (Matt 4:23; 9:35;

As Catherine sought to embody the compassion of Jesus who considered what was done to the least as done to him, her heart was moved toward those she saw as most needy. These were poor Catholic children, the sick and dying and women under threat of sexual exploitation. The first paragraph of her Rule and Constitutions shows the

relegated to a location one block back from the main thoroughfare. She placed her schools under the National Board of Education and she pioneered the monitorial system for girls in Catholic Ireland.¹² She sent young women out onto the streets of Dublin to care for sufferers of cholera during a number of epidemics. Mary Clare (Georgina) Moore tells a most moving story of Catherine's bringing of an infant whose mother had just died of cholera to her own room in order to care for it.¹³ Hers were subversive actions on behalf of the most needy of Dublin. They critiqued the ideology of oppression and enabled a processing of pain.

Mercy as Expansion of Social Boundaries

Two stories, read in tandem, one from the Gospel of Matthew, and one from Catherine's life, show how the needy who stood before Jesus and Catherine extended the vision of mercy in ways that took them more intimately into the heart of the Divine Compassionate One. We can imagine that whatever the experiences behind each of these stories, that they took Jesus and Catherine to the boundary, to that liminal space where new prophetic vision becomes possible. It would not have been for either a new place but these were new encounters with boundary points which opened up spaces for a more diverse group to participate in the fruits of the *basileia*, in the fruits of mercy.

The Jesus story is that of his encounter with Justa, the woman

Two stories, read in tandem, one from the Gospel of Matthew, and one from Catherine's life, show how the needy who stood before Jesus and Catherine extended the vision of mercy in ways that took them more intimately into the heart of the Divine Compassionate One.

Mark 1:32–34; 3:10–12). Lepers and the blind specifically draw forth Jesus' compassion (Matt 20:34; Mark 1:41). It is not perfectly clear why these two groups would have been specifically singled out for compassion in first century Palestine but it was perhaps because they were the most alienating of afflictions. Leprosy in particular marked the sufferer as an outcast. Jesus also has compassion on the crowds who were hungry and he fed them, enacting the *basileia* vision as an act of redistributing resources. The needs of first century residents of Palestine drew forth particular and concrete responses from the prophet Jesus who knew divine compassion from the God of Mercy, the one who heard the cry of the oppressed poor.

work of mercy characterized by "instruction of poor girls, visitation of the sick and protection of distressed women of good character" (Rule and Constitutions 1.1). It was vulnerable young women, uneducated children and the sick and dying of her day that impelled her to subversive action like that of the circle of women of the exodus story.

As noted earlier, she began educating poor Catholic children in Baggot Street before Catholic emancipation. She built a house of Mercy on one of the most fashionable streets of Dublin when Catholic institutions were supposed to be concealed from public view. It is interesting to note that Archbishop Daniel Murray was not allowed to build his pro-cathedral on O'Connell Street, but was

called Canaanite (Matt 15:21–28). (Justa is a name that might be given to replace her anonymity) Catherine's story is an encounter with a young woman who came late at night to the House of Mercy.¹⁴ Justa's story is one which tends to shock us. Jesus encounters her on the racial boundaries between her space and his. Jesus and his coworkers for the *basileia* vision move back from the boundary to the center and take up a position against her. Jesus initially ignores her while the disciples object to her crying out (15:23). Then Jesus claims that the *basileia* vision cannot extend to her crying need, the healing of her daughter who is demon possessed, as a threat to social order. Readers are surprised that the call for mercy by Justa meets such opposition, augmented when Jesus asserts his argument with the proverb: It's not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs (15:26).

Justa has, however, critiqued the centralist ideology attributed to Jesus and she has processed her own pain so that she not only cries out for mercy in a way that would touch the heart of God but she maintains her cry through and beyond attempts to silence it. Her response to Jesus' last rejection is subversive, a critique of the centralist ideology attributed to him in the story. Justa's courageous compassion for her daughter broadens Jesus' understanding of compassion. Finally Jesus recognizes that she has taken him to the very heart of divine compassion. He says, "As you desire so too God desires" (15:28). The prophetic vision of mercy is never

complete even in Jesus, the embodiment of divine compassion. The cry of the most needy will continually extend this vision.

Mary Ann Doyle tells a gentler story of how desperate need can expand the response of women of mercy. One evening there is a "violent ringing" on the door which is by this time "secured by the chain." It challenges Catherine and Mary Ann to extend their boundaries. They cautiously open the door to a "very young girl who implored a shel-

some bread and milk. A note later in the story indicates, however, that the young girl had been refused admission at the Sisters of Charity in Stanhope Street. Like Justa in the scriptural story, she certainly refused to give up. While Catherine procured a "safe lodging" for the young woman at Little James's Street, she was, in the words of Mary Ann Doyle "not exactly taken into the house." (i.e., the House of Mercy). Catherine's care of the young woman and her finding of a place

We need to continually extend the vision of compassion narrated in Exodus, the prophets, Jesus, and Catherine, a vision evoked by people in distress. Those who responded to persons in distress learned compassion in acting on behalf of those cried out to a heart that could hear them.

ter for the night." The hesitation of response is communicated in the description Mary Ann gives: "the wild glare of her large dark eyes, the disorder of her hair and dress naturally excited unfavorable suspicions." It was, however, her "great distress," her courageous refusal to be daunted by any suspicions that touched the heart of Catherine who "would not refuse her relief."

It is interesting at this point to compare the reference to bread in each story. While Jesus says that it is not fair to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs, Catherine brings the young girl into the hall and gives her

for her meant that Baggot Street became known as "a great house where every sort of people were let in."¹⁵ Catherine's boundaries, like those of Jesus, were extended to include the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

These two stories demonstrate responses to the theme I posed at the outset about being captured by mercy and compassion. We need to continually extend the vision of compassion narrated in Exodus, the prophets, Jesus, and Catherine, a vision evoked by people in distress. Those who responded to per-

sons in distress learned compassion in acting on behalf of those cried out to a heart that could hear them. In the listening, hearing, and responding beyond existing boundaries, the compassionate individual and community discovered the Merciful One, and were drawn into divine compassion.

I do not suggest that biblical mercy is a fixed formula, a finished product. Rather, I have invited readers into a process in which we all stand and for which we are all responsible. We have seen that the prophet of divine compassion learns compassion among the oppressed. The prophet, in turn, embodies that compassion in responding to suffering, and names the experience of divine compassion as mercy. Mercy is grounded in the unfolding story of prophetic awareness which knows and names God as merciful. The biblical story and the tradition of Catherine offer us the process. They invite us into the spiral of mercy in our place and in our day. They invite us to learn com-

passion as we encounter the plight of the most needy and as we come to know and name the divine Compassion that embraces all our yearnings toward a just, compassionate and faithful society. We seek to name and live this dream of a transformed society in our day. The dream is captured by telling the story of mercy as one of God's names.



Notes

1. I would like to thank Sr. Anne Hetherington for the invitation to participate with her in this pilgrimage and all the participants for the shared exploration of mercy during the ten days in Dublin.
2. Helen Marie Burns, "Catherine's Legacy: Kindness and Patience will not suffice," *The MAST Journal* 6.2 (1996): 6.
3. Carol Estelle Wheeler, *Catherine: A Reflection on Values from the Mercy Tradition* (Baltimore: Mercy High School, 1991), 3.
4. Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 10-16.
5. Brueggemann, *Hope*, 16-20.
6. Brueggemann, *Hope*, 19.
7. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 31-71.
8. Brueggemann, *Hope*, 20-24.
9. Mary Ignatia Neumann, Ed. *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), 331.
10. *Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley* (Saint Louis: Vincentian Press, 1927), 137.
11. This phraseology is informed by Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context, Religious Life in a New Millennium Volume One* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 138-144.
12. Angela Bolster, "Catherine McAuley: From the Edges of History to the Center of Meaning," *The MAST Journal* 6.2 (1996), 4.
13. Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 97-98.
14. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, 50.
15. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, 50.

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), Mary Sullivan (Rochester), Patricia Talone (Merion), Mary Daly (Connecticut), Carol Rittner (Dallas), and Kathleen McAlpin (Merion). Subscriptions correspondence to Marilee Howard, R.S.M. (Auburn) at 8380 Colesville Rd., #300, Silver Spring, MD 20910, e-mail mhoward@sistersofmercy.org. 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.

Mary of Magdala

A Ministerial Partner with Jesus in John 20

Judith Schubert, R.S.M.

The name of Mary Magdalene prevails as a familiar one to Christians today. If asked to describe her, most would reply that she was a prostitute. However, nowhere in any biblical texts or later primary texts is this powerful woman identified as one.

Mary of Magdala remains one of the most prominent women leaders within New Testament literature. She appears in all four of the canonical Gospels and receives singular appearances by the risen Lord in Mark 16 and John 20. The tradition of her leadership was so effective in the early centuries of the Church that a gospel called the Gospel of Mary, which was entitled in her honor, circulated among the Christian communities in the early centuries. In John 20:1, 2, 11–18, Mary of Magdala emerges as the first Apostle of the risen Jesus. She is the one to whom Jesus chooses to appear first and alone.

Background

Mary of Magdala emerges as an important figure¹ in the gospel after Jesus has been raised from the dead in John 20.² She discovers the empty tomb and shares the news with Simon Peter and the other disciple (11:1–2). She is the first person to whom the resurrected Jesus appears (11:11–18). Mary remains, therefore, an integral part of the entire chapter.

John 20 describes both the resurrection and Jesus' appearances that follow. The chapter divides naturally into two major sections: vv. 1–18 detail the events at the tomb on Easter morning; and, vv. 19–31 describe the experience of the disciples during the week after Jesus' resurrection. Each section offers two sets of responses about the glorious event. The first response at the tomb describes the reactions of Peter and the Beloved Disciple (vv. 1–10), while the second recounts those of Mary of Magdala (vv. 11–18). Mary is the recipient of Jesus'

only resurrection appearance to one person. John's gospel places her twice at the tomb (20:1–2; 11ff), an emphasis that marks her prominence.

Most likely, Jesus' appearance to Mary reflects one of the oldest resurrection stories, despite its absence in 1 Cor 15:5ff, the earliest account of the resurrection in the NT.³ In both Mark 16:7 (first ending) and 16:9 (appendix) Mary of Magdala was among the first ones instructed to tell the 'good news' to the others. Moreover, in Mark 16:9 Jesus also appears to her alone, rather than in a group. In Matt 28:7–10, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary, who arrive at the empty tomb first, are given orders twice to proclaim the news to the others, first by the angel at the tomb and soon after by the risen Jesus. While the other gospel accounts (Mark 16:1; Matt 28:1; Luke 24:10) include Mary at the tomb on Easter morning, they list her among other women who visit the tomb.

In the fourth gospel the Markan appendix tradition expands into a brief dialogue between the risen Jesus and Mary. It then continues with Jesus' command to her to proclaim the news of his resurrection to the other disciples. John 20, then, develops the strong gospel tradition about Jesus' choice of Mary.⁴ Thus, he promotes the undeniable importance of Mary both in the life of Jesus and in early Church leadership.

Mary of Magdala Converses with the Resurrected Jesus

John 20:1–2, 11–18

John 20 opens with Mary going to the tomb before day light. Here darkness signifies not only pre-dawn but also her lack of understanding as she encounters the empty tomb. When Mary finds the stone removed, she goes to Jesus' other disciples, asserting ignorance of his body's location (v. 2).

The question of "where" Jesus is dominates the first section of the chapter.⁵

Mary returns to the tomb and weeps outside it, lamenting the loss of Jesus' body (v. 11). In this scene she receives two appearances, one from two angels and the other from the risen Jesus. Neither Peter nor the Beloved Disciple, who had also been to the tomb but who had returned home, is privy to such appearances. Both the angels and the risen Jesus pose the same question to her, namely, "Woman, why are you weeping?" (vv. 13, 15). The repetition of the question suggests Mary's great grief and their superior knowledge.

Jesus adds, "For whom are you looking?" to his original inquiry. The question maintains a central christological focus and continues the motif of the quest for Jesus' whereabouts. Throughout this pericope Mary continually seeks Jesus. Even though she hears his voice, she does not recognize Jesus because of her grief. However, when Jesus calls her by name, Mary turns and recognizes him immediately. She had been seeking the body of the dead Jesus, but she finds the living Lord of the resurrection.⁶ Spontaneously, she responds, "Rabbouni." (v.16). This respected term of endearment marks her as a true disciple, one who clearly recognizes the "teacher."⁷ Her sorrow turns to recognition and joy as she turns toward the risen Jesus.

In v. 17, Jesus commands Mary to proclaim his resurrection and ascension to the others. Thus, Mary is the first and only person to whom Jesus first entrusts this vital message. This point remains very important in the fourth gospel.⁸ In John's gospel Jesus' only solo postresurrection appearance is to

Mary of Magdala. To this marginalized woman Jesus imparts his apostolic mission. Thus, Mary becomes the first apostle of the risen Lord.

Mary responds very favorably to Jesus' trust in her and to his command. She departs from the empty tomb and returns to the other disciples (v. 18). Mary "discovers that the Lord is now present in the community of the disciples. Jesus has gone away and has come to them as he promised in John 14:28."⁹ As such Jesus' whereabouts transcends physical location. Subsequently, in John's gospel Jesus' spirit permeates those who believe in him. When Mary arrives, she announces the 'good news,' "I have seen the Lord." These powerful words echo Paul's assertion to the Corinthians that indeed he is a true apostle like the early Christian leaders, Peter and James. He questions in strong rhetoric, "Am I not an apostle?" because he has seen the risen Jesus. (1 Cor 9:1). Paul uses his witness of the risen Jesus to assure the Corinthians that his apostleship is secured. Being a witness to the risen Jesus and being commissioned by him to preach the gospel meet the criteria of apostle in the early Church. The fourth gospel clearly portrays Mary of Magdala this way (vv. 17-18). Mary, who the risen Jesus chooses to proclaim the 'good news' to the others, brings new life and hope in her creative role as model disciple and apostle.

Conclusion

In John 20, Mary of Magdala functions as partners in Jesus' post-resurrection ministry. She emerges as recognized apostolic witness and leader of the early Church. Truly, her effective role transforms the Christian community to a greater belief in Jesus.

Mary's role as apostle in John 20 surpasses those of her male associates. When Jesus deliberately chooses Mary to be the bearer of this vital "good news," he makes is clear that women were chosen by God to minister to the Christian community through their courageous leadership, strength and example. May Mary of Magdala remind the women of today's Church that their clear vision and enlightened wisdom are urgently needed to bring growth-filled change to the world today.

