

The **MAST** *Journal*

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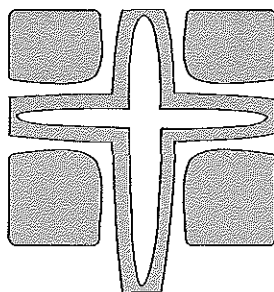
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Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

The family in the downstairs unit, with two little girls, four-year-old Lizette, and two-year-old Ruth, will be moving out soon. I was going to dispose of last week's newspapers back of the building and Lizette called out to me from behind her screen door, "Hi, hi!" So, I greeted her, "Hi, Lizette, your mom told me you are moving. That's exciting." She said, "I'm going to school when I move." I said, "That's great, Lizette. You'll do fine in school because you are a smart girl." Lizette looked pleased. I generally try to find a reason to tell little girls they are smart, not wanting their self-image to get locked into "pretty." So I continued, "You will learn lots of new things. You can help your little sister. So do what your teacher says, and what your mom and dad say." As I carried the papers to the back, I did what we used to call in the novitiate a "consciousness examen." I queried myself, "Why did you say goodbye to her by telling her she was smart, telling her to help her sister, and then telling her to be obedient to her parents and teacher? What kind of a message to women is that?"

On the way back up the stairs, I revised, "Lizette, I will miss you. When you come back, you can come visit me. (She smiles.) Remember when you came a few days ago with Leslie? (an eight-year-old neighbor). You can come again, because now we are all girlfriends. (She nods.) And girlfriends visit each other, and talk to each other about everything, and help each other. And girlfriends are friends forever!" This was too long a speech to give a four-year-old. But I felt much better about it than my descending, prissy, be-a-good-girl encomium.

Later reflection: The first message comes from my position of power as the Caucasian woman "upstairs." I outlined Lizette's future as an Hispanic woman. Her smartness would be expressed in obedience to parents and teachers, to authority. I was silent about her real-time relationship with me. I imagined that she would benefit from institutionalized education and outlined her consequent ministerial duty to Ruth. Could she internalize this as her permanent, subordinate status as a helper to everyone?

Was I too hard on myself? This sort of self-examination used to be proposed in the novitiate as an exercise in humility. Humility carried a lot of spiritual and theological freight, even in a post-Vatican II church. Only profound humility (shame?) could counter the disastrous pride that seduced Adam in the garden and led to the downfall of the human race. Have I matured as a person, or am I tangled in women's self-shaming when I question my thoughts now? Is my fundamental spirituality any different today than it was in formation? If I question axioms, am I still faithful to my vows?

In place of "consciousness examen," let me substitute "feminist analysis" which examines power relations for their social origin and impact on women's lives. There is a mission script which affirms vowed women for fidelity to vows and loyalty to church, for staying the course through changes of community leadership, and sustaining Mercy's sponsored works. Did I consign its obedience-and-duty scenario to Lizette?

I hope I said something to liberate Lizette, not bind her. In the script of "we are all girlfriends," her intelligence and goodness get affirmed, not by proof of her submission to authority, but by her solidarity with other women. I want her to imagine she now has continuous connections with women who can rely on each other, no matter their race, schooling, marital status, weight, religion, first language, age, political party, wealth, or whether they live upstairs or downstairs. Women's solidarity is broader than a family circle, an institution's members, or a ministry's recipients.

Religious life, though, is more than a sorority of friends devoted to charitable work. The compelling love which fundamentally sustains women of Mercy is God's. But who is the God of Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, and Leah dwelling amidst a community of women? Since Rome won't endorse inclusive language, are we faced with a Solomonic solution—cut God in half and embody our part? What are systemic changes needed in religious life to dissolve this paradox: We are saddled with a top-down, military-like, ecclesial culture as vowed women, but we have a Mercy Constitution which describes a sisterly, democratic, participative, and collaborative culture.

Is anyone working on "girlfriend theology"? Lizette is excited about moving to a new house. She knows she can come back to visit me and her old place, but she's turned to the life ahead of her. I blew up a yellow balloon for her, tied a string to it, and she ran happily off with it.



Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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

About This Issue

Looking as If for the First Time

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., Guest Editor

There are times in our lives when a serendipitous convergence of streams come together and invite us to look at familiar things with new eyes. As Institute we stand at such a moment. We have been like many streams flowing to the ocean for the past twenty years as we have explored how we might come together for the sake of God's reign. The events put into motion by Vatican II urged us to examine what was most dear to us. We were asked to reclaim and renew the charism that was entrusted to us by the Spirit through Catherine. The result of accepting that invitation has been to look again at our relationship and structures. We have asked ourselves continuously how our choices foster the mission. Are we faithful to our call as Sisters of Mercy?

This thought was on the minds of the MAST membership when it met over a year ago. We spoke of the current efforts to re-imagine and reconfigure ourselves as Institute. Perhaps it was our bias as theologians, but we felt an urgency to engage in deeper conversation about the nature and shape of religious life itself, especially Mercy religious life. In the midst of this conversation we returned again and again to our Constitutions, to the core document that proclaims who we are and what we are about. It is with the intent of broadening and deepening that conversation that we committed ourselves to publish this two part journal on our Constitutions.

This edition is part 1, devoted to theological themes from our core document. Beginning with Sheila Carney's article, "Constitutions as our Corporate Word," we are reminded that the Constitutions is our word, our collective confession of what we believe the Spirit asks of us. As Sheila says, "The words of our Constitutions are indeed our words. Shaped from the substance of our lives, they bind us to themselves and to one another."

Patricia McCann devotes her attention to one of the most critical issues for women religious today, that of ecclesial identity. Since we name ourselves as women of the church, what does that mean? If we are to authentically re-imagine ourselves, Pat suggests that we must answer a core question: "I named the central question facing us as women religious in this way: Is faith in God made manifest in Jesus and articulated through the Catholic Church and its theological tradition still our core reality?" The answers to such questions shape our future and provide the context for our choices.

Janet Ruffing, Helen Marie Burns, and I all contribute to this volume through reflections on our vows. Drawing from our life experience, Constitutions, and contemporary writings on religious life, each of us lifts up questions for your consideration, questions that we must explore together. Each of these articles contains elements of paradox. What we say we believe doesn't always find resonance in our actions. What must we claim and reclaim in our shared life to support our "lifelong direction"?

Mary Daly and Marilee Howard complete our listing of authors for this volume. They focus on mission and ministry. Mary Daly speaks of both the struggle to discern where we are called to ministry and the struggle to acknowledge that we cannot do everything. A corollary issue is, "Who does the sending?" Marilee Howard looks at a different aspect of the question in examining the interdependency between direct service and systemic change. She explores the various ways in which our Constitutions articulate Mercy ministry and how those concerns are related to social justice.

It is our hope that this collection of articles will provide rich food for reflection and stir conversations throughout our Institute. The articles are a beginning, not a final word. That is yet to come.



The Constitutions

Our Corporate and Corporeal Word

Sheila Carney, R.S.M.

[Stephen spoke to the people, the elders and the scribes:] While they were in the desert our ancestors possessed the Tent of Testimony that had been constructed according to the instructions God gave to Moses telling him to make an exact copy of the pattern he had been shown. It was handed down from one ancestor of ours to another until Joshua brought it into the country we had conquered . . . Here it stayed until the time of David. He won God's favor and asked permission to have a temple built for the house of Jacob, though it was Solomon who actually built God's house (Acts 7:44-48).

This passage about the temple—desired by David but built by Solomon—may seem a strange beginning for a reflection about the Constitutions as our corporate word. Yet it came quickly to mind as I thought about the long journey we made together in the development of this document. From Catherine's day to ours, the Constitutions, in various forms, was handed down from one generation to the next. In the years following the Second Vatican Council, Chapter decrees and enactments became our "Tent of Testimony" as we wandered in the unknown lands of experimentation, seeking to renew our Mercy life.