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Notes

1. This assertion contradicts many male scholars, whose harmful biased views either bypass any discussion of the importance of Mary of Magdala or treat the section about her in John 20 as a minor unofficial visit by the resurrected Jesus. Cf. J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 503f; R. Brown; P. Minear, "The Promise of Life in the Gospel of John," in *Theol Today* 40:4, (Jan, 1993), 494; C. Talbert, *Reading John*, 250f; B. Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 179.
2. The evangelist does not mention any women from the conclusion of the Book of Signs up until John 19:24, the scene at the foot of the cross where Mary of Magdala is first identified. In this instance the evangelist follows the Markan tradition, where Mary also enters the gospel at the death of Jesus.
3. R. Brown, "The Resurrection in John 20—A Series of Diverse Reactions," *Worship* 64 (May, 1990), 198f.
4. John 21, an appendix of post-resurrection appearances, centers on the Beloved Disciple and Peter in leadership roles within the community. The absence of Mary of Magdala in any leadership capacity suggests that one of the purposes of John 21 is to correct the earlier powerful tradition of Mary as chosen leader of the Easter gospel message.
5. In John 20:1–10 some contrast the belief of the Beloved Disciple, who see the linen wrappings in the tomb, finally enters it and "believes" (vv. 6, 8) with the so-called lack of faith of Mary. However, as Dorothy Lee reminds the reader, no text reports that Mary ever saw such clothing inside the tomb so that she could believe or disbelieve. Moreover, in John 20 her faith deepens as her hearing and sight become clearer despite her deep grief. D. Lee, "Partnership in Easter Faith: The Role of Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20," *JSNT* 58 (1995), 40.
6. The question of seeking in 11:15b forms an inclusion with John 1:38ff, the call of discipleship. When Andrew and Simon, Philip and Nathaniel sought fullness in their lives, they found the living Jesus. When Mary of Magdala sought the dead body of Jesus, she found Life itself in the risen Lord.
7. Kysar (*John's Story*, 87), likens Mary's recognition when Jesus calls her by name to the story in John 10:3, where the shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Cf. Peter Ellis, *The Genius of John*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1984), 286; D. Lee, "Partnership in Easter Faith," 44.
8. In other traditions such as in 1 Cor 15:5 or Luke 24:34, the risen Lord appears first to Peter.
9. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 182.

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Martha and Mary

Integrating or Disintegrating Images for Action and Contemplation

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

Symbols and images in our Christian tradition tend to reside uncritically in our imaginations with entire trains of associations, feelings, and meanings attached to them. These meanings and interpretations often have specific historical, social contexts which shaped them, but which may have become obscured over time. These symbols then take on a life of their own, especially when they are embedded in Scripture and reinforced by preaching, art, and popular culture. We continue to be influenced helpfully or destructively by various aspects of this received tradition unless we critically reflect on their potential to continue to maintain oppression or to support liberating, healthy spiritual growth in us.

It seems to me that part of our contemporary difficulty in integrating contemplation and action in our lives as women,

religious or lay, has something to do with our failure to criticize the images which maintain this dichotomy and to creatively imagine this integration in images or stories which might foster and support such wholeness. Our received images sometimes serve to reinforce the dichotomy because of our failure to notice other interests at work in the images or in their uses in the spiritual tradition.

Schüssler Fiorenza's Four-Stage Model

Within feminist biblical interpretation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has developed a four-fold strategy for reading received biblical texts: They are ideological suspicion, historical reconstruction, theoethical assessment, and creative imagination. Basically, these four strategies help develop feminist critical

consciousness. A hermeneutics of suspicion "seeks to detect and analyze not only the androcentric presuppositions and patriarchal interests of the text's contemporary interpretations and historical reception, but also those of biblical texts themselves."¹ This strategy assumes that all biblical texts are embedded in a patriarchal culture, religion, and society, and have typically been interpreted by men.

The second reading strategy, historical reconstruction that she has elsewhere² called a hermeneutics of remembrance, seeks to discover remnants and historical information which supports a retrieval of women's actual history and roles in early Christianity which was subsequently obscured in the androcentric biases and interests in the received texts. This strategy restores a history to women in the early church.

The third reading strategy, a hermeneutics of proclamation, "ethically evaluates and theologically assesses" how a biblical text either contributes to maintaining oppression against women or how it might foster female empowerment and women's struggle for liberation. This assessment takes into consideration the present audience of women and the effect a given text might have

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on her within her own context. When and for whom might this text provide nourishing food? For instance, encouraging a woman to love another as Christ has loved us when the woman is in an abusive situation could serve to maintain her continued abuse and the patriarchal assumptions of such a marriage which maintains male dominance and female subservience.

Finally, the fourth strategy, a hermeneutics of liberating imagination rewrites or reenvisions the story in a way that supports women's empowerment and struggle for justice in church and society.

These basic reading strategies may be fruitfully employed in reading historical texts from the spiritual tradition as well as biblical texts. These strategies point to fruitful processes of reflection and entirely new interpretations of traditional stories and long-maintained impasses in women's spiritual lives. I have also been struck how often women's contemplative experience enables them to do such creative reimagination and even claim authority on the basis of recognizing liberating possibility through their visionary experience which finds a way through impasses which serve to maintain women's subordination.

Martha-Mary Dichotomies

I propose to explore this theme of our inherited dichotomy between contemplation and action by something of a meditation on the figures of Martha and Mary. This is not a piece of technical exegesis, although I have been

influenced by various feminist readings of this story over the last twenty years³ of feminist interpretations of Luke 10:38–42. I am more simply reflecting on and playing with the images of this story as they may have affected us negatively or positively as women reading and praying with this story and expanding the range of possible interpretations by drawing on some of these principles of feminist biblical interpretation, extrabiblical legends, and a less well-known medieval tradition which favored Martha.⁴

that Jesus himself had to rein her in. Yet many women do identify with her in a way which creates and maintains internal conflicts within themselves as well as diminishes the importance or significance of women's work or activity in any sphere. At the very least, Martha's treatment appears to be unfair regardless of any actual defects in her personality or complaints. Mary wins the praise prize and there is no second prize for Martha.

Few women necessarily entirely identify with Mary, passively sitting at Jesus' feet. After

If interpreted as mutually exclusive feminine archetypes, Martha gradually came to symbolize the woman who works too much, either at home or in public life and Mary the serenely, passive and conflict-free woman of contemplation.

The scriptural parable of Martha and Mary has long symbolized seemingly irreconcilable aspects of our lives as women. If interpreted as mutually exclusive feminine archetypes, Martha gradually came to symbolize the woman who works too much, either at home or in public life and Mary the serenely, passive and conflict-free woman of contemplation. In patriarchal interpretations of the story, no woman in her right mind (the one tamed to conformity) wants to identify with Martha, who often appears so busy, even bossy,

all, do you know any women, cloistered contemplatives included, who actually do only that? Luke's parable seems to give us a caricature of each woman. When the parable stands alone separated from its larger context, we are often troubled by the friction even competition between the two sisters. Not only is Mary somehow the better disciple; but also once Jesus, as the male guest and authority figure affirms her choice, it is nearly impossible to restore mutuality between the sisters or to restore esteem for Martha.

Friends of Jesus and Ecclesial Leaders

Even more disturbing, these two sisters, who in John's gospel, a completely different story world and ecclesial context than that of Luke's parable, were among Jesus' dearest friends. Their home was his place of welcome, hospitality, and refuge. Both women were recognized as leaders in the Johannine community. Both become positive models of female disciples. Martha speaks resurrection faith in the face of her brother's death equivalent to the petrine christological confession in the synoptics. Mary is the disciple her anoints Jesus for burial, the positive example of discipleship in contrast to Judas.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion suggests in her reading of this same passage that the story itself is used by Luke to mute the role of women like Martha in the early Christian community.

Why is it that Luke's version "stuck" in our imaginations, creating this forced choice between the two sisters and what they came to symbolize? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion suggests in her reading of this same passage that the story itself is used by Luke to mute the role of women like Martha in the early Christian community. Martha's treatment by Jesus represents not Jesus' actual

behavior or attitudes but that of an increasingly androcentric church which is prescribing Mary's role, passive listener, as the preferred role of women in the community. Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that as women identify with Martha they internalize the conflict that is in the text itself, intentionally fulfilling patriarchal desires that Christian women relinquish leadership within the community.

The strategy of remembrance and reconstruction discovers that Luke and Acts has eliminated women in the ministry of word and table (*diakonia*) which survive in the Pauline Epistles and the Johannine community. Here, she notes that the

interpretation have maintained its women-restricting intentions up to the present time.

Was it Actually a Harmonious Relationship?

Yet perhaps, the sisters themselves had a better relationship with one another than the Lucan parable suggests. Perhaps, we can retrieve these sisters as an integrating symbol through the play of imagination as Fiorenza encourages us to do.

Most women today have grown accustomed to feeling fragmented or simply pulled in multiple directions at once. There is a psychological truth to the parable which still holds true. The story of these two sisters and centuries of commentary on it only too accurately epitomize the split between work (both unpaid work at home and all forms of public life) and spirituality. Commonly, the split might also apply to that between work and prayer, action and contemplation, housework and leisure. There is much for reflection!

As you remember, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home while "Mary sits at the Lord's feet." In the meantime, Martha involves herself in the tasks of hospitality. Eventually, Martha approaches Jesus with the request: "Rabbi, tell her to help me . . ." and he replies, "Martha, Martha, you are burdened about many things. Mary has chosen the good portion and it shall not be taken from her." (Luke 10:41-2)

How we, women, have struggled with this story! Its common interpretation sets the two sisters against one another—maybe

even competing for the attention of the most important male in the entourage. We want to be like Mary, apparently free from mundane or domestic tasks to listen to Jesus, enjoy his presence, sit down for a change—yet we find ourselves serving and serving, caught up with our work even while we yearn for contemplative repose or the enjoyment of more mutual relationships.

Typically, interpretations of the story have used Mary as a symbol of the contemplative life and Martha of the active life, identified with being too busy about mundane domestic tasks. Even in our own feminine imaginations, we see her as too concerned with the details of preparing dinner to enjoy her guests. Something about her rings true in terms of someone who serves from a need to be needed, or someone who is compulsively busy. If these are dispositions with which we struggle, the story challenges this. But it can do so only if we are free to identify equally with either woman. So long as one is good and the other not; one role ours and the other not, the story ceases to invite us to integration.

But is this work/prayer split the whole story? Could it be that Martha as a type began accumulating negatively charged, gendered reactions to a woman who is somehow stepping outside of her place? Might she be a competent, active leader whose influence must be constrained in order to keep her and women like her in their places, restricted to the domestic sphere, which is not all that important anyway? Haven't we often felt such

gendered reactions in our own active ministerial lives? Ought we not be a little bit suspicious of this line of interpretation which most of us have unconsciously assimilated?

Location of Martha-Mary in Luke's Narrative

Placing the story in its wider context opens further lines of interpretation. It occurs in a pivotal section of Luke's gospel—the

hospitality, a key feature of the kingdom of God. When the parable is detached from the larger narrative, the force of Martha's positive activity of "welcoming" and hospitality becomes obscured. Jesus and the disciples have arrived at Jerusalem, Bethany marking the outskirts of this destination.

The episodes sandwiched in between these two stories are the sending out of the seventy-two disciples, the instructions for missionary life, and the story of the

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first missionary journey. At the beginning of the literary unit, the Samaritans refuse hospitality to Jesus and his disciples because they are on their way to Jerusalem, and in so doing the Samaritans reject the gospel (Luke 9:51–56). They are notoriously inhospitable. A general principle in biblical interpretation looks for a chiasmic structure to illumine meaning and themes within a literary unit.⁵ The structure of this section does not disappoint us because it ends with Martha's active hospitality, welcoming Jesus and his band of disciples into her home. Symbolically, she embraces the gospel through her activity of

Good Samaritan. Jesus' prayer of praise to his Abba, expressing gratitude for the wonderful works of grace done through the evangelizing disciples, is the center of the section. In a chiasmic structure, the center is the main point. In this section, it is this praise to God for activity in the world through the disciples.

At this central point in the story, the disciples meet the lawyer whose question about eternal life leads to the "answer" in the Good Samaritan parable. (Luke 10:25–37). This parable ends with the admonition, "Go and do the same," namely, to treat one's enemies as a neighbor with compassion.

Is the Focus Inclusion of Mary in Full Discipleship?

The next stop on their itinerary is Martha's house. Martha appears to model this inclusivity of care intuitively in her hospitality without benefit of Jesus' explicit instruction about how she is to act. She generously welcomes Jesus and the disciples into her home. She exemplifies the ideal disciple—universal hospitality being one of the marks of discipleship along with compassion. At the same time, Martha speaks her mind, apparently burdened by the details of hospitality. I wonder how the "Good Samaritan" felt as his journey was interrupted by the man left for dead by the roadside. His story would give him no one to whom to complain or to confide in even if he felt like it.

Jesus does not praise the priest and Levite who led the scholarly, contemplative life of the day available to men in his culture. Instead, he advocates an inclusive care and compassion for everyone, men and women, Jews and Greeks, Samaritans and . . . Is Jesus' remark about Mary, his defense of her call to full discipleship and apostolic life? Could this be a form of inclusive hospitality on Jesus' part and not a commentary about Martha at all?

This text has been used to defend Mary's obliviousness to necessary household tasks. She is often admired as a symbol of the idealized contemplative—off somewhere in prayer. This interpretation developed by connecting this story with the chapter on prayer which follows rather than

looking at the larger narrative unit to which the story is a conclusion and resolution of the dilemma posed by inhospitality.

Martha and Mary Exemplify Discipleship

The story itself suggests something more startling. Mary is welcome to participate in the disciple group and seemingly is excused from "women's work." She is admitted to the public role of *disciple* with the others who were traveling with Jesus. "To sit at a Rabbi's feet" meant to apprentice oneself as a disciple—to study Torah with the rabbi, the teacher. Recent feminist interpretation of this section points out that Mary is welcome to listen but not to question and speak as even the twelve-year-old Jesus does in Luke 2:46.⁶ It suggests that this split between the sisters is not relational, but a strategy which first splits the two ministries of preaching and table service (*diakonia*) which were a single unity and then subordinates one to the other and until women's participation in either disappears altogether from the text and historical memory.

If we resist this splitting, both women, in different ways, can be seen to be exemplary models of discipleship. Both assume roles that are usually performed by men. In Middle Eastern culture, the head of the household is the one who offers hospitality to the guest or stranger. (Remember Abraham entertaining the three angelic visitors, while Sarah eavesdrops from behind the tent?) In this instance, we must assume that Martha is the head of the house-

hold. When she appears in John's gospel and speaks resurrection faith, it is clear that she is the head of the house church and in charge of the funeral services. Mary studies at the feet of her teacher and Jesus defends her right to participate in that form of theological education. Androcentric interpretations of the text, ones which maintain women's social status relative to the male to whom they are attached, prefers to lock her safely away in a cloister or banish her to the desert where she would be no threat to her codisciples.