The committee that wrote the Core Constitutions of 1981 made the first to attempt to transform our lived experience into words—to find the language that would name who we are at this moment in our history and how we choose to live our Mercy calling. Just as it is not given to every generation to create a temple for our God, it is not given to every generation to write a Constitutions. But this challenge was given to ours. Led by yet another Constitutions committee, we explored each word and phrase. We handled them, we tried them on, we considered their fit. In consultation after consultation, each member was invited to test the words against her own experience—to affirm, to nuance, to amend. This process continued into the First Institute Chapter where the document was debated, given its final form, affirmed and sent off to Rome for approval.

In the Pittsburgh Regional Community, we had been living for twenty-four years according to various Chapter enactments—my entire religious life at that point. And so it was amazing and touching for me, with no previous experience of living with a constitutional document, to see the excitement with which the community received the news that our

Constitutions had been approved. At the ceremony of distribution, each member received her copy with the question, "Will you live by these words of Mercy?" The joy and the eagerness of each "Yes!" still echoes in me.

A Living Document and Guide

The phrases of our Constitutions are indeed our words. Shaped from the substance of our lives, they bind us to themselves and to one another. The verbs goad us to action: respond, proclaim, relieve, support, witness, encourage, intercede, collaborate, pursue, adore, celebrate, and transform. The paragraphs on our history, the meaning of our membership, our call to ministry, our life of prayer, our vows, our place in the Church center and focus us. The sections on governance describe the structures that assure stability and continuity and that safeguard our right of participation.

They are powerful words, these words of ours. Having shaped and affirmed them, how do we allow them to inhabit us? How are they alive in us? The Constitutions itself calls us "to pursue integrity of word and deed in our lives" (Const. §8).

How have we integrated these words and expressed them through our deeds? One way to seek answers to these questions is to think of the Constitutions not only as our corporate word (belonging to a corporation or group), but also as our corporeal word (bodily, physical, and material).

"Prayer, retirement and recollection are not sufficient for those called to labor for the salvation of souls. [They 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 exterior action should separate us from Him . . ."

fore 1837 ever made the vow of service. And, of course, they didn't have to because it was out of the witness of their lives that the vow arose. Much like our own experience of creating the Constitutions out of the substance of our own lives, for Catherine and her companions, lives of service found articulation in the form of a vow.

Much like our own experience of creating the Constitutions out of the substance of our own lives, for Catherine and her companions, lives of service found articulation in the form of a vow.

Vow of Service

There's a wonderful passage in *Tender Courage* which offers an example of this possibility from Catherine's life. In this passage, Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss are describing the origins of the fourth vow.

With a shared vision, Catherine and her first associate had so unequivocally reduced their Rule to practice before submitting it for approval that the Bishop of Cork urged at a profession in 1837 that they add a fourth vow—the service of the poor, the sick and the ignorant—as both integral to their dedication and descriptive of it. Catherine's conviction that the works of mercy were the very "business of our lives," had shaped the community from its inception in an apostolic spirituality. She had emphasized this spirituality in retreat conferences to the sisters at Baggot Street:

With wisdom and balance, she asserted the value of prayer and contemplation, and the importance of a profound inner life, while insisting at the same time that in service of God's people, works unite us to God.¹

It's important to note that Bishop Brown suggested the vow of service, not because he thought it would focus the community toward certain works. Rather, in the words of the reading, "Catherine and her first associates had so unequivocally reduced their Rule to practice that he thought the vow would name what was already integral to their dedication and descriptive of it." The vow was an afterthought, to name something central to the life of the congregation that was already alive among them, that was evident in their deeds.

It's not clear that Catherine and the other sisters professed be-

Jesus and the Living Rule

Of course the example, par excellence, of the integrity of word and deed is in the person of Jesus, the Word become flesh. The unity of word and deed in Jesus is evident throughout his life on earth. Jesus tells his disciples that he has compassion on the people who have followed him without thought of food or drink and his word of compassion turns into the act of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:31–44); Jesus announces that he is the bread of life (John 6:35) and then turns bread into his living substance (Mark 14:22); Jesus tells us that there is no greater act of love than to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13) and then this word becomes the act of dying on the cross for us (John 19:30). Over and over, Jesus models for us the dynamic and challenging call to forge a living bond between the words that we say and the life that we live.

On a less exalted plain, my reflections on Jesus as word and deed, as the message and action of God, took me back to the film, *The Nun's Story*. In an early scene, Audrey Hepburn's postulant mistress points out a sister to her charges and describes this

A Living Rule is a Sister who has so incorporated the Rule into her way of being that, if all the copies were lost, you could reconstruct it by observing her.

sister as a Living Rule. When the postulants ask what she means, she says that a Living Rule is a Sister who has so incorporated the Rule into her way of being that, if all the copies were lost, you could reconstruct it by observing her.

This image of the Living Rule found a home in me, and I began to ask myself, What if each member of our Institute chose some word or line or paragraph from the Constitution and transformed it into her flesh so that others could encounter it through her? What if someone took the line that says, "We learn how to forgive and to intercede for ourselves and others" (Const. §10) and turned that into flesh, allowed that word to become flesh in her? What if someone else gave over her life to developing "a global perspective on the works of mercy"? (Const. §3). What if someone else chose, "We witness to Mercy when we reverence the dignity of each person" (Const. §8) and "unequivocally reduced it to practice" as the reading from *Tender Courage* says?

How would our creation be sustained by our valuing "the resources of the earth as gifts of God and [using] them in a spirit of stewardship"? (Const. §26). How would our shared life change if we were all to commit

our efforts to incarnate the provision, "Community strengthens us for mission when we listen openly to one another, seek the common good and promote mutual trust"? (Const. §19). How would each of us living a life marked by "the courage of deep faith and interior joy" act to "extend God's reign of love over human hearts"? (Const. §84). How would our own sense of integrity be strengthened by our growing fidelity to and incarnation of these words, our corporate and corporeal words?

Conclusion

This reflection on our Constitutions resulted in one final connection for me.

El Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino has written a very challenging book called *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*. One of the essays in this book is a reflection on the six Jesuit martyrs who were friends and colleagues of his, and on all those who have been martyred for the faith in his country. This includes Oscar Romero and the four American church women and so many others. He speaks about the effect that the witness of their lives has had on his people in these

words: "The truth is that, with Monsignor Romero, with many thousands of others, with Julia Elba and Celina and the six Jesuits . . . God passed through El Salvador. They leave us their faith, therefore, but above all, they leave us the mysterious passing of God."²

Is this not worth aspiring to—to so clearly have incorporated, given flesh to—the words we have said about ourselves as persons called to discover and reveal God's mercy, that people say of us, "In them the Mercy of God is passing through North Carolina and Albany and Chile and the Philippines and Cedar Rapids. They inspire us by their fidelity to their corporate word and in them we know the mysterious passing of God's mercy."

Our generation has been given the gift of articulating through the Constitutions the meaning of our call and our life together. It is also given the challenge of lifting these words off the paper and making them a vital force for the transformation of ourselves and of our Institute.



Notes

- 1 Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), p. 106.
- 2 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 183.

Ecclesial Identity and Mercy Life

Patricia McCann, R.S.M.