Both women, we find, are focused in different ways on single-hearted devotion to the Christ. Jesus is the center of attention of Martha's hospitality and the center of Mary's as *disciple*, one who is being taught. In the Gospels, women are *called* and follow Christ through the symbols of their working world. Men leave boats and nets; women leave water jars. Men are called at work fishing or collecting taxes; women are called while drawing water or cooking. All are focused on Jesus and the way of life he lived and taught. Both leave behind something symbolic of their ordinary lives.

This parable of the two women exemplifies two equally appropriate responses to Jesus and the reigning of God. The first is welcome, hospitality, and community leadership. The second is receptivity to receiving the word, the teaching, and the one who teaches, the Rabbi. We presume both will continue to share in the life of full apostolic discipleship in which each one teaches, evangelizes, and converts others.

Were we to welcome these expansions of meaning Martha and Mary might represent for us, once we see through their androcentric intentions, we would be well on our way to healing the false dichotomies set up by the story and reinforced by subsequent interpretation. Retrieval of the historical situation of women disciples and interpretation yielded by other rhetorical clues has already expanded the possibilities for these two women to symbolize a diversity of gifts functioning in a restored harmony among women disciples.

Later Interpretation of Martha-Mary by Eckhart

Interestingly enough, the fertile imaginations of later followers of Jesus often did surprising things with the figures and themes from Scripture or other extrabiblical sources which enabled them to develop innovative lines of interpretation in order to address a contemporary issue through these symbols. For instance, Meister Eckhart preached a sermon in which Martha's active, robust, and lively energy is actually preferred to the more passive and, from a "conventional" male point-of-view, less problematic Mary. The gist of his interpretation is *not* that Martha is jealous of Mary but that Mary is still immature, seduced by the pleasure of Jesus' company (a symbol for becoming stuck in emotional consolation in prayer) and needs to learn to integrate her God-centeredness with works of compassion. Martha's prayer-request is for Mary's development and

integration and that Jesus' reply indicates to her that this will be fulfilled. Eckhart's sermon shows how Martha is the better model for Christian life because of her maturity and experience. In Eckhart's treatment, Martha symbolizes the integrated contemplative—a woman who does not lose her capacity for contemplation when she is fully active and engaged with worldly work. Would we heard more preaching like this! Or better yet, did this kind of preaching ourselves!

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Eckhart's cultural world included local traditions influenced by women who were freshly asserting their ability and call to participate in apostolic life. Eckhart knew Beguine women who lived lives of intense contemplation which they combined with the works of mercy. Eckhart judged this "mixed life" of active contemplatives superior to and more in harmony with the gospel than those contemplatives withdrawn from apostolic life. In the middle ages, in France, Germany, and Italy, "Martha houses" or convents were institutions which housed this active-contemplative activity.

Eckhart's Adaptation of Legendary Material

Further, *The Golden Legend*, compiled around 1260 by Jacobus de Voragine, was the most widely read book after the Bible in the late middle ages. These richly embellished stories flesh out the gospel images of Martha and Mary quite dramatically. In this legendary material, both Martha and Mary live an apostolic life of missionary journeys, preaching, and miraculous

healing together with their brother Lazarus. They were put on a raft or boat without oars, but landed at Marseilles and worked in Southern France. Martha is identified with the woman cured from the issue of blood and as a powerful protector who overcomes a local dragon, freeing the people from its tyranny.⁷

Eckhart freely weaves elements from all of this material as appropriate symbols for his own theology of the spiritual life. He freely adapts the Scripture in order to use the story as a metaphorical vehicle for his teaching. He presented his sermon text thus:

"Saint Luke writes in the gospel: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ went into a small city. A woman named Martha received him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at our Lord's feet and listened to his words. But Martha went about and served the dear Christ' (Luke 10:38-40). Eckhart portrays Martha's relationship to Jesus as one of service and love. Instead of the compulsively busy woman irritated with her sister, Martha is one who serves a cherished friend. Eckhart interprets Martha's request for help, as not said "out of anger." "She spoke rather out of loving kindness because she was hard pressed. We must indeed call it a loving kindness or a lovable form of teasing."⁸

Many women feel split between our contemplative selves and our active selves even though we may be more integrated than we realize.

In this sermon, Eckhart not only reconciles the two sisters, restoring their relationship of love for one another and for Christ, but also reconciles action and contemplation, compassion and love of God. He boldly asserts: ". . . saints may make so much progress that nothing can take them away from God. Even though the heart of such a saint may be grieved that people are not in the state of grace, his or her will remains uniformly in God and says: 'Lord, I belong to you and you to me!' Whatever may happen to such a person does not hinder his or her eternal happiness so long as the very peak

of the spirit is not affected in the place where the spirit is united with God's most precious will."⁹

The Work Women Do Together: Reciprocity

Patriarchal interpretation when internalized by women, unlike Eckhart's, has often left women divided among themselves. This has been especially so, in the centuries-long associations of Mary and Martha as representing respectively the contemplative and active lives or lay women and women religious. Lay women become jealous of or resentful of nun-women who appear to them to be in the pre-

petence, and our service to the life of the planet. All this work is an essential aspect of our spirituality. Eckhart's interpretation moves toward integration in its startling assertions in favor of an on-going centeredness in God, not dependent on activity or inactivity.

Our work-lives of both home and community include other settings as places where we meet God, work for and with God, and mediate God's presence in the world. God can only act in and through us as we work for justice, to support and nurture our families and communities, to further the reign of God, and to insure continued life on this planet. These are holy works and works which make us holy because we become more human, more ourselves through the creative engagement of our activity and our work. To use a phrase from Maria Harris, they are one form our "artistry" takes. These are holy works because they are at the service of God's life, human life, and the planet's life. These are works worth doing; more than that, these works require all the commitment we can bring to them if all forms of life are to survive.

We have lived too long with a dualistic active/contemplative split within ourselves and unnecessary and stupid divisions between women. How might we manage to resist choosing between Martha and Mary? Some women's traditions have advocated a way of choosing both. The 1955 Constitution of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States did just this. "The spirit of the Institute is Mercy toward those who are afflicted with

ferred or valued Mary-role. Nun-women gain greater self-esteem from having "chosen the better part" and not being poor "Martha's" yet find they, too, are busy about many things.

Many women feel split between our contemplative selves and our active selves even though we may be more integrated than we realize. The figure of Martha is so unappealing we neglect to honor our own work of home-making, hospitality, entertaining, discipleship, teaching and service. We neglect to appreciate our cocreation, through development of our gifts into com-

ignorance, suffering, and other like miseries. This requires such a combination of the spirit of Mary and Martha that the one does not hinder but helps the other."¹⁰ A profound spiritual reality of reciprocity and interrelationship is implied.

Considering some of the images and symbols evoked by the Martha and Mary stories, we have come full circle from experiencing them as disintegrating symbols maintaining the splits within us, to several lines of interpretation which draw on these two sisters as integrating symbols. The reinterpretation invites identification with both women and harmonizes the split set up by one line of preaching and teaching on contemplation and action.

However, it seems to me that we need something more than merely choosing both together. We need to seek for ourselves images of integration that overcome the seeming fragmentation and polarization fostered so long by some interpretations of this story.

How is life in God more of a unity than two separate identities or compartments? How do our quiet times which we do need and relish help us to find and keep our centers in God? How do our work-lives express our deepest loves, values, and creative energies? How does one moment flow into the next in a reciprocal unity—a both/and in which we experience ourselves not fragmented but essentially whole? How do we find ourselves not isolated from others whose energies differ from ours but linked with them in the dance of life?

Catherine's Integration: Dance and Compass

I offer you two images from Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, who in the 1830s struggled to express an integral unity of doing the works of mercy and prayer. One image she drew from the dance: "Amidst all this tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back." The other she drew from science—the way a compass functions. Women who are called to labor in the world should be "like the compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its center. Now our center is God from whom all our actions should spring as from their source, and no . . . action should separate us from God." Perhaps other unifying images come to mind which help express the unity of our God experience as it weaves its way throughout our daily round. As women, we will be richer for recognizing and sharing them because they will help us resist the our present oppression within church and society and release even more energy in contemplation, love, and service.



Notes

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 53.
2. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: the Challenge of Feminist Biblical*

Interpretation 15–22 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) for the necessity of recognizing the way biblical materials have been used both to maintain women's social oppression as well as to resist that oppression. Her interpretive steps include: suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and creative actualization.

3. See Jane Schaberg, "Luke" in *The Women's Bible Commentary* ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. pp. 288–289, for a summary.
4. I am indebted to Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) for first introducing me to the iconography of Martha and Eckhart's Sermons about her. See also Amy Hollywood, "Preaching as Social Practice in Meister Eckhart" in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000 for her interpretation of this sermon.
5. This is a Semitic literary form, a type of parallelism in which might be either lines of verse of story units arranged for instance ABCDCBA. Meaning intensifies when the parallelism is recognized. The unit, in this case "D" which stands alone is the climax of the unit.
6. Schaberg, 289.
7. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Vol. 2. Trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23–25.
8. German Sermon #86 of Meister Eckhart in Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in a New Translation* (New York: Image Books, 1980) 478–486.
9. Fox, 485.
10. *Constitutions of the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States*

Four Homilies

Prodigal Son, Baptism, Good Shepherd, Body and Blood

Barbara Moore, R.S.M.

Homily: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time —The Prodigal Son

Exodus 32:7–11, 13–14; 1 Timothy 1:12–17;
Luke 15:11–32

September 16, 2001

As a family of faith today,
this is the place
we want to be.

The place we *need* to be.

As a human family, we are filled
with questions, fear, and grief.

We are emotionally exhausted as we
come to grips with
what happened to our nation
last Tuesday.
We stared raw evil in the face!

It occurred to me
that folks my age and older,
remember and perhaps experienced
the horror of Pearl Harbor
and World War II.

Our children faced the pain and
controversy of Vietnam.

But last Tuesday, our grandchildren
and great-grandchildren
in many ways,
lost their innocence.

While answers are few,
God's Holy Word does offer solace,
some direction and comfort.

For a few moments,
let us be with Luke's gospel,
for ironically,
it has a powerful message for us.

It is interesting to take
today's parable
and relate it to global struggles,
as well as our national, local,
and personal conflicts.

A small segment of the human family,
last Tuesday,
violently turned
on brothers and sisters
and created devastation and pain.

Brothers and sisters
against brothers and sisters.

What can the gospel about brothers
say to us?

But the violence is not just what we saw
on Tuesday.

For we also know that . . .

Another father, has two sons;
one lives in Dublin;
the other in Belfast.
He yearns for peace
among the Irish people.

A mother has two daughters;
one lives in Ramallah,
on the West Bank;
the other in Jerusalem.
She longs for harmony
and an end to violence
in that holy place.

And the examples could go on.

And many of us can also see
in the gospel story
our own families.

For who among us
has not known sibling struggle;
children estranged from parents,
and family members
who do not speak to one another?

One conclusion we can reach
is that many of the above personalities
often have a similar history,
cultural roots, and geographic claims.

All of the above are children of God
made in God's image.

We also have deep differences,
and divisions that are so powerful,
that violence seems to be the only tool
some use to seek redress.
In our gospel this weekend,
two brothers,
born on the same land,
raised with the same values,
moved in different directions
and their differences deepened.

They both moved
from the *center* of their lives,
to a place on the *margins*.

And they were called back
to the *center* again.

The younger son chose to walk away
from the *center* of his world
and through choice and circumstances,
found himself
in a very difficult place:
a place on the *margins* of his society.

He lost his money,
was impacted by famine and hunger,
and was far away from home.

The older son
was firmly in the *center* of his family.
His father said,
"You are here with me always,
everything I have is yours."

There is a powerful universality
about this story
because as we look at it, and through it,
the text becomes a mirror
and we see ourselves,
our lives, and our world
reflected deeply in the words.

That movement
from the *center* to the *margins*
is also reflected
in our other readings this weekend.

The ancient Jews
in our first reading from Exodus,
were impatient with God
and turned to the cultural *Center*
around them.

They constructed a molten calf
and worshipped it,
just like their pagan neighbors.

They were a motley crew
on the edges of their world.
Their covenant with God
made them somewhat different.
God said, "They have turned aside
from the way I pointed out to them."

Paul in a different way
was right in the *Center* of his world.

He desperately wanted
to preserve his ancient faith
from the outsiders . . .
the followers of Jesus.

So he persecuted and hounded
the new Christians.

But his change of heart
brought him into the very *marginal* community
he wanted to destroy.

Our readings today are filled
with the human experience
of moving from places
we believe or call *center*;
to places that are or feel
like *margins* in life.

And then moving back again.

There can be great life in both places.

There can be great pain in both places.

The younger son in today's gospel
made an effort to return
to the values he had learned.

The older brother,
because of his struggles
with the younger one's return,
placed himself on the *margins*.

"He refused to enter the house,
and his father came out
and pleaded with him."

The father only wanted to extend
his love, and care, and example
no matter where the children
found themselves.

That image of God
as a loving parent
is at the heart of the gospel.

And how hard it is
to hold on to that image
in light of this week!

Perhaps, on some level,
we know that our God is inclusive,
and a loving parent.

But the question becomes:
how can we make that a reality?
How can the father
persuade the elder son
to join the family?
How do we hold on to that image

in light of last Tuesday?
How can we bridge
the differences among us?
How can deep divisions
within families, between nations,
among races and religions,
be healed?

How can those on the margins
feel part of the community?

How can we find any consolation
in God's Word
after this week?

The answers to these questions
take an enormous amount
of human effort.

But often some answers
come in unexpected ways
and with small steps.

We have prayed this week.
We have given alms, and blood.
We have volunteered.
We have tried to understand.

Some may even have made efforts
at reconciliation
and many have embraced
our Muslim brothers and sisters.

But . . .

More and more, I am coming to accept
that only the grace of God
has the power
to bring the healing and change
that we and our world need.

God's grace has the power
to bring us
from the margins and centers in our lives
toward one another.

Just watch and listen
to stories as they unfold in the media.

How does that grace appear?

In the parable,
the Father desperately wanted
reconciliation with both sons.

When we can bring ourselves
to work for reconciliation
between and among people . . .
God's grace is active.

When we can recognize the men and women
on the margins of our lives,
our neighborhoods,
our families,
*God's Grace can step in
and move us to act.*

When we can name God's forgiveness
in our lives
as it is shown in the gospel;
we can begin to forgive others.

When we can feel God's patience
in our lives
as it was shown to the ancient Jews,

And when we can name
the *great mercy* of God
in our lives
as it was in Paul's,

Then God's grace is active in us
and we can find the ways
to extend this forgiveness,
patience, and mercy
to our brothers and sisters
who so often feel on the edges of life.

My brothers and sisters,
the way we can make some sense
of the tragedy of last Tuesday
is to be channels of reconciliation and love.

As we embrace one another
while working
— as our Bishop has asked —
for a justice
that does not reduce us
to the level of those who personified evil,
God's grace is present.

My our gracious God give us
the grace to live this way.

For it will make a difference.

Amen



Homily: A Celebration of Baptism

Isaiah 42:1–9; Acts 10:34–38; Matthew 3:13–17

January 13, 2002

“In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.”

This statement by Peter
from the Acts of the Apostles
is absolutely stunning!

It had to shock both its hearers,
and its readers.

“I see that God shows no partiality.

“Rather, in every nation,
whoever fears God and
acts uprightly,
is acceptable to God.”

Try to convey that concept today
to *extreme* fundamentalists
who are either Christian,
or Jewish, or Muslim.

Extremists who are so sure
that God is partial to *them*,
and them alone. And that
*God is partial to their
interpretations and actions.*

Try to make sense of that statement
to someone who is so convinced
that he or she *knows the mind of God
and understands God's Word
and plan for the community.*

Try to convey the inclusiveness
of this statement to someone
who believes they know
who *the sinners are*,
and who has any chance of salvation
and who does not.

Peter fudged a bit
before he could come to this place
in his faith development.

But in that way he is so like us.

It must have been very difficult
to make such a change in his thinking.

He moved to a place of acceptance and inclusion.
The excluded, marginalized Gentiles were
now part of the community.

But he got to this place,
because of God's grace
and the human experience
of encountering the family
of Cornelius: a family of
good and sincere human beings.
Cornelius, a centurion,
of the Italian Cohort,
a devout man, a family man,
a Roman, a Gentile.

We can understand Peter, because . . .
you and I have been
in the same place.
Often we have had the same
problems haven't we?

It is hard from time to time
to open our embrace
to those who are suspect,
different, threatening,
whenever they want
to join our families,
or are new co-workers,
or are new neighbors.

It is hard to avoid judgments
about people isn't it?
I think it must be so painful
to be an Arab American
or a faithful Muslim these days:
suspect, hassled, avoided, blamed.

For Peter and the early
Christian community,
to be willing to embrace
Gentiles is beyond imagination.

Just as it seems beyond imagination to us
that Palestinians and Jews,
Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics,
tribes in Africa,
blacks and whites in some parts of our nation,
gays and straight folks,
could ever find peace
and live in harmony.

Over the holiday I read a novel
entitled, "The Red Tent."

It is the story of the girl child
of the Old Testament's Jacob and Leah.

Her name was Dinah.

The beauty of the novel unfolded
as the author revealed
the numerous rituals
that ushered young men and women
of the tribe
into adulthood.

Rituals that enabled them to belong
and to assume responsibility
for the life of the community.

Baptism is such a ritual
for the Christian family.

Baptism is the action
that visibly states that
"God shows no partiality."

Baptism is the sacrament
that ushers us into a community
and at the same time,
places responsibilities on us
for the life and well being
of the community.

Baptism is the sacrament
that levels the playing field
between and among us.

It is the sacrament that gives us
new eyes to see
and new ears to hear
the world around us.

Ritual washings were part
of many facets of Jewish life,
but this action on the part of Jesus and John
in today's gospel
is different and powerful.

While some texts tell us that John resists,
Jesus moves forward almost as a symbol
for the rest of us.

And the Holy Spirit confirms him
as "The Beloved
in whom God is well pleased."

Scholars question who heard
the voice from the heavens, saying,
"This is my beloved son, with
whom I am well pleased."

Many believe Jesus, and perhaps John alone,
heard it.
The community heard it recounted later,
and wrote it down

The beauty of the statement
lies not just in an affirmation
of the life and ministry of Jesus,

But in truth,
every time we baptize
an adult or child,
our God proclaims the same affirmation.

"This is my beloved daughter,
my beloved son, with whom
I am well pleased."

And we can proclaim with certainty,
"I see that God shows no partiality."

Baptism is the fundamental sacrament
through which our life journey
and life choices unfold.

After his Baptism,
Jesus launched his formal ministry
among and with the people.

And the life choices
you and I make in faith
flow from this sacrament.

Our choices for marriage,
the single life, priesthood,
religious life or other options of service
in the Christian community
flow from this powerful action
which initiates us into a community
and calls us into service and care
for the community.

One can understand how the early Church
saw in the words of the prophet Isaiah
concepts that fit into the Christian view.

"Here is my servant, my chosen one,
upon whom I have put my spirit;

"I have grasped you by the hand;
to open the eyes of the blind,
to bring prisoners out of confinement,
and, from the dungeon,
those who live in darkness."

In reality, Isaiah's view
is one for all of us.

The waters of Baptism
open our eyes and ears
and grace us to reach out
to the men, women and children
in our lives and beyond
and act in toward others
in such a way that we show the truth
that "God shows no partiality."

Today and this coming week
two themes will surface
that will afford us the
opportunity to act in a way
that reflects the openness of God.

First, we are praying today for
openness on our community's part
to God's call to service
in the Christian Church.

The call is there, may we pray
that the response will follow.

Let us remember, in that call,
that we are assured that
"God shows no partiality."

Secondly, I urge you to find a way this Monday
to honor a modern martyr,
Martin Luther King Jr.

He urged our nation to understand
that God shows no partiality
when it comes to race
and economic issues.

King once wrote,
"We must act in such a way
to make possible a coming
together of white and black people
on the basis of a real harmony
of interest and understanding."

He is a powerful Christian model for us
as we struggle to live out
our Baptismal promises.

"I see that God shows no partiality."



Homily: Fourth Sunday of Easter —The Good Shepherd

Acts 2:14, 36-47; John 10:1-10

April 21, 2002

The life of our Christian Church
mirrors our own lives
and our own human journeys.

Vatican II acclaims the Church
as the "People of God,"
and thus similarities are bound to exist
in our lives and the life of the Church.

All of us move from joy, to fear, to deep grief,
and then back to delight and peace.

We experience disappointment
and yet know great satisfaction.

Sometimes we feel them
at the same time,
often on a daily basis!

There have been moments of great joy
in the life and history
of our Christian Church:

The crowds following Jesus
especially after a miracle
of profound significance.
The praise and exaltation
on Palm Sunday.

The overwhelming experience
of the Resurrection.

We read about the radical way
people lived the gospel
after Pentecost:

Sharing a common purse,
selling goods to meet needs,
inspired preaching.

And in time, a joyful willingness
to even hand over one's future
for the gospel,
and face death
with calm and peace.

History tells us of great lives lived,
compassion shown,
justice done,
and care for the poor.

Amazing moments!

Amazing people.

So too our own lives.

And just as we *all* know failure,
and painful experiences,
and yes, sin,
now is such a time
in our Church.

Church historians can readily list
many other examples.

Peter and the eleven
pointed to such a example
in our first reading
from the Acts of the Apostles.

They reminded the community,
"God has made
both Lord and Christ
this Jesus whom you crucified."

The listeners "... were cut to the heart
and asked, 'What are we to do?'" "

Like the crowd in the first reading,
all of us are asking these days,
"What are we to do?"
"What must our leaders do?"

Thomas Troeger, a former professor
at our Colgate-Rochester Divinity School
has written a book entitled, "Preaching
While the Church is under Reconstruction."
I was struck by the title,
because this is exactly
what we Catholics
are facing and experiencing.

"What are we to do?"
is the same question we are
all raising in light of our
present scandal.

The answers to this question come easily
if we can *accept* the fact
that the church is under reconstruction
and needs change and reform.

If some in leadership
can not heed this need for change,
I believe change will happen
on levels beyond their control.

Troeger advises preachers
that before we judge the world,
we must come to terms
with the things that keep us oblivious
to resurrection now.

We must, he says, "deal with the violence
that starts in the household of God."

And acknowledge
"how the truth of Jesus Christ
has been the sponsor
of both fantastic and horrible things."

I have been struck
by the debates and discussions
that have been swirling
around the abuse scandals.

They focus mostly
on those in leadership,
their behavior,
and the changes that need to occur.

That is critical
for any healing and reform to happen.

But have we heard much
mentioned about the role
and place of all of this
in our relationship to Jesus Christ?

After all, he is the head
of our Christian Church
and we bear his name as our own.

Almost as a gift, the Scriptures today
offer us a metaphor and image
of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

An image that offers us a model,
as we face this serious crisis.

"What are we to do?"

Throughout John's gospel,
we find Jesus naming himself
"the light of the world,
living water,
the resurrection and the life,
the bread of life,
the true vine."

But the image of Good Shepherd
is far from most of our human experience.

Maybe the "good farmer, the good cattleman,
the good vine dresser and wine maker,
the good manager."

But "shepherd" may be foreign to us.
Yet it was a powerful image for his listeners.

This weekend Jesus names himself
as the shepherd
but also as the "gate"
and "voice."

John tells us, "The religious leaders
did not recognize
what he was trying to tell them."

In Jesus' time, shepherds slept
at the gate to the fold.

Their bodies became a shield
for their flock.

Thieves and bandits
had to face them or walk over them
before they could reach their prey.

The shepherd cared for
and protected the vulnerable.

The image portrays Jesus as the channel
through which pastures and life
can be found.

He is also the "voice"
who can call each of the flock by name
and whose "voice"
is a source of security and safety
for the sheep.

He is the "voice" who
left the ninety-nine
to go after the one lost sheep.

Sadly, his voice has been silenced
for the victims in our Church.

Sadly, the gate to the fold
was left unattended by some.

While we are all called
to shepherd one another
this gospel speaks so clearly
to those formally called to this role.

The most powerful line
in the gospel today
is its closing one.

"I have come
that you may have life
and have it more abundantly."

A church in the midst
of reform and "reconstruction"
must ask itself:

How have we and our leaders
fostered life?

Have our actions denied others
the abundance of life?

If Jesus is the voice, the gate,
the Good Shepherd,
how can these qualities be
reconciled with arrogance, secrecy,
and the abandonment of many children?
They cannot!

The Church is under reconstruction and reform.
I pray we can recognize it,
and act upon this opportunity for change.

I pray that we can find the ways
to strengthen our faith
in the one who has come
that we may have life
and have it more abundantly."

I pray that this crisis will enable us
as members of the "People of God"
to examine our own lives
and root out those things
that have limited abundant life
for ourselves and others.

"What are we to do?"

Amen

Homily: Body And Blood

June 2, 2002

About 15 years ago,
when I was ministering
in the Monroe County Jail,
our community was experiencing
grave anger, fear, and horror.

A serial killer, who preyed on
both Black and white prostitutes
was foiling police attempts
to capture him.

One woman, named June,
was due to be released
from the jail,
and as I ended our visit,
I asked her to be careful.

I said, "I will be devastated
if I see your name
in the newspaper."

She responded, "Don't worry, Sister Barbara,
I can take care of myself."

She was his next
—and last—victim!

Her body was so broken
that her casket was closed.

A simple Mass was celebrated
in the funeral home.

As the priest,
standing behind the closed casket,
raised the host and said,
"This is my body broken for you",
I was overcome
by the scene, the symbol,
and the meaning of it all.

This woman, whose body and life
were so totally broken . . .
This woman, blessed
with a strength . . .

And with gifts and potential
that were never fully realized . . .
Whose family must have grieved for her
over the years . . .
Whose choices pushed her
to life's dangerous corners . . .

And yet, Christ was present
in the midst of it all.

Present through
those who attended the funeral
and through the sign
of a broken body, a broken life,
given for June
and for all of us present.

This is the sign
we remember today . . .
this feast
of the Body and Blood of Christ.

A sign of presence,
fidelity, and commitment to us
no matter who we are,
or what mistakes we have made or will make.

"I am the living bread from heaven;
the bread that I give
is my flesh
for the life of the world."

St. Paul once wrote
that one could almost understand
someone giving up their life
for a good person.

Parents have that capacity
when it comes to their own children
and their safety and health.

But, Paul adds,
to lay down one's life
for all of us,
with our sins and failures
seems impossible to grasp.

But that is the reality
of Christ's actions.

I have often marveled
 at the conviction, the love, the courage,
 and the commitment to a cause,
 that would enable someone
 to lay down their life,
 or refuse to be deterred
 from their mission:

The martyrs of the early Church.

Clergy like Dietrich Bonhoeffer
 at the hands of the Nazis.

The 4 church women in El Salvador.

Bishop Oscar Romero.

Martin Luther King Jr.

Jesus Christ.

It is not that these men and women
 wanted death or suffering,
 but they had come to understand
 the power, life, and indeed truth
 of the gospel.

They came to understand
 how much God loves the poor,
 the vulnerable, the marginal,
 the Junes of this world.

They came to understand that
 God calls us to freedom,
 respect, wholeness, and equality.

And they came to a place
 where they *knew*
 that the gift of their life
 might be the only way
 these dreams would be fulfilled.

"The bread that I give is my flesh
 for the life of the world."

Why else would Bonhoeffer
 refuse to endorse
 Nazi rule and policies?

Why else would the churchwomen
 return to a dangerous El Salvador?

Why else would Martin Luther King
 continue his preaching
 even after his home was bombed?

Why else would Jesus
 continue his ministry
 in the face of such opposition?

So many stories in the Hebrew Scriptures
 speak of God
 feeding the Hebrew people.

Today we hear
 in the Book of Deuteronomy,
 "God fed you in the desert
 with manna,
 a food unknown to your ancestors."

Jesus fed the crowds
 with loaves and fish.

But the gift of himself
 in his Word
 and in his body and blood
 is breathtaking.

"My flesh is true food,
 and my blood is true drink."

No wonder the listeners
 quarreled among themselves
 when they heard this.

In a selfless action,
 Jesus gave us not only his life
 but this gift
 that has the capacity to sustain us
 along the journey of life
 and faith.

We have the gift of his example,
 the Holy Spirit,
 the good news of the gospel,
 and this meal he celebrated
 before his death.

A meal he asked us to continue
in memory of him.

Certainly, if we are to live
our baptismal promises
in our day-to-day life,
this gift of the Eucharist
is one of the sustaining forces
we have.

"My flesh is true food,
and my blood is true drink."

In a very real way,
the celebration of the Eucharist
mirrors the message of Jesus
and the way he wants us
to be with one another.