Some years ago when we were in the process of forming the Institute of Sisters of Mercy by bringing together the separate units of Mercy communities that existed in the United States, including their connected missions in a variety of places throughout the Americas and beyond, I fell into the task of chairing the Constitutions Committee. I still remember the phone call from Sister Amy Hoey, a member of the administrative team that handled the huge task of coordinating the transition from a loosely connected Federation of Sisters of Mercy to the single congregation Institute. Would I take on the task of shepherding the Constitutions through the Roman approval process, she asked.¹

Response to Invitation

The substantive work on the Constitutions was already done, thanks to the leadership of Sister Helen Amos, then president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union and chair of the Core Constitutions project. Still to be done was a membership consultation with more than six thousand Sisters of Mercy who would constitute the new Institute, adaptation to the canonical requirements for the new structure, and the Roman approval process. Everything in me felt inclined to answer Amy's invitation in the negative. There was a limited time frame for the task. I do not care for work that requires a lot of attention to details. At that time, I was in a phase of questioning why we needed canonical status and the topic of constitutions didn't interest me. Nonetheless, in the grace of the moment I said yes. It turned into a valuable learning experience. I came to appreciate the role that constitutions play in protecting members from individual whim, arbitrariness and misdirected use of authority. It also provided my first clear understanding of the significance of ecclesial identity for our stability and endurance.

Why Relate to the Church?

The question of ecclesial identity has been a thorny one for women religious in the last several decades. This is partially due to our complex situation as women in the church during a historic time of growth in feminist consciousness throughout society. Though perceived as church leaders in our roles as principal, college president, health system CEO, or social service and pastoral leader, our actual contribution to church governance has been minimal. A second factor is the impact of New Age spirituality, whether integrated with the biblical tradition or in place of it, among women religious in the United States. Thirdly, the resistance of the church hierarchy to change, to theological and ecclesiological renewal, and especially to feminism, has further complicated our sense of ecclesial identity.

In reflecting on the question of ecclesial identity and Mercy life, it is useful to define some terms. In his address to the August, 2003 Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Marist Brother Sean Sammon (who lived through many of the same questions in the last several decades) speaks of identity as "that feeling of knowing who you are and where you are going in life."² Ecclesial identity for us, then, refers to our knowing who we are as church and within the church, and knowing where we are going with that reality. In an article that I wrote for *America* magazine, I named the central question facing us as women religious in this way: Is faith in God made manifest in Jesus and articulated through the Catholic Church and its theological tradition still our core reality?³ This is the heart of the ecclesial identity question. Despite the poetic, beautiful, and inspirational language we have used to talk about ourselves over these decades, it still comes back to this question. How we answer and how we integrate contemporary thought and spiri-

tuality with it holds the key to our ecclesial identity and to our future.

Ecclesial Identity in the Constitutions

The early paragraphs of the Mercy Institute Constitutions name this "faith in God made manifest in Jesus and articulated through the Catholic Church and its theological tradition" essentially and clearly. "Responsive in faith to God's mercy, Catherine McAuley heeded the call of Jesus . . . to involve women as religious in the mission of the church in the world . . ." (Const. §1)

In the following paragraph, women who are members take on an official identity in the church: "[R]esponding to a call to serve the needy of our time . . . We profess by public vows . . ." (Const. §2). The ministry of members is rooted in message and the actions of Jesus: "Recalling the word of Jesus . . . to proclaim the gospel to all nations . . . we seek to relieve misery . . ." (Const. §3). The orientation of Mercy's ministerial service to achieve good in this world imagines the scope of the entire church: "To this end we serve God's people . . . through ministries that further social, political, economic and spiritual well-being." It is a work that involves ". . . interceding for the whole church." (Const. §4).

The ministry is not merely the fruit of women's compassion for suffering people, but meant to mirror the actions of Jesus: "As Sisters of Mercy we sponsor institutions to address our enduring concerns and to witness to Christ's mission" (Const. §5). Inspiration is drawn not merely from humanistic ideals and altruism. Rather, "we rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us" (Const. §9). We set our ministerial direction, not primarily by principles of economic advantage, but rather, "we seek to discover God's movement in us and in our world" (Const. §10). Another reference to our ecclesial identity recalls, "Our union with Christ signified in the Sacrament of Baptism is enhanced by our participation in the liturgical life of the church" (Const. §11).

These examples leave no doubt about who we think we are and the context of our life. It is language that grew out of extensive input from the total membership in the process of developing the

Constitutions. I read every one of more than four thousand consultation responses returned to the committee in 1990. The text represents a consensus about Mercy life that existed a short time ago. I think it still does.

Feminist Consciousness Informed by Catholic Theology

We bring the reality of our unique gifts as women to community and mission. Our gift of leadership in the church contributes to an informed feminist consciousness. It is essential that we recognize this as a dialogic process. In order to be holistic, feminist consciousness among us needs to be informed

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by Catholic theological tradition every bit as much as Catholic theological tradition benefits from our women's awareness and experience. Structurally and culturally this is no small task. Its challenge will extend far beyond the span of our lifetime. Nonetheless, integrity impels us to commit ourselves to the demanding, frustrating, and sometimes maddening work of integrating Catholic tradition and feminist consciousness. "Is faith in God made manifest in Jesus and articulated through the Catholic Church and its theological tradition still our core reality?" To decide that is impossible is to answer this core question, or to answer in the negative is to abandon ecclesial identity.

New Age and Scientific Language

Language constitutes an essential aspect of the ecclesial identity issue. Here the Constitutions provide the model. Throughout the sections identifying the charism (Const. § 1–15 and §83–84), the language is clearly biblical and theological. On July 20, 1991, our Founding Document underscores this as well: “We gather this day knowing that our bonds are rooted in God, and that we strengthen and enable one another for mission. We remember . . . the many gifts of life we have received from God through Jesus . . . We believe that the life of our community is a vibrant sign of the gospel; we believe that the presence of the church is made visible in this world through our service . . . we pray that the bonds we formalize today will endure, will enliven us, and will serve our church and touch our world.”⁴

These texts leave no doubt about where we are rooted. There is thus a problem in retaining our sense of identity when members rely mainly on New Age and neo-scientific language and imagery for our community prayer and description of mission. Often we are using these newer images as tools to revivify what seem to be tired old concepts. In the process, we unintentionally blur our core identity. I am concerned if a whole day of prayer at a community meeting never mentions the name of Jesus.

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Jesus.**

We can draw much that is useful from New Age thinkers and writers. Indeed, we need to be in touch with their work to communicate with those who are on a spiritual quest without a specific denominational or religious tradition to ground their search. In articulating who we are as well as offering something substantive to those who are searching for God, we need to translate this more ambiguous language of spirituality into biblical and theological language. To withhold this rich heritage from a spiritually starving world is a dangerous impoverishment. We become Marie Antoinette saying, “Let

them eat cake,” when in fact we are able to share the Bread of Life.

Conclusion

Even as I write this reflection, I am aware of the complexity of the issues. There are those who want to retain imagery, structures, and vocabulary of an earlier era in some rigidly fundamentalist way. That is not what I am suggesting. Our expression of ecclesial identity in Mercy life, as in the whole church, is a more fluid reality. It evolves with each new historic era as Jesus continues to reveal God among us in new ways.

The church, the Institute of Mercy, and our chaotic world, all need to re-imagine, to develop new structures and concepts that can incarnate Jesus and gospel life in these times. To do that effectively, though, we have to be careful about preserving and passing on the faith tradition upon which Catholic ecclesial identity and Mercy life rest.

What are the key themes? Fundamental to this re-imagining are: a gospel-based life, discipleship with Jesus that animates our service to and with others, and a sacramental spirituality rooted in the Eucharist. These strands are knit together with an absolute trust in the goodness of God who continues to choose to be among us in history. That trust sustains us. It offers hope for those to whom we reach out in mission. It attracted the disciples to follow Jesus and has the power to attract women to continue the journey with us today.