Note his words,
"Take this, *all of you*, and eat it;
take this, *all of you*, and drink it" . . .

Words that embrace, are inclusive.

We walk forward,
rich and poor, young and old,
We walk forward,
rooted in different races and cultures,
We walk forward
with our gifts and our failures,
We walk forward
as a great community of equals.

Where else do we see
such a model of community
and inclusiveness?

Paul was pointing to this truth
when he wrote the Church in Corinth,
"Because the loaf of bread is one,
we though many are one body,
for we all partake
of the one loaf."

Next week, as Christians,
we return to the season
of ordinary time.

It is as if the Church
is offering us tools, assistance,
encouragement, and support
as we approach this season.

We have been reminded
of the power of the Trinity,
the action of the Holy Spirit
at Pentecost,
and now the nourishment
of the Body and Blood
of Christ.

But there is one other aspect
to this feast we are
celebrating today.

Yes, we are nourished here
at the table.

Yes, we mirror one family
as we approach the altar.

But the challenge for all of us happens
when we head home
and return to our own ordinary times.

How can you and I
become bread and wine for others?

How can you and I
nourish, care for, and sustain
our brothers and sisters?

"Whoever feeds on me
will have life because of me."

It seems to me
our call as Christians
is to do and be
that food for one another.



Mercy and Creative Seeing

Mary Ann Hieb, R.S.M.

On a bright orange day in October 2001, I was driving from Philadelphia to New York, to facilitate presentations at a retreat center on the Hudson River. The first event was an evening class on art-journaling. The following day, I was leading a day of reflection for seasoned spiritual in which they would experience the prayer of art-journaling and then examine the ways in which they might use this discipline in their spiritual direction practice.

On the drive, a friend and I were beguiled by the beauty of the autumn that surrounded us; at every turn of the road, a new source of wonder presented itself. In between these sightings, our conversations kept drifting back to the stories of horror from September 11th, and our personal reactions and fears. Every few miles, we would refocus our attention on the magnificent scenery, lapsing into silence, to gaze at the blazing beauty. After a few minutes, we would resume our ruminations about the tragedies encompassing our world and our sensibilities. It was in this atmosphere that we arrived at Linwood.

Preparing for the evening's class, I wrote on an easel pad the key words that would help focus my presentation: "Art-Journaling is the use of simple art materials

and written journaling. It is a prayer, a process, a product, a way of presence and a practice." To this, I added the words, creativity and gazing, as a reminder to emphasize these aspects of the art-journaling process. As I waited in the quiet dark of the room for the arrival of the students, I recalled the beautiful ride, and felt how that beauty expanded my inner vision. Almost simultaneously, my thoughts were constricted by the destructive images from the World Trade Center tragedy that replayed in my mind's eye since that terrible day. Moving between these two visual experiences, I became conscious of a deeper application to include in the evening's presentation.

Seeing and Healing

Art-Journaling is the term I have coined for a reflective process that combines the use of simple art materials and written journaling to help focus, respond or express prayer. It is a way of prayer that has evolved from my own personal practice. As I studied fine arts, art therapy, spiritual direction and embarked then in a ministry that included retreat work in the context of holistic spirituality, art-journaling became a tool that integrated aspects of my prayer style and professional

interests. In the past years I have given numerous workshops, facilitated retreats and used art-journaling as a reflective process for meetings. This particular evening, I would find myself focusing on a way of contemplative seeing that is integral to the creative process.

In my presentation, I gave explanations and examples for "prayer," "process" and "product," and was moving into the next category, a "way of presence." I described the manner in which we are invited to gaze at our own lives and at creation. Rather than looking judgmentally, we learn to shift to a contemplative way of gazing that is open and receptive. I recounted my usual example of the way we look when a beloved child presents us with a drawing s/he has done just for us. We receive this with delight. We gaze at the drawing, the child and the experience with awe and love. Gratitude is forged.

Understanding of this phenomenon stirred in the group, and evoked smiles from mothers, fathers, favorite uncles, aunts and teachers at the memory of the experience. I challenged them to use that gaze as they looked at their own art-journaling.

Then I added a second example. I told the story of my recent drive through autumn beauty, and the way that nature

seemed to offer rest and healing. As I described this creative gazing, I shared the day's insight: "I realized today how very essential it is for each of us, at this particular time in our history, to look at beauty. We have experienced injury in our seeing. We have been through such trauma to our visual sensitivity. We were shown the image of the destruction of the World Trade Center over and over again. We have watched the images daily over time. Our vision has been traumatized and we need to gaze at beauty, to be healed by nature. This wound to our vision, our seeing, needs care, compassion and healing . . ." The silence in the room was overwhelming. Some of the people sitting there had driven up from Manhattan that day in order to attend the class. The reality that I could only dimly imagine was their daily experience. Truly, they had felt the scarring, but hearing it in those terms came as a new insight. They knew the truth of this visual trauma and how deeply it was affecting their spirits.

Our time together became dedicated to the quest for moments of visual healing. We paid attention to the autumn beauty that surrounded us. We deepened our visual awareness by learning and applying the discipline of art-journaling in personal prayer and in the companioning of others on the spiritual journey. In the weeks that followed this class, I reflected on the experience. I realize that much of my own journey in Mercy has been about darkness and light, blindness and seeing and, symbolically, about

the healing of sight. I began to think more about Mercy as compassionate and creative seeing. As an artist, I know the healing power of beauty. I am taught by creation. Nature, the subject of much of the beauty I encounter, gives hope. I know the deep and revelatory mystery of images. Being an art therapist opened me to a world of art as a healing tool for others. Being a spiritual director and retreat leader connected that healing to the great tradition of sacred creativity and the Word.

and resurrection are present in the Divine life of creativity. We follow this pattern when we faithfully manifest God's life. We are most faithful when we create. Jesus teaches us through the visual. Many of the parables draw us into contemplative seeing in order that we learn from the inner wisdom that our creator God has implanted within us. Jesus invites us to consider the lilies. He tells us to observe the conditions under which a seed does or does not take root. He gestures to the birds of the air and then is silent,

All aspects of life, death and resurrection are present in the Divine life of creativity. We follow this pattern when we faithfully manifest God's life. We are most faithful when we create.

The charism of Mercy embraces this grace of seeing. Historically, individually and corporately, we see pain and poverty and are empowered to respond. Seeing grants us recognition; naming injustice and marginalization enables us to act. Our seeing and naming share in a spirituality of creativity, the transformative dynamic that gathers us into a greater compassion.

Spirituality of Creativity

God in Genesis teaches us best about the creative process. The Creator calls out of chaos, speaks a word, gazes, sees and names as good. All aspects of life, death

allowing us to learn from our seeing as we gaze at the lessons they manifest for our own lives. Jesus names sight as an awesome blessing. "Blessed are your eyes, for they have seen what prophets longed to see, and did not." (Luke 10.24f)

Jesus says much about healing our seeing. Jesus gazes on the multitudes and has compassion on them. He feeds the crowd. This is a direct act of service. It is mercy in action. It is also the height of creativity, making something for the many out of nothing, out of sparse materials, reaching great numbers, changing them, bringing delight, amazement, awe and gratitude.

Catherine's Merciful Gaze

What about Catherine and creativity? Catherine had discriminating vision that could gaze at the world around her and create action. She possessed a discerning vision that was oriented towards the needs of real people. That creative discernment narrowed her choices until the newness demanded of her became inevitable. This is a different face of creativity, but one just as authentic.

It is told that, as a child, Catherine's
imaginative vision found the Cross in the
tracing of branches and in the structured
lines of doorframes. This creative vision
never left her.

It is told that, as a child, Catherine's imaginative vision found the Cross in the tracing of branches and in the structured lines of doorframes. This creative vision never left her, although it was not frequently articulated in her letters to us. She was a person at odds with herself around the scope of creative gazing. You are probably familiar with the account of Catherine McAuley and Mary Clare Augustine Moore. In that famous passage in which she complains to another Sister about Clare Moore, we see the ambivalence of that gazing. This sensitive place in the letters describes Catherine's reaction to the length of time it took to paint several leaves.¹ Clare, on the other hand, gives no indication

that she knows Catherine's judgment. Indeed she writes with delight, "She (Catherine) loves to watch me work."²

Prior to the renovations that transformed Mercy Convent into Mercy International Centre, I spent some magical days in the basements of Mercy convents in Dublin, paging through books of Clare's breathtaking illuminations. I was overwhelmed at the intricate beauty of leaf, flower

and each letter of each word. What a gift Clare handed down to us through her persistent holding to the creativity that was her own way of Mercy. Our charism needs the compassionate sight of both of these women, bound in relationship, in order to push forward the great work that results from this creative tension.

Inconvenient Creativity

Part of creativity is frequently an inconvenient pressure, an unyielding barrier against which one must push in order for something to be born. Catherine was not originally about creating something new. Rather, she was told she couldn't live at Baggot Street and continue the work she loved in the manner in which she was

doing it. Circumstances forced the newness, and drove her to found a new religious community. Here is an example of "inconvenient creativity." This phenomenon is a familiar one to each of us, her daughters. Sometimes circumstances lineup against us. As we take reluctant action, something new comes into being. This is at times the way God worked with Catherine. So she grumbled through some of the events that yielded life for her and for us. Having to go to the Presentation Community and do a novitiate was far beyond inconvenient, and I'm sure that Catherine would have something to say to me about the mildness of this word in relationship to her experience.

Jesus was up against inconvenient creativity at the wedding feast of Cana. He was cornered by his mother's wishes and by the need of the wedding guests. We hear him grumble under his breath, "Mother, my time has not yet come!" Mary replies, "Do whatever he tells you." In a moment that was sheer but reluctant creativity, the water becomes wine.

We all have many personal experiences of "inconvenient creativity." When pushed into a corner, when met by resistance, when unable to move in the familiar ways, the forced newness can be a catalyst for the next piece that wants to be born. Once, I was asked about facilitating a creativity workshop as part of a national conference. I indicated my willingness. However, following an initial conversation, the committee did not contact me. I concluded they had decided against including me.

Months later, an acquaintance called me to congratulate me on being the keynote speaker for the conference. I replied that this could not be possible. She told me she had the program brochure in her hands. This was my introduction into the world of public speaking! A committee miscommunication assigned me not to workshop facilitator but to be a major presenter. I had four months to tremble and put into words things I had never articulated. The result was "Spiritual Direction as a Work of Art," a forty-five minute presentation with slides that was the beginning of a whole new direction for me. Had they asked me to do a keynote, I would have declined with no qualms; I don't do talks! Because I found myself at a place of inconvenient creativity, I was pushed up against an extreme and something new and valuable was born. It forced me to put in writing my thoughts on art-journaling, spiritual direction and the creative process. Since then, the discipline and my ability to articulate it have increased. Growth, despite the way it might occur, is one of the sure signs of the process at work.

Creative Processes and Mercy Ministry

Sisters of Mercy have a reputation for being, among other things, solid, down to earth, and practical. Service is the benchmark against which things are measured. Within this reputation, creativity can seem indulgent. Yet consider, we are daughters of the woman who created a new Institute, a new

way of being religious, and a new model of living community in relationship to service. This is a woman who used the creative approach to redeem a bad situation, making a movement out of what could have been a barrier. All creativity presses up against walls and the product yields from that sustained pressure, from fidelity to staying there. The Institute of Mercy is Catherine's major opus, although she had many minor works along the way.

**Sisters of Mercy have a reputation for being,
among other things, solid, down to earth,
and practical. Service is the benchmark
against which things are measured.**

What she did not bequeath us is a language with which to acknowledge this creative river that runs beneath our surface. Without the language, we frequently do not look for and name the creative aspects of our works, our institutions, our planning, and our lives in Mercy. Our coming together in 1991 as the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy was an act of creativity. Yes, it was good and practical planning; yes, it was grace; yes, it was faithful listening to the signs of the times. But at its essence, it was the creative process, discerned and made manifest in an organization. Moreover, our everyday gatherings, our community structures, our problem solving, our discernment, our history of leadership, our prayer styles,

and our documents are manifestations of a mercy that sees creatively. Many small, subtle things: choices, movements, adaptations and changes may have originally sprung from a reluctant or inconvenient creativity that yielded pieces of who we are now. The results point the way toward which we are journeying. On the other hand, many aberrations in ministry and in community life can be related to resistance to creativity. When we do not extend mercy to ourselves

and to each other, we abort creative process and the dark shadow side of the charism is activated. In Catherine and in us, that temptation comes in productivity separated from creativity, therefore separated from Mercy. The creative spirit cannot live in the atmosphere that is negative, critical or judgmental. And when we resist creativity, we are resisting Mercy. Catherine was at her best in the places in which she was able to exercise her creative vision. So, too, with her followers. Whenever we strangle that spirit, in ourselves or in others, we contribute to the lack of Mercy in our culture. Mercy cannot exist apart from creativity. In Mercy, we are made whole; we are renewed. This is creative work.

Creativity and Newness

One of my great delights has been to be artist for two of our Mercy: Journey to Wholeness Retreats, and for Mercy: Still Captivating. At this latter retreat, Mercy Sister Lilyan Fraher's presentations touched on Mercy history and spirituality. Participants used art processes to reflect on and integrate the theme. We visited the charism in a new way, finding images and colors that deepened our understanding of our histories and of each other by telling stories in clay, healing relationships with twisted wire, arranging bits of materials found in nature, drawing open windows, using pen and ink to integrate loss, exploring living in community all happened in color, line, shape and form. We were privileged as sisters and associates to catch glimpses of each others' souls. Creativity and working in solitude together forged bonds that were unique.

that she could not explain because of confidentiality. As others learned about her position, she began receiving what she described as "uncreative looks" even from her good friends in the community. Here was the same person they had known and loved, but because of a misunderstanding, she was being regarded differently. As that dynamic continued, she began to feel as if she were changing, becoming less worthy, less able. The destructive glance disempowered her.

With her permission, I utilized the painful grace of her experience as a theme for a workshop, "Healing our Stories in the Creative Gaze of God." Using pictures of faces cut from magazines, I provided each participant with a "new acquaintance." I instructed them to gaze on their new acquaintance with the creative gaze that God might use, to pray with this experience, then to use an art-journaling process of responding in art and written journaling. I then asked

them to recall if either experience had been theirs. Did they recall the experience of being gazed at creatively, and what were the consequences of that? Did they ever experience being looked at with disdain, and what was the fruit of that?