Notes

- 1 Constitutions, Institute of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.
- 2 Sean Sammon, F.M.S., “The Identity and Purpose of Religious Life,” *Origins* (August 28, 2003, Vol. 33, No. 12).
- 3 Patricia McCann, R.S.M., “Catholic Identity, New Age and Women Religious,” *America* (July 21–28, 2003).
- 4 Full text of the Founding Document found in the Constitutions, appendix B.

Our Vow of Poverty

Musings Forty-Five Years After the Act

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.

Introduction

All vows stem from the heart—marriage, private, religious vows. This does not mean vows are meaningless. This simply means their content and meaning begin and end in the heart. The mind offers rational explanations. Experience provides learning that creates deeper and deeper understanding. The heart, however, keeps the vow vital throughout a lifetime.

This invitation to write an article on our vow of poverty, then, became an opportunity to engage an honest analysis of my own experience: whether and how my heart was engaged in this vow and whether and how meaning persisted. These musings are the result of that analysis and come primarily from reflection on my lived experience.

This rich, sometimes traumatic experience has biased me in favor of the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; but I will speak here only of the vow of poverty.

Basically, I find in my experience, in my learning, and in my heart continued affirmation for the striving symbolized in these vows. I fear a renaming of the vow of poverty, for example, because I fear a disconnect from the ancient wisdom of so many

faith traditions that saw the accumulation and hoarding of possessions; the desire to use possessions to obtain power, prestige, and security; and the human tendency to create an illusion of self-sufficiency as serious obstacles to growth toward full humanness as the outcome of our spiritual journey.

I offer my musings regarding the vow of poverty in our lives as Sisters of Mercy in three movements: a look at vowed life in general, a look at this vow as expressed in Catherine's early instructions and in our Constitutions, and a look at this vow in light of our present and future service in the Church and the world.

Vowed life in General

Emily Dickinson captures my understanding of the vowed life in a simple poem:

*A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.*

*I say it just
Begins to live
That day.*

This is the mystery of all vows. The "word said" begins to live. The living gives meaning to the word even as the word gives meaning to the living. The very utterance of a vow initiates a lifetime of unfolding and discovering meaning. The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience have created a vibrant context for my life that is a stance toward life, an action on life, and a witness and commitment to life.

A beautiful expression of the vowed life as stance toward life is found in our Constitutions:

*By our religious profession we
choose a life-long direction
that unites us to God and to*

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one another as disciples of Jesus (Const. §22).

Our vowed life is a stance we take toward life—a “life-long direction.” The history of religious life suggests that various configurations of vows have served to name and describe the “lifelong direction” appropriate to a particular congregation. All utilize, however, a basic paradigm of public proclamation in a community-in-service to make clear the intent involves a commitment to journey together in a particular manner for the sake of God’s kingdom. As a community-in-service and as individuals, we turn ourselves in a certain direction. That turning influences our perspectives, our choices, and our companions.

The vows of our religious profession impact the manner in which we engage life and direct us toward such engagement.

In addition to a stance toward life, my own experience suggests that the vowed life is also an action on life. The vows of our religious profession impact the manner in which we engage life and direct us toward such engagement. For Sisters of Mercy, they release our energies in very specific ways in order to construct a particular life form oriented to community and service. Barbara Fland in *Living the Vision* describes this concept well by posing several questions: “What if we saw [the vows] as dispositions that we embrace, as a way of being in which we dwell, as . . . ways of seeing into which we grow, which en-

ables us to encounter ourselves and the world on a deeper, on a sacred plane . . . ?”¹

Dispositions and attitudes occasion certain behaviors, practices, and choices. These behaviors, practices, and choices influence both individual and communal reality. The behaviors and practices that accompany “our surrender [of] the independent use and disposal of material goods” (Const. §24) symbolize the deeper process of knowing ourselves and relinquishing self-illusions, a process that “is ordinarily not a process of adding anything, but only of having the pretenses, the false assumptions, the unreal images both negative and positive stripped off.”² These behaviors

many implications in an understanding of the vowed life as a witness to life. Such an understanding helps us move away from legal, minimalist, and restrictive interpretations of these profound symbols in order to seek meaning in relation to personal and communal growth; to changing political, social and economic realities; and to new insights from theology and ecclesiology. As members of an active religious congregation, such flexibility and creativity lie at the heart of a life in which vows and common life are ordered to mission rather than mission being an overflow of vows and common life.

The Vow in Our Tradition and Constitutions

Catherine McAuley understood her vow of poverty as both backdrop and framework for a life of service, “a lifelong direction that unites us to God and one another as disciples of Jesus” (Const. §21). This is clear from her instructions to her companions that the imitation of Jesus Christ was the primary focus of their spiritual journey and the works of mercy the primary focus of their daily service. Further, recent study of the early documents of the congregation offers evidence of this sense of the supporting role of the vows in the life of Sisters of Mercy. Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., notes that, while the three chapters “Of the Vows” were chapters 3, 4, and 5 in the first part of the Presentation Rule, Catherine moved these chapters to the end of her first part, as chapters 17,

and practices serve our vow to the degree that they occasion authentic dispositions of transparency in self-understanding, simplicity in presence toward others, and openness to God dwelling in a world of finite beings.

Finally, the vowed life has been for me also a witness to life. Our Constitutions assert that Catherine McAuley founded her religious congregation to “involve women as religious in the mission of the church in the world” (Const. §1). That mission is the saving mission of Jesus Christ who “came that all might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). There are

18, and 19.³ She concludes that this deliberate choice reveals an attitude that places “the vows and . . . intra-institutional matters in a supportive rather than in a primary position” in the lives of Sisters of Mercy.⁴

Our current Constitutions continue that deliberate placement: sections on the vows (Const. §20–29) are placed after primary considerations of mission, prayer, and community (Const. §1–19). This placement reflects an attitude that flows rightly from a founder whose major gift to the Church was her contribution to a new form of religious life for women (active, apostolic) dedicated to the works of mercy and to the discovery of God in the market place.

Nonetheless, Catherine’s affection for her vow of poverty was great. This affection stemmed not so much from the call to detach one’s self from material goods as from the call to detach oneself from illusions and the trappings of social pretenses. Catherine sought to ensure that she and her companions were detached from attitudes and behaviors that conditioned respect for persons based on their economic, political, or social status. Indeed, detachment was ultimately valuable to the extent that it was a pathway toward the imitation of Christ. In her Retreat Instructions, she makes this link directly: “Poverty is the mother of all virtues. It is closely allied to Christ’s favorite virtue humility . . . [Now] humility consists in having a thorough knowledge of ourselves as we are in the sight of God and a realization of our in-

ability to do the smallest thing without God’s assistance and even the help of others.”⁵ She seems to have understood that the deep spirit of the vow of poverty called her and her companions to authenticity and simplicity before God and neighbor. One’s relationship to material goods depended more on this internal disposition than outward trappings: “The more the heart is withdrawn from earthly things, the easier it finds access to God. But let us understand well what true poverty is. To be poor in spirit does not consist in wearing poor clothes and at the same time being covetous of praise, of preferment, of distinction.”⁶

Catherine sought to ensure that she and her companions were detached from attitudes and behaviors that conditioned respect for persons based on their economic, political, or social status.

Catherine understood that the works of mercy performed in the name of a compassionate and merciful God require a heart dispossessed of its tendency to judge, to measure, to compare and to exact—a heart laid bare to its own limitations and poverty. In this supporting role, the vow of poverty paved the way for a presence to persons that was respectful of their dignity and attentive to their needs whatever the outward circumstances of their lives.

Catherine knew the extreme economic poverty of many Irish

people, but she did not understand her vow as a call literally to renounce her possessions. Prior to any vow of poverty, she had chosen to place her wealth and her life at the service of persons who had little of this world’s goods. Her many letters allude to the fact that this detachment for service guided her choices and those of her companions before and after their vowed life. She seems to have used a familiar criterion: how will this decision and action affect those who are poor, especially women and children?

As often as possible, Catherine placed herself in the circumstances of persons who were poor. She learned from her

proximity to these circumstances a sense of appreciation for material blessings, a need to place these blessings at the service of persons who were poor, and the freedom to bear inconvenience and want in her own life. Her remark regarding an early foundation seems a fitting commentary on her life and spirit: “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than [that] the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford.”⁷

The Vow of Poverty Today and Tomorrow

One of the challenges facing us today is how best to be present to the poor “in Kingstown and elsewhere” and how to understand “any consolation in our power to afford.” In addition, we need to discover what attitudes and behaviors best express a striving for authenticity and simplicity as individuals and as a community. Since active religious life takes shape and form from the social and ecclesial order of its time and the pressing needs that reflect the absence of God’s kindom, any interpretation of our vowed life will need to take into consideration current realities of church and world.

The humility that Catherine associated with a vow of poverty seems very needed in our Church and our world today . . . We are challenged to create a world, beginning with our own, in which mutuality—acceptance of fundamental equality—is possible.

New attitudes and behaviors occasioned by such interpretation will need to address the extent to which traditional practices and expressions of detachment from material goods (e.g., the independent use and disposal of material goods, renunciation of all we earn by our work or receive as gift, provisions about inherited property) continue to serve as an effective pathway toward the imitation of Christ.

What is the stance toward life, the action on life, and the

witness to life desirable in a vow of poverty in a twenty-first century Church and world? I suggest that our stance will be found in more and more authentic solidarity with persons who are poor, sick, and ignorant. Our action will be found in efforts to strengthen mutual relationships in various circles of community. Our witness will be found in making visible a community in which all are seated at a table of plenty.

Authentic Solidarity

Poverty is still a dominant feature of our world and its reverse (wealth) presents just as great a problem unless and until it is shared.⁸ A vow of poverty in a

powerless. Such a stance may lead also to “[an] attitude and conviction that the Christian does not go to God alone. We are saved as members of a people.”⁹ We come full circle, then, to Catherine’s idea that our vow of poverty leads to a “realization of our inability to do the smallest thing without God’s assistance and even the help of others.”

Strengthen Mutual Relationships

The humility that Catherine associated with a vow of poverty seems very needed in our Church and our world today. Behaviors and attitudes that suggest self-sufficiency as individuals and as a congregation are contrary to the lifelong direction we assume in this vow that asks us to acknowledge vulnerability and need. Likewise, attitudes and practices that allow relationships to be guided by illusions of dominance, prestige and status—within various circles of influence—weaken our credibility and authenticity. We are challenged to create a world, beginning with our own, in which mutuality—acceptance of fundamental equality—is possible. In such a world, we work together, respect diverse gifts, share burdens and achievements.

Today, this sense of mutuality needs to extend to the whole of creation. As Alexandra Kovats proposes, the vow of poverty “challenges us to relate to all . . . God’s creation with reverence . . . to live out of a deep sense of gratitude . . . not to use, abuse or misuse the gifts of creation . . . What is enough? How do I/we

We need to see anew the radical possibilities in a vow of poverty to live simple and authentic lives in a community-in-service, free from possessions and illusions, open to the abundance of a loving, merciful God.

share what we have? How do I/we live in right relationship with the gifts of creation?"¹⁰

Visibility of Community

Our witness to life rests in the visibility of ourselves as a community dedicated to freely sharing the abundance bestowed on us by an all-merciful God. As Johannes Metz observes, "Religious orders . . . offer productive models for the Church as a whole in the business of growing accustomed to living in new social, economic, intellectual, and cultural situations."¹¹ Globalization and interconnectedness mark new social and economic orders in the twenty-first century. Do we as an Institute of the Sisters of Mercy participate in these new social and economic orders and create alternate ways of being global and interconnected? Our vow of poverty challenges us to seek ways to redeem this moment by fostering mutual relationships and solidarity with the poor, by promoting access to resources by the poor and

equitable distribution of wealth, and by working for innovations that enhance life and counter death.

Catherine's trust in God's care for all creation and her sincere belief that means would be found for works intended by divine energy moves us to trust anew this same loving God and to risk interdependence with one another. "Our God," Catherine insisted, "is a faithful provider. Let us never desire more than enough—God will give that—and a blessing."¹²

Conclusion

My musings suggest we need to reclaim the unfinished business of our vows rooted in a rich tradition of Roman Catholicism. We need to see anew the radical possibilities in a vow of poverty to live simple and authentic lives in a community-in-service, free from possessions and illusions, open to the abundance of a loving, merciful God.



Notes

- 1 Barbara Fiand, *Living the Vision* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 48.
- 2 Elaine Prevallet, S.L., "From the Inside Out," in *Claiming our Truth*, ed. Nadine Foley, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1988), 71. Prevallet builds on the insights of psychology and religious studies and examines the vows precisely as a shift from the ego to self (as Jungian psychologists understand these terms—surface and center, respectively).
- 3 Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) 265.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.290.
- 5 Mary Teresa Purcell and Mary Bertrand Degnan, eds., *Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952) 27 and 101.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 7 Angela Bolster, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley* (Cork, Ireland: Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy-Dioceses of Cork and Ross, 1989) 71.
- 8 Michael Taylor, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth: The Findings of 'Project 21' by Michael Taylor* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003) 1.
- 9 Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 100.
- 10 Alexandra Kovats, C.S.J.P., "Revisioning the Vows Holistically" in *Occasional Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Summer 2003) 24.
- 11 Johannes B. Metz, *Followers of Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 11.
- 12 Angela Bolster, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, 183.

Our First and All-Encompassing Love

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

There has always been a compelling energy for me in the words of our Constitutions: "Accepting God as our first and all-encompassing love, we give ourselves in love to our companions in community, to those in need and to family and friends."¹ These few but powerful words summarize the major thrust of vowed Mercy life. They provide a horizon against which I can measure my actions. Our Constitutions speak of our life of consecrated celibacy as a relationship, a "unique response to the love of Jesus."² Reflecting and praying about our vowed life of consecrated celibacy is not about defining what is or isn't acceptable behavior. Our vow is not about what we give up, but is about our living relationship with God, a relationship that shapes and reshapes our lives.

Consecrated celibacy does not lead to a "Jesus and I" spirituality; it is more expansive and all embracing than that. The more we grow in love, and the more we live in the pattern of Christ Jesus, the more the horizon of our love broadens to include our brothers and sisters. Consecrated celibacy moves us beyond ourselves for the sake of God's reign and, authentically lived, never fosters a distancing or withdrawal from God's people. It, instead, impels us outward in love because of the love we have so freely received from God. Our vow is not a one-time commitment but, rather, one that we need to renew daily.

Our Constitutions remind us that we have chosen "a lifelong direction that unites us to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus."³ The poetic brevity of the text contains enough challenge for a lifetime of living. To be faithful demands we not imitate the Church of Ephesus lest we too hear: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev. 2:2, 4).

Evolution in Naming the Vow

When I think back to my formative years in Mercy, I know that I was presented with a mixed sense of what consecrated celibacy meant. This search for the best articulation of the vow is seen in the many different names for it. In our early documents, the vow is always called Chastity. After awhile, recognizing that all Christians were called to live chaste and holy lives, we changed the name to Consecrated Chastity. Still, the term did not seem to speak to the reality as fully as desired. Finally, the term, Consecrated Celibacy was adopted. In a way, the changing names spoke to changing understandings, understandings that have evolved from ones of negation to one that sees the vow as a passage to deeper and more inclusive love for all.