The results were profound. When participants shared it became very clear that both creative and destructive gazes were within their experience. A positive regard was creative, allowing them to flourish. Receiving the destructive look had affected their abilities; for some, to love themselves; for others, to perform with confidence. Some expressed grief for that which was lost, others marveled over the startling realization of the power we have to affect each other by the intent of a glance. We used prayer with classical icons to end the experience, placing our trust in the creative gaze that God showers upon us freely and with Mercy. Try this way of gazing at your place of ministry or on a community day. Some familiar colleague or community member begins to speak. You know from long experience what s/he is going to say. The barriers to seeing and hearing are already forged. With the grace of God, drop down to that place where s/he is known and loved by God, and where you and she are mutually connected in Mercy. Pay attention to the invitation to inconvenient creativity. Something new will be born in you with the potential to send down roots, not just for you but for the larger whole. As we look at the trends of people entering religious life these days, we have realized for a while now that we are not going

Pay attention to the invitation to inconvenient creativity. Something new will be born in you with the potential to send down roots, not just for you but for the larger whole.

The words, "Behold, I am doing something new" are not always proclaimed joyfully. Several years ago, the theme for a new workshop came out of a conversation I had with another Sister. She was distressed because she had made an unpopular decision

them to shift their gazing, to look at this same face with disvaluing, with disregard, to see if in mustering those feelings, they could see what happened to themselves interiorly. They did a drawing and journaled about that feeling. Finally, I asked

to be recreated from the outside with a great influx of new life. The influx of new life can come from within, as we look at each other with new eyes.

Creativity and Culture

As we continue to develop as an Institute, we enter more completely into the embodiment of Mercy through the arts. They are the integral expression of culture; they are the inroads into each other's spirit. Navigating the seas of multiculturalism, we realize how much of our appreciation of diversity occurs through our inner and outer vision. We see how culture is expressed, mediated through the arts. The traditional pottery of Peru, the tribal dress of Africa, the painted gourds, the literature, the wall hangings, the aboriginal art, the calligraphy, the sculpture, the poetry, the dance, the stories, the music and song, the color, the energy, and the intensity: these all have to do with the creative process manifest in a person and a place. This beauty is our manifestation of Mercy at its most creative. After the World Trade Center tragedy, the creative arts became vehicles of expression and spirituality. The things that are so hard to express in words can begin to be approached in a prayer that uses clay to express anguish, or uses movement to seek direction. Music can be a place that speaks to our spirits, expressing our depths, lifting us up.

When I present art-journaling, I spend some time with the elements of art: line, shape, and color. I show how this is a deep

language, one we already know and one that can help us in a parable way to listen to our inner wisdom. As part of the art-journaling day for spiritual directors, I provided an opportunity to gaze at slides of fine art paintings. I invited the participants to prayerfully notice which elements attracted them, and which repelled them. After a time of receptive gazing and journaling, one of the men shared this insight. "I was drawn to areas in the paintings that were transparent. Places of simplicity called to me, and I became uncomfortable with paintings that were cluttered. My soul sought open spaces." Translating that into a spiritual yearning, such a person might find congruency spending time in spacious nature, or entering into a practice of centering prayer. I invite people to be silent and to journal, to prayerfully make the connection with what they notice in the artwork to what is happening in their lives right now. Whatever speaks to them symbolically can be a vessel of revelation, gently holding out something that God desires to communicate. For our final prayer that day, people walked outside to be refreshed by the beauty of nature, intentionally breathing in the spirit of God, and to listening for the word of God. One woman was drawn to the beauty in the gnarled roots of an old tree. She was experiencing her life as complicated, twisted and tense and recognized some of those qualities in the lines formed by tree roots. She was able to gaze at their beauty. She realized that, at this

point, she was unable to change what was going on in her life, but she had received the grace of seeing it in a new way, recognizing its beauty. She gratefully acknowledged the parable, that this was a time in her life for rooting, and was necessary for the anchoring and grounding she needed. This insight came as a consolation. Gently, it supplanted a felt sense of emptiness and absence of God into which she had been flinging cries of frustration. When we gaze at the world around us in a way that seeks wisdom, we are drawn into the source of our mystical understanding. The earth is the ground of Mercy, the home that teaches us about creativity and compassion. As we grow in compassion for our earth, we deepen in Mercy. Mercy changes things. When I am merciful, I am creating a newness. When I receive mercy, I have been transformed. Something new is born in me. What else is this but creativity?



Notes

1. Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M., ed., *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Maryland: Helicon Press, Inc., 1969), 311.
2. Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 194, 206.

The Art of Mercy

Images of Redemption

Jayme M. Hennessy

Margaret Miles, in *Image and Insight*, emphasizes that religious communities need art to “orient individuals and communities, not only conceptually but also affectively, to the reality that creates and nourishes, in solitude and in community, human life.”¹ Although art has long played a distinguished role in the Church’s life, it is now necessary to retrieve the vitality and richness of a tradition somewhat vitiated by the stark vision of modernism and diluted by a proliferation of religious “kitsch.” Moreover, in reclaiming this tradition it is essential to address the need for the recovery and creation of images that can orient the person and community to feel and act in accord with the remembering activity of mercy: the practice of redeeming the fragmented realities of human existence through restoring persons and relations to the wholeness envisioned in creation and the human vocation to become the image of God.

Traditionally the Church has valued the power of images to instruct, delight and move” the person to faith, and the faithful to greater devotion. From the earliest Christians of the first century to the churches of the twenty-first century, icons, mosaics, paintings, stained glass, statuary, and architecture have communicated the narrative, values and desires integral to the Christian community’s identity and mission. While theologians in the church have debated, at times, the legitimacy, veneration, and function of religious images, the power of these images has never been contested. For in their appeal to senses, imagination and heart, images can exercise a revelatory, formative and affective power demonstrating a potential to shape the “patterns of desire” that interiorly move and dispose a person to faith and action.

In functioning as “texts,” images exhibit a revelatory capacity in representing the events of Scripture and the beliefs of tradition to the viewer. Although these are depictions of events, they are

not merely illustrations of scriptural narratives. Images, instead, are representations, attempts by the artist to interpret and render the significance of particular scriptural events and teachings to the viewer. Because of their visual drama and power, religious images can leave a lasting impression on a person’s memory, thus affecting a person’s character and actions. For when a viewer is drawn beyond looking to contemplation, there is a surrender of one’s consciousness to the image and a longing to appropriate the virtues, values, character and desires presented to the viewer’s eyes. The representations of Jesus and the saints, therefore, serve as models for imitation as they reveal that redemption and the striving for spiritual perfection are embodied realities that unfold within the world. In short, the viewer is moved by the image of the Incarnation, of the enfleshed God who can be materially represented and “imitated” by humanity. This openness to the image also creates the possibility of affective transformation, for the emotions embedded in the image can move the viewer to become a co-desirer, to share in the vision and desires it represents.

The tradition of the church, in maintaining the inter-relation of art and the Incarnation, reminds the viewer that the world is the arena of Jesus’ redeeming work, and that salvation from the brokenness of sin is directed to the embodied existence of humanity. The images of Jesus, Mary and the Saints, therefore, not only serve as models for the faithful to imitate, but also remind the viewer of the physicality and historicity of redemption as lived and embodied in the world. Image, then, with its power to direct human attention to the physical realities of life and redemption, can be a powerful means of shaping both a person’s mind and heart about the nature of and the desire for the practice of mercy. Thus, in its power to represent and to affect, image can show us why mercy is so urgently needed in the world; it can offer the viewer models

of merciful action for contemplation and imitation; it can act upon the viewer to shape emotions for mercy, and ground all of this in the revelation of the God of mercy, incarnate in the world.

The General and Particular Nature of Image

Religious images, as cultural artifacts, are tied to particular beliefs, emotions, and values within the context of overarching topics. All religious pictures, therefore, while addressing the representation of similar subjects, will reflect the theology, spirituality and moral concerns of their particular culture. Consequently, the meanings of certain images may not be fully clear to an audience unfamiliar with the artistic symbols, characters and narrative associated with the particular beliefs represented in some works. This distinction between the general and particular nature of image is illustrated in the following images, for example, as



Figure 1. Christ as the Man of Sorrows

both treat the general subject of the suffering of Jesus, but differ in the theological and spiritual significance of Jesus' sufferings:

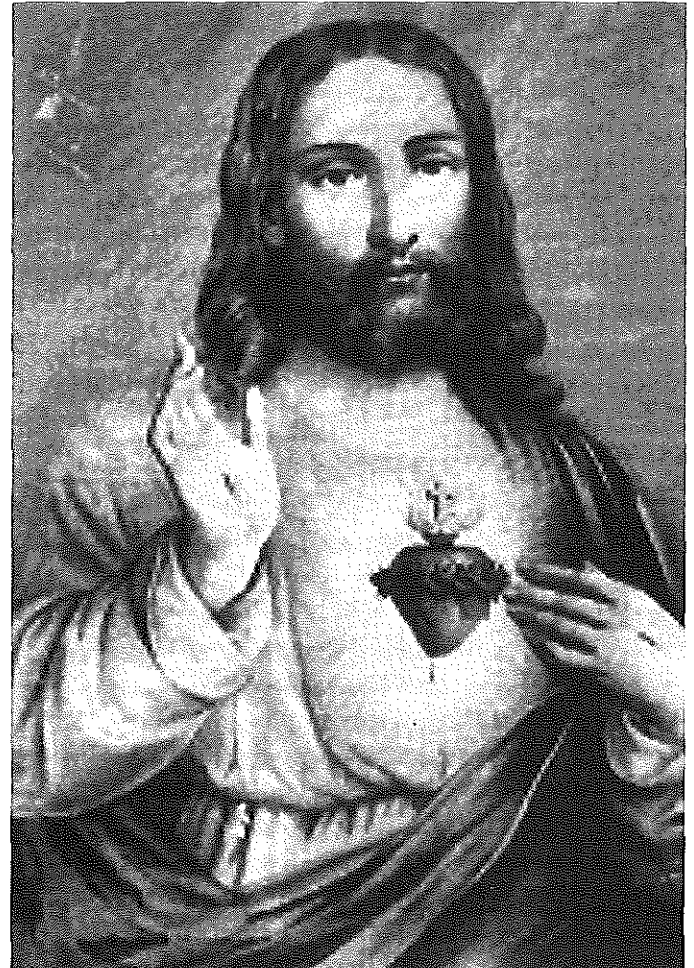


Figure 2. The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Christ as the Man of Sorrows, an oil painting from the 1520s, depicts Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The artist's intent is to direct the viewer's attention and feelings to the sufferings of Jesus. Jesus' hands are bound, and he wears the crown of thorns mockingly prepared for him by his tormentors.² Gabriele Finaldi comments on the artist's attempt to move the viewer to compassion for the sufferings of Jesus:

The painter has employed all the artistic means at his disposal to induce feelings of compassion and contrition in the viewer, from the small scale of the image, which already assumes intimacy, to the catchlights in the tear-filled eyes, which

make our response for immediate. Even the drooping lines of Christ's shoulders reflect the plaintive character of the painting. This was undoubtedly an object for private contemplation, and in the privacy of prayers it was intended to elicit tears and empathy, directing the viewer's attention to the pain of Jesus' sufferings by engaging the Jesus' eyes and large tears which stream down his face.³

The Sacred Heart of Jesus is an anonymous mid-twentieth century image; mass-produced for the popular private devotions of Roman Catholics. The concern of this image is to cultivate a devotion to the love of Jesus, and accordingly directs the viewer's gaze to the vividly stylized heart exposed on Jesus' chest. In this image, Jesus' wounded heart functions as a metaphor for his emotional and moral life; it symbolizes his deep love for humanity and his willingness to embrace the sufferings of the cross to conquer sin.⁴ This particular devotion to the Sacred Heart probably developed from the devotion of the Five Wounds: a popular practice of the 15th century through which divine protection and mercy were gained by those who venerated his physical wounds of Christ's passion.⁵

In comparing the image of *The Sacred Heart of Jesus* with *Christ the Man of Sorrows*, it is evident that these images reflect particular Christologies and desires. First, the humanity of Jesus in *Christ the Man of Sorrows* is palpably present and more approachable than the humanity of Jesus figured in *The Sacred Heart*, who is seemingly unaffected by his physical wounds. Secondly, each painting radically differs in its depiction of the sufferings of Christ, thus reflecting and reinforcing the attitudes towards suffering held by its particular culture. Thirdly, while both images are of Jesus, they do not share the same intent. *Christ the Man of Sorrows*, with its vivid depiction of suffering, seeks to elicit compassion from the viewer. The intent of *The Sacred Heart*, in contrast, is to move the viewer to seek compassion and protection from Christ.

An image, therefore, while addressing a general theme (e.g., Jesus) also possesses a particular intention and interpretation that it presents to the viewer. This distinction between the general and particular nature of an image becomes helpful in

discerning the relevance of an image to the re-membering activity of Mercy.

Images of Redemption

Human beings, in a certain sense are unknown to themselves. Jesus Christ not only reveals God, but "fully reveals man to man." In Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself. All believers are called to bear witness to this: but it is up to you men and women, who have given your lives to art, to declare with all the wealth of your ingenuity that in Christ the world is redeemed; The human person is redeemed, the human body is redeemed, and the whole creation, which according to St. Paul, "awaits patiently the revelation of the children of God" (Rom 8:19) is redeemed. The creation awaits the revelation of the children of God also through art and in art. This is our task. Humanity in every age, and even today, looks to the words of art to shed light upon its path and its destiny.⁶

In this excerpt from his Letter to Artists, John Paul II describes the role of artists in communicating the Good News of redemption. Art, with its radical attention to the embodied realities of human existence, is well suited to this charge, as it can depict both the suffering and alienation effected by sin, as well as the restoring power of mercy. Here, in this following images, mercy directs redemption beyond the satisfaction of sin to overcoming sin through restoring persons and relations to greater life and wholeness. This collection of images, therefore, begins with a representation of the life-orienting beauty and harmony of life to which mercy redeems and re-orders creation. It is this vision of creation, as both human origin and destiny that provides the lens through which the re-membering experiences of redemption, restoration and resurrection are viewed.

All of the following images represent some aspect of this re-membering: the beauty and harmony of creation, the redeeming work of Christ, the restoring power of forgiveness, and the transformative power and promise of resurrection. Each image, in its own way, reminds the viewer of the re-membering power of mercy found in the gap between the vision of creation and the fragmented reality of the world.



Figure 3. Creation Window
Katherine and Frederick Breydert, 1979

These stained glass windows, designed by Katherine and Frederick Breydert, are intended to both delight and instruct. The windows tie in the beauty and majesty of creation with the redeeming work of Jesus. In the original installation, in the Church of St. Andrew, Block Island, Rhode Island, the viewer was directed through the six days of creation to the events of the Incarnation and Death of Christ, establishing that God who creates is the God who redeems. The main window of the collection depicts the glory, beauty and power of the created world. Soaring birds, vibrantly colored fish, the fertility of the earth and the balance of the sun and moon all express an exuberant sense of the vitality and harmony of creation. This window marks not only the life-orienting relations of creation, but also the destiny of creation that groans, awaiting its fulfillment. (Rom 8:19–22). Carefully cut and fitted, the pieces of glass are veined by lead channels that depict both the powerful rhythm of life and the underlying fragility and fragmentation of the world.