In his book, *Religious Life: a Prophetic Vision*, Diarmuid O'Murchu, M.S.C. says:

Consecrated celibacy assumes a new ambience in our time, namely, the redemption of life-giving intimacy. This involves a growth in acceptance, warmth, closeness, and empathy with both God and people. For liminal witness, a celibacy out of tune with the human capacity for intimacy loses credibility. It must remain close to the longings of the human heart and articulate these in a manner that awakens and fulfills people's deepest desires.⁴

O'Murchu touches some critical issues for women religious today. What constitutes lives of "life-giving intimacy?" How do we support each other as we strive to live into the fullness of our vowed commitment? There is not always clarity to the map.

Along the way we must deal with three major elements: a) intimacy with God and others; b) embodiment and identification of a lifestyle that supports making God the center of our lives; and 3) making our God relationship the prism through which all other choices are made. When I entered

Mercy during the early 60s, it had nothing to do with ministry. It had everything to do with a compelling love for God that could not be satisfied in any other way. In my naiveté, I assumed all women chose religious life for that same reason. It came as surprise to me when I discovered while reading a study of religious life that some women chose religious life primarily as a way of serving others and making a difference in the world. In retrospect, it makes sense to me. There weren't many options for women to exercise their creativity and talents in the pre-Vatican II world. It was the passion to be of service to others that brought some sisters to religious life, not their relationship to Christ Jesus. Religious communities provided a mode of life that they saw as freeing them from patriarchal dominance. While that was not really accurate, it did provide women with opportunities for leadership, productivity, and professional education. When Church and societal horizons opened up new possibilities for women, these same women found it was no longer necessary for them to embrace a lifestyle for which they felt no compelling commitment. Only an intense commitment to the person of Jesus Christ can sustain the way of lifelong celibacy for the sake of God's reign. Without that sustaining relationship, a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience does not make sense.

Sandra Schneiders defines religious life in these terms:

The commitment to Religious Life is a commitment to a person, Jesus Christ, in irrevocable love expressed in a particular form, namely, lifelong consecrated celibacy analogous to marriage, which is a commitment to the spouse in irrevocable love expressed in the particular form of lifelong and total monogamy. This commitment is a total self-gift that has an absolute priority in one's life and begins with no qualifications or loopholes or *if* and *only ifs*.⁵

The profound nature of such a love is based upon the pure lovability of the beloved. It is a love that impels us to place God before family, friends, status, or comfort. Again, Schneiders describes this love in bold terms:

The person whose experience of Jesus is such that it draws her out of herself, beyond herself, in a movement of unitive desire that consumes all that she is and can be to the exclusion of any comparable or even mediating love of another human being feels

the need to commit herself to him by the irrevocable gift of her life.⁶

It is this type of love that is mirrored in Catherine McAuley's *Suscipe*, "My God, I am yours for time and eternity."

Only an intense commitment to the person of Jesus Christ can sustain the way of lifelong celibacy for the sake of God's reign. Without that sustaining relationship, a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience does not make sense.

The Gift of Self to God

In considering the implications of our vow of consecrated celibacy as articulated in our Constitutions, it is critical to begin and end in our God relationship because it is from this relationship that all else flows. The Constitutions point out, "As we experience the tensions inherent in the vowed life, we depend on God's mercy to support us and to call forth our fidelity."⁷

Gifting ourselves to God is easier said than done. It has to be translated from a desire or idea to an enfleshed reality. It is here that we come face to face with the challenges and blessings of intimacy. Intimacy is more than a feeling of closeness and warmth. It asks us to allow ourselves to be fully who we are and to enter into relationship with another who is invited to be equally authentic. It honors and respects differences while recognizing similarities. We don't have to hide our feelings or failings; likewise, we don't have to highlight our successes or gifts. We just have to be ourselves and reciprocally share that self with another. We want to be in relationship with one who knows us, warts and all, and loves us anyway.

We long for that kind of acceptance from each other, but no matter how much we invest in our

relationships with family, friends, and our sisters in community, there is still emptiness. Mary Anne Huddleston, I.H.M., writing about the quest for intimacy, quotes the words of Caryll Houselander:

Do not ask from any human being that which God only can give. I grant you that God gives Himself through human beings, and unites Himself through relationship . . . But no one friend can give God to you so perfectly as to satisfy and fill your need for His love.⁸

The God who loved us into being and accepts us just as we are is the only one who can satisfy our deepest longing. Times of loneliness remind us of that reality and act as invitation to prayer and gentle intimacy with the One for whom we give our lives.

Caryll Houselander's words point us to an important truth. The shape of God's love for us is learned through our relationships with one another. It is in the give and take of everyday contact that we learn what acceptance and forgiveness is like. It is in the one-on-one contacts of everyday that we come to know ourselves, our gifts as well as our brokenness.

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Assumptions about Celibacy

Some assumptions seem foundational to building lives of healthy, faithful consecrated celibacy. While these assumptions might seem to be self-evident, they are worth examining.

1. We are meant to be in union and oneness while honoring our otherness.

When we commit ourselves to lifelong celibacy, we are not committing ourselves to isolation, individualism, or withdrawing from the risk of loving others. Quite the contrary, we are choosing a path of communion, a way of interconnectedness and harmony with God and all God's creation. There is a natural pull toward connectedness and communion in us by virtue of our humanness. God created us to be interdependent persons but we need our solitude to be in communion. What most of us resist is a sense of losing ourselves in the other, a fear of engulfment. We resist those who would violate our emotional or spiritual space.

2. Healthy, diverse friendships and a vibrant affective life are necessary to support our vow and empower us to embrace one another in Christ.

For those who entered religious life prior to Vatican II, one of the most painful consequences of that decision was being separated from family and friends. Restrictions on home visits, letters, and opportunities to visit with friends caused new members to center their affective life within their religious community. Community lifestyle of this era was rooted in silence and sometimes discouraged self-disclosure. As a young teacher, I remember being cautioned not to build friendships with the families of students I taught or even other faculty members lest it lead to a conflict of interest. In such a climate, it was challenging to develop healthy, diverse friendships even though we managed to do so. When religious communities were asked to renew their structures and return to their original charism, those practices were among the first to be discarded.

Friendship and intimacy go together. For those committed to consecrated celibacy, the experience of sexual intimacy is excluded but the need for human intimacy remains. It is an essential component to our lives, but it is not achieved by wishing. Father David Kiefer describes that process in this way:

Intimacy does not develop quickly or easily. It grows slowly as stories are shared. It deepens as the other is invited into the secret corners and hidden places of our lives. Slowly, our facades of perfection are pierced. Our guards come down, and efforts to impress others no longer govern. We are who we are, without masks, defenses, protections. A loyalty to each other develops. This loyalty expresses itself

in support at times of sorrow, challenge, and failure . . . These qualities—shared life experience, vulnerability, mutual support, and loyalty—are qualities of intimacy and friendship.⁹

It is this type of relationship that we seek when we speak of intensifying our sisterhood, or as our Constitutions put it: “. . . by sharing our faith and mission, we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity.”¹⁰

For the celibate, intimacy grows in a variety of ways.¹¹ Intellectual intimacy fosters the sharing of ideas and ideals. Such intimacy allows us to probe the depths of our thoughts and heart and speak that truth out loud. Perhaps that is why retreatants who never met before their coming together feel a strong bond with others making the experience. They have been allowed to speak aloud and share with others what really matters to them. Intellectual intimacy is the fruit of holy conversation.

Another type of intimacy is the result of shared mission or work. People are brought together in a common task. We are all in it together. This type of connection has a powerful bonding effect. It helps us overcome small differences in our shared pursuit of a common goal. When larger numbers of sisters worked together, this type of intimacy happened naturally. What was sometimes disheartening was the sense of loss when people moved on to another mission and discovered that relationships did not always last. This is also the type of friendship that emerges from connecting with others who have the same talents or passion—musicians are animated by other musicians, artists through other artists. They are connected by what they love, by what excites them. Golfers love golfers.

A third level of intimacy we experience as celibates is the intimacy that evolves from shared feelings and shared faith. Sitting with another and feeling their joy or their sorrow binds us together. It provides a window into another's spirit. Knowing another's story creates deeper compassion and empathy toward her in our own spirit. I believe this is the type of intimacy that results in sharing our faith stories with one another. We feel the touch of intimacy when we pray together, strengthened by the energy of another's devotion. We receive a window into each other's love for the God who is our love as well. When we sit in sacred listening, our ears might

hear the words but our hearts hear Christ within the speaker.

These modes of intimacy nurture our affective life and make us more open to new friendships. The more diverse our friendships, the more we are able to see new dimensions of the Holy. There is a reciprocal aspect to the deepening of human friendship and our God relationship. In both relationships, our minds expand as well as our hearts, but neither come without a price; we must purchase and care for them with time and with trust.

When we make the commitment to center our lives in God, it implies that all our actions and decisions will be directed, shaped, and rooted in that choice. There is a lack of fit when my behaviors don't match what I say my priorities are.

3. There is no such thing as abstract love. It is earthly and evidenced in the quality and depth of our behaviors toward self, God and others.

Love is not a head thing; it is totally embodied. It finds its expression in behaviors.

When we make the commitment to center our lives in God, it implies that all our actions and decisions will be directed, shaped, and rooted in that choice. There is a lack of fit when my behaviors don't match what I say my priorities are. Our belief in the Incarnation is pivotal in this context. As Christians, we believe in the holiness of people and creation; we believe in the sacramentality of all matter. Given that conviction, anything that exploits, abuses or violates another's dignity is sinful. This understanding shapes the pattern of our vowed life of consecrated celibacy. This being so, it is important to be practical and realistic about what it means when we speak of embodiment. As Mossi says,

Embodiment challenges celibate ministers to be more incarnational, not less; to embrace with a purer vibrancy all that it means to be human and sexual. We are called to recognize God housed in our temples of clay and speaking through our earthiness. Our body . . . becomes a starting point and a listening post for God's activity.¹²

Faithful consecrated celibacy calls us to honor and reverence our own bodies as the dwelling place of the Spirit. In past times, a vigorous asceticism was exercised, an asceticism that sought to subdue the flesh. Today, excessive practices of mortification are seen as coming from an understanding of the flesh as evil rather than holy. Modern asceticism relating to our bodies has more to do with the appropriate care and moderation needed to be healthy and attentive to the Holy. Consecrated celibacy calls us to refuse to fill up our emptiness with the things that don't satisfy such as addictive habits related to food, shopping, excessive work, or activity. That open space within our spirits belongs to God.

Modern asceticism turns our reflective attention on what we read, how we entertain ourselves, and how we interact with others in the light of our vowed commitment. Yesterday's practice of "custody of the eyes" has a contemporary equivalent: consciously choosing what we allow to shape our imagination. Sexually exploitative movies devalue the human person and are inconsistent with a celibate commitment that reverences the dignity of each person.

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Embodied consecrated celibacy also calls us to look at the way in which we relate to friends and family, to coworkers and neighbors. Each of us has to order our relationships in such a way that we remain available for God and available to our Sisters in com-

munity. We have cast our lot together and need the support of each other to live vibrant lives. When our sisters are in crisis or in darkness, we want to be able to say, "I will be there with you." Catherine McAuley spoke of the great treasure we could give every time we speak the gentle word, give the tender glance or patiently listen to another's sorrows. Those are all moments of embodiment.

4. To love God means one is called to love God in the other.

God comes with a family. Just as a bride discovers she has acquired new relatives, we discover that our love relationship with God brings us into communion and solidarity with others. The consecrated celibate is a channel of God's love without restriction to family, similarity of disposition, social status, intelligence or personal attraction. We are invited to love because God loves. It is the measure of our intimacy with God. There is always a credibility gap when loving words don't correspond with cold actions. Harsh words, judgmental attitudes, and perfectionist expectations don't grow in the garden of God's tender mercy.

When I realize that I am loved, just as I am, that realization moves me to love others in the same way. One of my sisters in community, Mary Teresita Durkin, R.S.M., taught me a long time ago that the deeper our love is, the wider our vision of the world. When we live in the heart of God, we also feel the pain of our brothers and sisters. Perhaps it was this realization that prompted in Catherine McAuley a special love for the passage from Matthew 25 . . . "Whatever you do to the least of these you do to me."

When our love for God pours itself out in love for our brothers and sisters, it is characterized by compassion, respect and freedom. Celibate love always honors the integrity and deepest longing of the person loved. It never asks a person to give what rightly belongs to another. In practice this means that we do not place inappropriate expectations or demands upon the other. Dynamics of exclusivity, possessiveness, or undue claims upon another's time are indicators that the relationship lacks the freedom of celibate love.

If all that has been said seems like an ideal never to be realized, it is because no one claims a life of consecrated celibacy on her own. It is a gift

received; it is made possible only by the sustaining power of God, filling us with strength to joyfully embrace such a life. It is not easy to knowingly forego the joy of marital love, the delight of holding your own child, the tenderness and comfort of spousal companionship. Such a choice has to be supported not only by a deep life of prayer, but by the animating support of community.

Barbara Fiand brings these two dimensions together when she writes:

We say to one another in the depths of our hearts . . . "I am trying to be . . . the *Vacare Deo*, the empty space for the breakthrough of God . . . I can only do this if you help me; if, as we journey together, as we relate and bond, you help me reveal myself to you, as the crucified and resurrected Christ. As I am your companion, the one who breaks bread with you, be with me in this, as I will be with you . . ."

This is the stuff of celibate loving . . . It has everything to do with integrity, with commitment, with reverence for diversity and willingness to grow, and further growth . . . celibate loving . . . calls us toward honest, dedicated, mutual empowerment in the life process of maturation and holiness . . . Consecrated celibacy, the way it is described here, is the vow of community life.¹³

Conclusion

Our vow of Consecrated Celibacy cannot be separated from our commitment to each other lived in a communion of love. That fact raises serious questions for our consideration. How do we presently support each other in the vowed commitment of celibate love? Does our present style of life and ministry contain within it sufficient power to foster the type of intimacy needed for fullness of life? In what ways has our decreased sense of corporate mission and shared communal life made us more authentically loving? Does the witness of our life clearly proclaim that God is at its center? We don't have answers for these questions, but we must have holy conversations about them. Without choosing once more the shape of the life we live together, we risk drifting into half-lived lives. If we do not intentionally build the bonds of sisterhood among us, a communion of heart and mission, we may find at

the sunset of our life that we walk with strangers, strangers who are our sisters.

Sometimes the best teachers come to us unexpectedly. That happened to me one day when I was guiding a group of women through an afternoon of prayer. The majority of the women were in their eighties and nineties. The passage for reflection was the one where Jesus asks of his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" and that was the question I proposed for sharing. One woman, blind and partially paralyzed, had no partner so I went to share with her. I asked her: "Who is God for you?" She looked at me with a look that said, "Why even ask such a question?" Then she said, "My dear, he is my everything." For me, that is what our vow is all about. God is our first and all-encompassing love and when my life is ending, I hope that I will say with her same certitude: "God is my everything."