The leaded glass of the creation windows offers an overall lighter texture and a greater transparency than the materials used in the production of the Mary and Christ windows. Crafted of a thicker glass, which is coarsely molded and filled with imperfections, these windows seem to bear the weight

of materiality, thereby creating a sense of the physicality of the Incarnation. These representations of the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus with their lack of facial features initially provoked some controversy within the parish community. The artists purposely omitted the facial features in these images with the intent of creating a space that could engage the viewer's imagination and move him or her to contemplation. A number of viewers, however, experienced these blank faces as a hindrance to engaging the images in any meaningful way, and understandably so, for a great deal of a viewer's ability to enter into communion with an image is aided by empathy, by seeing another self and another human person in the image.

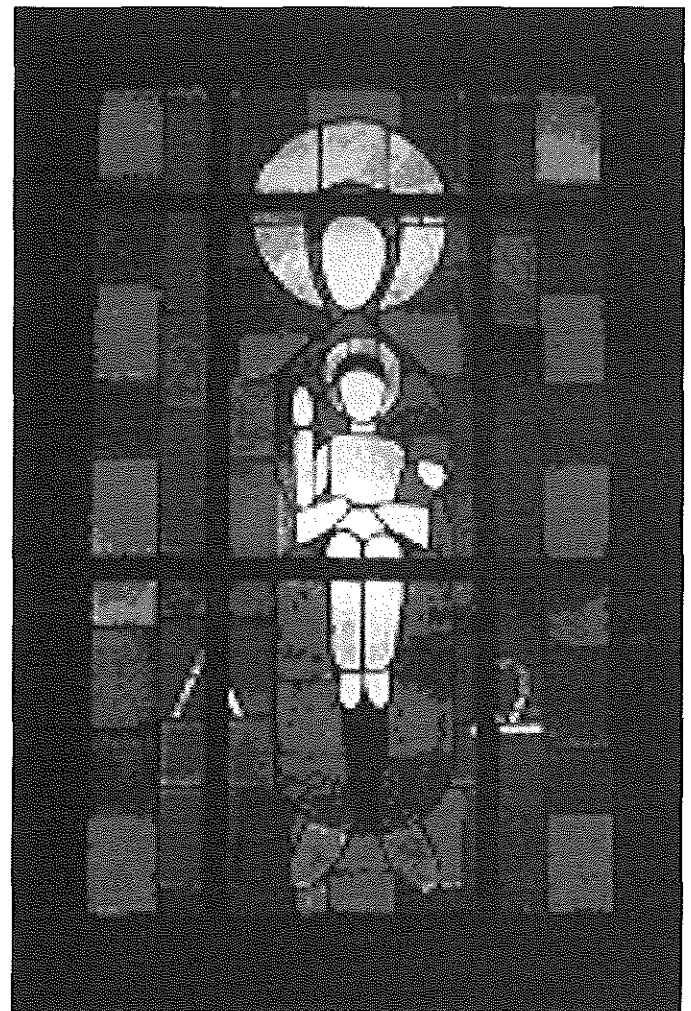


Figure 4. The Mary Window

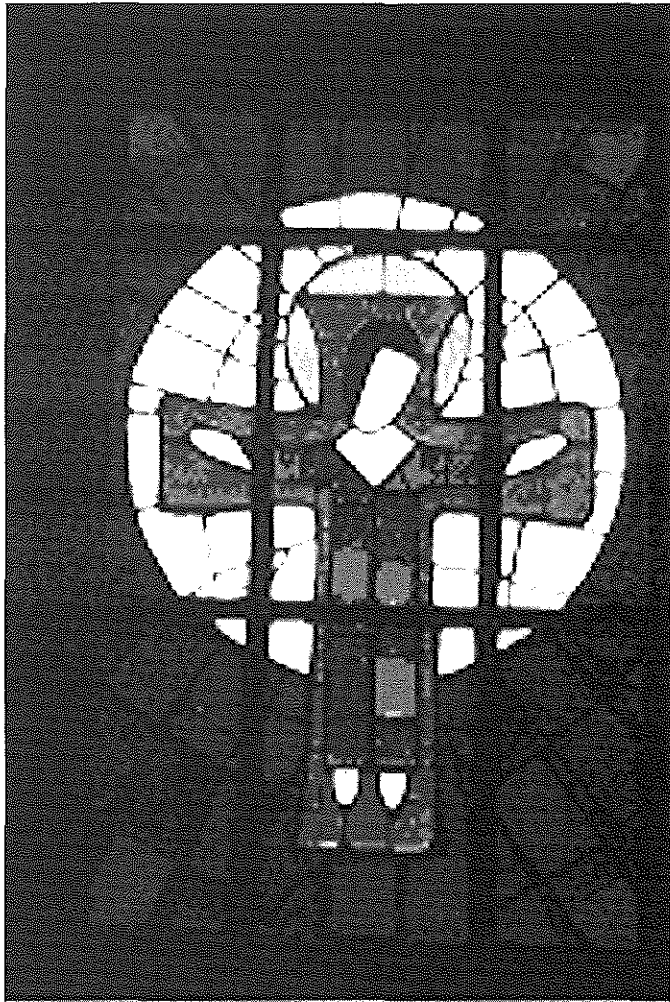


Figure 5. The Christ Window

Consequently, the lack of facial features in these images was disorienting for many of the viewers who were quick to pronounce their criticism. Pastoral persuasion and time eventually softened the clamor, but the experience illustrates the gap sometimes found between artistic intent and public reception.

The theology of mercy presented in these two images is consistent with the teachings of John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, which locates mercy in the Church's sacramental tradition. The *Mary Window* symbolizes Mater Ecclesia who presents Jesus, the Word become Flesh, to the Church. Redemption and communion are the chief themes of *The Christ Window* with its clear depiction of the relation of Eucharist to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross.

The Breyderts, as survivors of the Nazi oppression of Germany, were well aware of the gross evil,

or anti-mercy, that militates against human life, relations and love. And as Christians, they believed in the power of God's mercy to redeem humanity from the darkness of a world disordered by sin and to restore the wholeness of creation.

Redemption, in Stanley Spencer's work, transforms human existence. In his painting *Christ Carrying the Cross*, Spencer locates the scene of the passion in his home of Cookham, England, thus re-orienting the viewer's attention to the sphere of the ordinary and immediate. Susanna Avery Quash, in her commentary on this painting, refers to Spencer's acute sense of the incarnationality of mercy: "Spencer thought that Christ's decision to enter our humanity gave human life great dignity, by undertaking a mission of teaching and healing, Christ made all human tasks worthy, even holy."⁷

Spencer uses a blindingly bright light to illuminate the scene symbolizing both the joy of redemption and the transformation of human life. (A light made noticeably brighter by remembering that the scene is set in England, which is not famous for its sunny weather!) The light is so bright that two of the characters in the lower left-hand corner

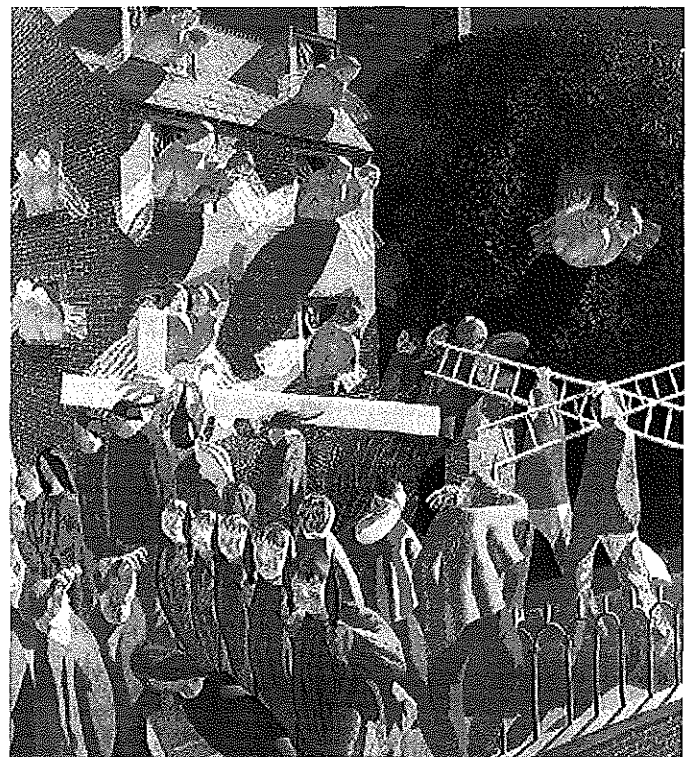


Figure 6. Christ Carrying the Cross
Stanley Spencer, 1920

of the painting shield their eyes from its intensity and glare. The light beams down from the right hand corner of the sky and falls on Jesus and the cross that he carries almost imperceptibly through the crowded street.

Spencer believed that the redemption of humankind from sin was the job assigned to Jesus: "He believed that Christ's sacrifice had led to a reconciliation between humanity and God, and he was able to view Christ's cross without sadness."⁸

Moreover, while Jesus has his job, humanity is called to its own job, to the imitation of Jesus' love that necessitates the carrying of our own crosses. The image of Jesus carrying his cross is almost obscured by the cluster of factory workers that pass by and by the carpenters who follow him, with their ladders carried symbolically on their shoulders.

These workmen are engaged in an activity very similar to Christ's: Spencer deliberately chose to use the word "carrying"—not "bearing" in the title of the picture because he particularly wished to convey the relationship with the carpenters behind him carrying the ladders and Christ in front carrying the cross, each doing their job of work.⁹

Spencer reminds the viewer that we are called to the *imitatio Christi*, to follow the example of Christ's mercy in meeting the needs of family, friend, neighbor and stranger.

Restoration

In the Book of Genesis, we learn that the unraveling of the life-orienting relations of creation is the consequence of human sin. The Scriptures record the steady disintegration of the relations of man and woman, siblings, community and finally the entirety of creation itself. It is this existential and spiritual alienation that is addressed by the remembering of mercy which overcomes fragmentation through openness and embrace of forgiveness and love.

Depictions of Adam and Eve are often concerned with the disgrace and alienation of their sin, but not so in this painting by Janet McKenzie. In this interpretation McKenzie moves beyond sin to reconciliation, as love overcomes the alienating consequences of sin. The canvas is delineated by strong horizontal lines that push Adam and Eve to the sides of the canvas, distancing them from each

other. Their faces and gestures are animated by a strong sense of humility and respect as they reach out towards each other from the edges of the painting. The oppression of the strong horizontal lines is broken as the half-eaten apple, the tell tale sign of their sin, falls from their hands while roses flow in to fill the void that separates them.



Figure 7. Adam and Eve
Janet McKenzie, 1999

Here, in this image, the re-membering of mercy is experienced in the reconciling power of forgiveness that restores relations so that love and life can flourish:

The betrayal in the garden has been portrayed again and again, yet rarely with such luscious and redeeming features. Here I see the reconciliation between man and woman. At this moment, the gift is not the source of temptation, but a symbol of forgiveness, a vestige of the forsaken garden. Their nakedness clothed in beautiful tapestry, their creativity surviving their fall from grace, and yet still connecting them to their God, the Creator.¹⁰

The restoration of relations is also depicted in Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, which brings the viewer into the moment of the father's embrace of his wayward son. In interpreting the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), Rembrandt depicts the subversive nature of mercy experienced in the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of relations. Mercy, in this parable, is subversive because it does not moralize, but rather it sets warranted punishment aside to embrace and address the person in need. While the father would

be justified in ignoring his son's pleas, his fidelity to his identity as father related to son exerts the stronger claim, and his son is welcomed home.



Figure 8. The Return of the Prodigal Son
Rembrandt von Rijn

The colors of the painting, rich red and golden browns, fill the canvas with warmth and welcome. We see the broken and tattered condition of the son who buries himself in the protection and comfort of his father's robes. The father, in turn, tenderly leans over his son to embrace him, restoring the son to relations with his family. Henri Nouwen, in his reflections on this painting, is drawn to the tenderness expressed in the father's hands:

As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are full present. That gentle and caressing

right hand echoes for the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her baby at the breast,, feel no pity for the child she has borne? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."¹¹

Although they are the center of the action, the figures of the father and son do not occupy the center of the canvas. There the viewer finds the figure of the eldest son who is either receding into the shadow or brooding as he watches his Father's reception of the youngest son. This presence of the eldest son effectively de-centers the painting articulating the mercy of the father against the resentment of the eldest son. This de-centering does not allow the viewer to rest in the mercy of the Father, but to drift into that stance of the eldest son, and to confront the tension found in the space between mercy and resentment.

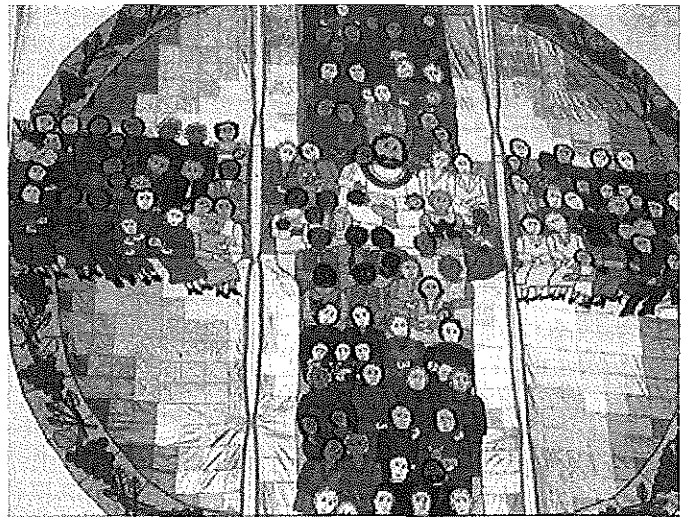


Figure 9. The Family of Christ
Linda Schapper, 1994

Recently displayed at the Encuentro 2000 gathering in Los Angeles, California, this tapestry literally set the stage for the millennial celebration of the diversity of the Church. A stunning work of brilliant colors, assembled from more than 12,000 separate pieces, the tapestry fills a 20-foot by 40-foot space with a cruciform image of the Church formed by the people of God with Christ as their head. The imagery symbolizes the re-membering power of mercy in addressing and overcoming the alienation resulting from the sin of racial and ethnic

prejudices while affirming the beauty, dignity and diversity of God's creation.

The tapestry appeals to the Pauline imagery of the diversity and unity of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) and embodies the unity of the Church effected through the grace of Jesus Christ. "Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you are also being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Eph 2:19-22)

The artist's own description of her tapestry refers to the re-membering activity of mercy as reflected in her work:

The tapestry consists of almost 200 people placed in family groups with Christ at the heart of the cross. In His arms he holds two babies of different races; another child bides gently behind His back. All races and many mixtures of families are represented so that no one will feel left out because he or she does not belong to the "ideal family." . . . As long as we belong to the family of Christ, we all belong to each other and none of us will ever be alone or unloved . . . I placed the families in the shape of the cross because love always involves a degree of surrender. Even though our family situations may not be perfect, every relationship is a gift helping us to give back-what we are to the family of Christ.¹²

Resurrection

These following images by William Congdon, Peruko Ccopacatty and Cindy Kelly all point to the possibility of new and transformed life through narrative or formal depictions of rescue. Congdon's work unfolds within the experience of his mid-life conversion to Catholicism, while the works of both Ccopacatty and Kelly are secular creations with an inherent spiritual significance. In their different ways, all three artists assert the power of remembering revealed in Ezekiel's vision of the Dry Bones: "Thus says the Lord God to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life. I will put sinews upon you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put spirit into you so that you may come to life and know that I am the Lord." (Ezek 37:5-6)



Figure 10. Lazarus
William Congdon, 1961

"Lazarus, come out!" Jesus summons his friend from the grave in the Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). The central focus of the image is the tightly bound body of Lazarus who is poised between the forces of death and life, between the tomb and Jesus. An explosive energy seems to fill the canvas, with the door of the tomb looking as if it has been peeled back by some powerful force. Black shards, the residual fragments of death, fly from Lazarus' body compounding the energy of the image. Wrapped in a dark blue sheet, with deeply incised lines accentuating the tightness and oppression of the bindings, Lazarus stands before the powerful figure of Jesus. This figure of Jesus anchors the right hand side of the image, his arms open in a cruciform pose reflecting his authority over death, his eagerness to embrace his risen friend, and his own impending death. The sweeping arcs deeply incised into the figure of Jesus, seem to draw Lazarus forward, into the embrace of Jesus.

Congdon's experience as an ambulance corpsman of World War II, and his assistance in the liberation of prisoners from the Bergen-Belsen death camp, exposed him to the cruelty of war and the depravity and evil of the Nazi concentration camps,

where human relations were perverted by hatred, cruelty and apathy.

It was an insane asylum in reverse. The insanity having been superimposed upon the normal by the insane, who watched over them . . . It was the wholly unrelated an revolutionary concept of humanity, that salvaged teeth fillings, fingernails and hair, stored them in warehouses with catalogued corsets and buttons, so as not to waste any raw products convertible to the war potential.¹³

Having witnessed first-hand the forces of anti-mercy at work in the world, Congdon's depiction of Lazarus is all the more powerful for its assertion of life in the face of the destruction and evil of the twentieth century.

The sculptures of Peruko Ccopacatty witness to the re-membling activity of mercy in both their essence and appearance: the rescuing of what has been cast off and the promise of resurrection. Ccopacatty works with the metal that has been

consigned to landfills and dumps. What had been deemed useless by his colleagues and tossed away cried out to Ccopacatty for new life. "Save us! Get us a life!" the scraps called out to him. And so he does. He responds by taking these inert scraps of metal and fashions them into forms that pulse and strain with the energy of life.

Sometimes you can recognize the past life of the rescued materials: the automotive bumpers, stair treads, boiler panels and construction rebar transformed into the limbs, muscles, tendons and flesh of the human and animal figures that he literally wrestles into existence.

Ccopacatty's larger woks are commissioned or often intended as public works, directed to the rehumanization of the technological world. His sculptures dramatically insert powerful human forms into the public square to assert the beauty, hope and strength of the human form. The particular work, entitled *Unity*, was privately commissioned for installation at a family community center in West Virginia. There it stands as a model for family unity structured and strengthened by the bonds of love. Particularly valuable is his portrayal of masculine figures whose evident physical strength is often tied to familial love or brotherly tenderness.¹⁴

These following mosaics by Cindy Kelly are a powerful metaphor for the re-membling activity of mercy. Kelly works with fragments of broken pottery and china, fitting each piece carefully into a new composition.

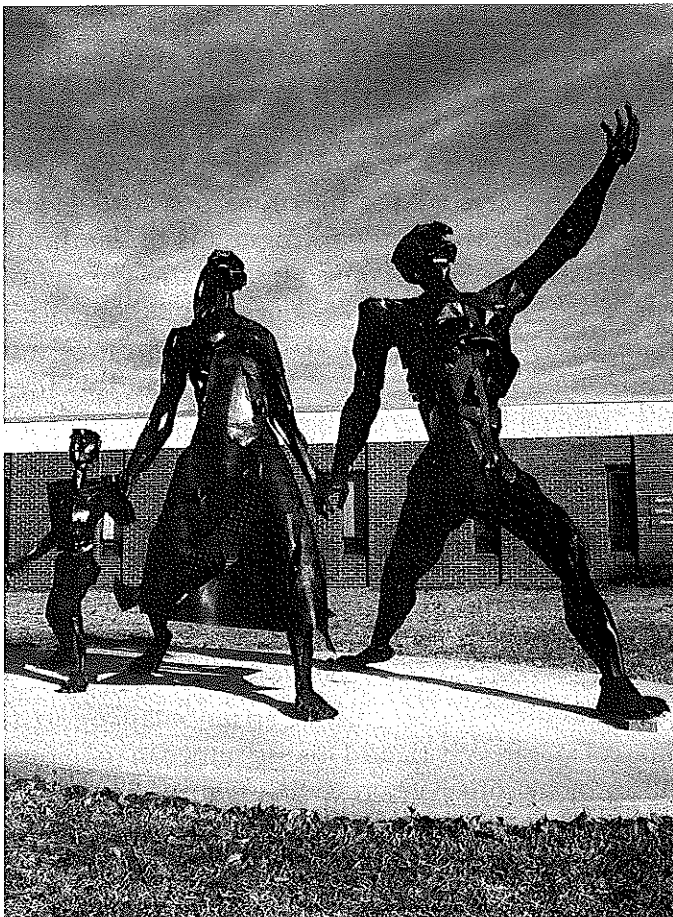


Figure 11. *Unity*
Peruko Ccopacatty, 1987



Figure 12. *Platter*
Cindy Kelly 1998



Figure 13 Planter
Cindy Kelly 1999

In her work she aims to recover the preciousness of articles once cherished but now broken, discarded and forgotten. It is a work of patience, imagination and vision. Pieces are carefully sorted through, chosen and fitted into a new pattern of form, shape and color. There is a hint of resurrection in her work as fragments of dishes, cups and plates are re-worked into a mosaic, thus taking on a new and transformed existence. Her works preserve the distinctive patterns and colors of the individual fragments by subsuming them into a larger pattern and overall new form. The works featured here are visual metaphors for the re-membering of mercy, for brokenness is the not the end, but the beginning of a new and transformed existence.¹⁵

As diverse as these images are, they all point to the re-membering activity of mercy directed to the embodied existence of humanity. Art, in its capacity for representing the significance and reality of the Incarnation, can challenge the dualistic notions of redemption and mercy that focus exclusively on the other-worldly salvation of the soul. In this light, these images establish that the re-membering work of mercy begun by God at creation, continued by

Christ, and addressed to the daily existence of humanity, is work that the church is called to continue. Mercy, as represented in these images, refrains from moral judgments about sin and suffering. Instead, it acts to relieve suffering by restoring persons and relations to greater life and wholeness. Through re-membering, mercy can draw the brokenness of human existence into the larger patterns of love, forgiveness and grace of the “already but not yet” reality of the Reign of God.



Notes

1. Margaret Miles, *Image and Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 4.
2. Matt 27:28–29
3. Gabriele Finaldi, *Images of Christ* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2000) 118.
4. *Catholic Encyclopedia* “Devotion to the Sacred Heart”
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07613a.htm>
5. Gabriele Finaldi, 118.
6. John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, (1999), section 14.
7. Susanna Avery-Quash, “Abiding Presence,” in Finaldi, *Images of Christ*, p. 196.
8. Ibid.
9. Rothstein, 1979, p. 80, quoted in *Images of Christ*, p. 196.
10. Juror’s comments CIVA Gallery review.
www.civa.org/gallery/civa_seen_99/mckenzie.htm.
11. Henri Nouwen quoted on web page
www.bridges_across.org/be/nouwen.htm
12. Linda Schapper quoted in the Encuentro 2000 program, p. 148, United States Catholic Conference of Bishops.
13. William Congdon, quoted by Peter Selz, “William Congdon: Five Decades of Painting,” in *Image: The Journal of Arts and Religion* 14 (Summer 1996): 23–39.
14. Peruko Ccopacatty, notes from interview by author, Block Island, Rhode Island, September 5, 2000.
15. Cindy Kelly, notes from interview by author, Block Island, Rhode Island, September 12, 2000.



Contributors

Jayne Hennessy holds a B.A. in Church Music, and M.A. in Religious Studies from Providence College, and an S.T.L. (licentiate in sacred theology) from the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Massachusetts. Currently, she is completing an S.T.D. at Weston in moral theology. The article in this issue of *MAST* is a portion of her 2000 S.T.L. thesis, "Mercy as the Art of Re-Membering: The Role of Affect and Image in Cultivating the Virtue of Mercy." She is currently an instructor in the Religious Studies Department at Salve Regina University, coordinator of music for Campus Ministry there and active in parish liturgy. She collaborates in planning and presenting programs on theological education for the Providence regional community.

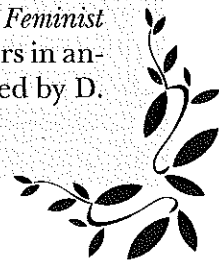
Marianne Hieb, R.S.M., MFA, D. Min., (Merion) directs the Wellness Spirituality Program at Lourdes Wellness Center in Collingswood, NJ. She is trained as a studio artist, art therapist and spiritual director. For the past twenty years, she has presented workshops and retreats using art-journaling as a spiritual practice. Her sculpture series, *Encirclings*, is an outgrowth of the retreat ministry.

Barbara A. Moore, R.S.M., (Rochester) holds an M.A. in history from the University of Rochester, an M.Div. from Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and is completing a D.Min. in Preaching at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Her present concentration is interfaith preaching and retreat work. She has preached in thirteen denominations. Over a period of seven years, she served as manager of Highland Hospital's Center for Women and was the hospital's Community Services Coordinator. Prior to this, she was Executive Director of the Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry (1980-1990) and for two years worked on the Congressional Staff of Congresswoman Louise Slaughter in areas of women's health, children, criminal justice and disability issues. She has a background in secondary education in public and private schools, ministry as pastoral associate, and has received numerous civic awards.

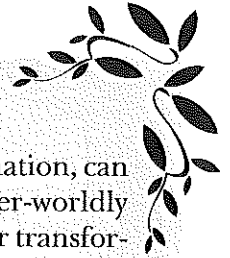
Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M. (Burlingame) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and is Professor of Spirituality and Spiritual Direction in the Graduate School of Religious Education at Fordham University. She has lectured on spirituality and spiritual direction in Ireland, England, Australia, India, Belgium, Ireland and Thailand. She is the author of numerous articles, as well as the books *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Narrative and Spiritual Direction* and *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (Paulist, 2000). She edited *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse University Press, 2001).

Judith Schubert, R.S.M. (New Jersey), holds a Ph.D from Fordham University, and is Professor of Religious Studies at Georgian Court College in Lakewood, New Jersey. She chairs the Religious Studies and Theology Department, directs the Master of Arts in Theology Program as well as the Institute for Lay Ecclesial Ministry for the Diocese of Trenton. She has published articles in *Bible Today*, *Homily Review* and the *MAST Journal*.

Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M. (Brisbane, Australia), Ph.D., has recently taken the Foundational Chair in Theology in the newly established School of Theology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She was recently Catholic Biblical Association Visiting Professor at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. She was formerly Professor of Scripture and feminist theology at Brisbane College of Theology as well as Visiting Scholar at Harvard Divinity School. She is the author of *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel of Matthew* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991) and *Shall We Look for Another: Feminist Re-reading of the Matthean Jesus* (Orbis, 1998), as well as numerous journal articles and chapters in anthologies, most recently "Biblical Commentaries" in *New Testament Women*, Vol. 13, edited by D. Smith and M. Williams (Abingdon, 1999).



Discussion Questions



(Hennessey) “Art, in its capacity for representing the significance and reality of the Incarnation, can challenge the dualistic notions of redemption and mercy that focus exclusively on the other-worldly salvation of the soul.” Which artistic image most effectively conveys to you a redemption or transformation that is taking place now, rather than later?

(Hieb) “As we look at the trends of people entering religious life these days, we have realized for a while now that we are not going to be recreated from the outside with a great influx of new life. The influx of new life can come from within, as we look at each other with new eyes.” Which persons can you gift with this creative gaze?

(Moore)

Prodigal Son: What are gentle ways you try to mend the relations of “sibling struggle; children estranged from parents, and family members who do not speak to one another”?

Celebration of Baptism: Who in the community or place of ministry do you find “suspect, different, threatening” and what basis do you can find for including them?

Good Shepherd: What initiative are you are taking to “deal with the violence that starts in the household of God”?

Body and Blood: For what cause would you lay down your life, risk your job, or compromise your reputation?

(Ruffing) “Eckhart’s interpretation moves toward integration its startling assertions in favor of an ongoing centeredness in God, not dependent on activity or inactivity.” What kind of activity, as well as inactivity, would interfere with centeredness in God, available to both Martha and Mary in such an interpretation?

(Schubert)

How would you explain the choice Jesus made of Mary of Magdala as first witness to the resurrection, the one to take the message back to the rest of the disciples? How does Mary embody the qualities needed for effective mission? How does the narrative in John 20 differ from homiletic stereotypes of Mary Magdalene?

(Wainwright) From whom have you learned “compassionate attentiveness”? What particular forms of suffering move you to take action without having to reflect very long on what needs to be done? What have you learned from people who have received your help?



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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.

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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.

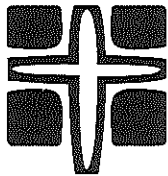
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia, at St. Raphaela Center, June 8–11, 2003 and the following year, June 10–13, 2004 in Auburn, CA.

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, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Executive Director, Gwynedd Mercy College, Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437, (215) 641-5521, email: mariemicheled@aol.com

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.



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