Notes

- 1 Constitutions, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. §23.
- 2 Constitutions §22.
- 3 Constitutions §21.
- 4 Diarmuid O'Murchu, M.S.C., *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 132.
- 5 Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., *Selling All* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 80.
- 6 Schneiders, 81.
- 7 Constitutions §21.
- 8 Mary Anne Huddleston, I.H.M. "The Quest for Intimacy," in *Human Development*, 20:3 (Fall 1999), 19.
- 9 David Kiefer, "Intimacy in Priest's Support Groups," in *Human Development*, 23:1 (Spring 2002), 43.
- 10 Constitutions §18.
- 11 Mary Elizabeth Kenel, "Impediments to Intimacy," in *Human Development*, 23:1 (Spring 2002), 32-33.
- 12 John Mossi, S.J., "Embodied Love in Celibate Ministry," in *Human Development*, 15:3 (Fall 1994), 24.
- 13 Barbara Fiand, *Living the Vision, Religious Vows in an Age of Change* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 88-89.

Discernment and our Vow of Obedience

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

Discernment, “disentangling the voice of God from the noise of other voices,”¹ has been a growing preoccupation in religious life in our reinterpretation of our understanding of vowed obedience in the last four decades. If the God quest lies at the heart of religious life, hearing the voice of God and responding to it profoundly transforms the role of obedience in our lives from unquestioning acquiescence to the commands of legitimate authority to a continuing process of personal and communal discernment. As a life form, religious life focuses our commitment to follow Jesus and his way of life within the context of our communal charism of mercy. The vow of obedience as a dispositional and juridical practice is only meaningful and Christian if it strengthens our commitment to this gospel way of love. This love leads us to embody the beatitudes and the works of mercy, as well as working to make the reigning of God in our world a reality. An adult, obediential response makes sense only in a context of trust and relationship, of intimacy with and love of God experienced in contemplative prayer, and in apostolic activity and in our relationships with one another in community.

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This relational context begins most fundamentally in our relationship with God. It is expressed in our desire to recognize and respond to God’s will in our relationship with one another in community as we together discern our common call to religious life within this particular institute. Our graced experience and our testing of vocation must disclose to us both God’s trustworthiness and the trustworthiness of the Institute, its office-holders, and its members.

From Law to Love

Sandra Schneiders, in *New Wine-Skins*, most clearly describes this shift from a servile, blind obedience to the rule and the prescriptions of authority that required a Sister to obey even when in doubt about the appropriateness of a decision unless it was manifestly sinful, to a dialogical form of obedience based on a complex process of discernment seeking to find the will of God for both the individual Sister and the community.

The title of the piece identifies the change in understanding: “Religious Obedience: the Journey from Law to Love.” Schneiders described in this essay, first circulated as early as 1976, accurate in 1986, and timely today, the need for a theology of mediation of the will of God that recognizes multiple forms of human mediation and a theology of discernment rooted in religious freedom. She contrasts a rule of law versus a law of love that is at the heart of the gospel and of Christian discipleship.

For those who have vowed obedience, our “total commitment to the will of God is contextualized in the persons and institutions of the congregation entered.”² The community constitutes a privileged mediation of God’s will for us, but not the exclusive mediation of God’s will. Equating human mediation with God in some magical way, is truly an idol. Adult responsibility requires each of us to discern the proportional claims of the gospel and our

community norms or legitimate commands of authority in each particular situation. "It is the process of discernment which prevents the alienation of personal authority and responsibility that would turn obedience into magic."³

Discernment

It is also this ongoing process of discernment that evokes the realization that there are multiple voices within us. We recognize that we have internalized this struggle between law and life, seeking approval, validation, appreciation, acceptability, and security through pleasing another, following the rules and not making waves. Responsible choice based on discernment and following our own consciences may place us in uncomfortable conflict with legitimate authority, custom, and other members. A discerning practice of obedience requires a reflective, contemplative style of life. How else can we distinguish among these internal voices, including our own self-centered and resistant one?

The writer Herman Hesse describes such focused silence as the background against which this discerning contemplation can occur. He aptly describes the characteristics of some of the voices that present themselves deceptively as the voice of God. He says:

The soul that waits in silence needs to disentangle the voice of God from the noise of other voices, the ghostly whisperings of the subconscious self, the luring voices of the world, the hindering voices of misguided friendship, the clamor of personal ambition and vanity, the murmur of self-will, the song of unbridled imagination, the thrilling note of religious romance. To learn to keep one's ear to so subtle a labyrinth of spiritual sound is indeed at once a great adventure and a liberal education. One hour of such listening may give us a deeper insight into the mysteries of human nature, and a surer instinct for divine values, than a year's hard study or external intercourse with others.⁴

How might you name some of the voices in you that present themselves as the voice of God? I can sometimes hear the voice of Mercy expectations, or a fatalistic voice that suggests, "Why bother to speak? No one will really listen." Even a cursory reading of the Constitutions reveals this underlying theology of discernment and obedience described by Sandra Schneiders. It begins, "Responsive in faith to God's

mercy, Catherine McAuley heeded the call of Jesus to reach out with courage and love to the needy of her time."⁵ Catherine discerned her faith response to this persistent call. "We respond to the cry of the poor."⁶ To do so requires us to hear the cry of the poor before we can respond. "We carry out our mission of mercy guided by prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, Catherine McAuley's preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women, the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church and our talents, resources, and limitation."⁷ The provisions on mission identify the criteria that we agree should inform our discernment about corporate and individual ministries. Even more significant than these is the fundamental criterion, "We rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us. The Word of God opens us to contemplate the Divine Presence in ourselves, in others, and in the universe."⁸

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Vowed Obedience in the Constitutions

Our first obediential response to the way our First Institute Chapter characterized our life and mission in Mercy in our Constitutions is the development of these habits of reflective listening to the voice of the poor, the voice of the Spirit, the voice of the Divine Presence in ourselves, and now, in the ecological age, the voice of the creation itself in our evolving universe.

The articles explicitly articulating our theology of the vow of obedience are quite clear:

By our practice of obedience we unite ourselves to the obedient Christ whose call and mission led to his death and the redemption of the world. Through this vow we commit ourselves to obey those who exercise legitimate authority according

to these Constitutions. For serious reasons the Institute president (or her delegate) can normally invoke the vow, either in writing or before two witnesses.⁹

The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God's will in fidelity to our mission. Responsible obedience requires that we inform our minds and prepare our hearts for dialogue, share our insights and respect freedom of conscience. In this search we listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God's will. When the Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and the courage to live in this way, We are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in our lives.¹⁰

These articles draw on all of the themes already highlighted. First, obedience is a virtue required of all Christians in so far as it relates to our discipleship of Jesus. Jesus' obedience to the will of his Abba was more complex than simply following specific devotional observances prescribed in the Torah. Contemporary studies of Jesus within his historical context emphasize Jesus' embrace of compassion for all persons as the dominant value of his ministry.¹¹ Christian obedience requires our liberating practice of ministry in the footsteps of

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Jesus' inclusive compassion and resistance to oppression of all kinds.

Second, within the context of religious life, our vow commits us to cooperate with legitimate authority within the limits defined by the Constitutions. Legitimate authority includes: the entire governance structure—chapter, institute leadership team, regional assembly, regional leadership team, local coordinators, liaisons, ministry directors, and any other persons who hold delegated authority. This is, of course, one way of describing a complex web of relationships among us. Our common membership in the Institute commits us to uphold the same core values and to organize our lives

in ways that support one another in our common mission and way of life.

Simply naming those who hold legitimate authority suggests multiple locations of the mediation of God's will for us and with us. Seriousness about discerning God's will, rather than efficiency or merely administrative tidiness, implies sustained dialogue and ongoing relationship. Adult obedience implies mutuality and self-disclosure. The responsive adult trusts the one(s) in authority enough to be transparent. This transparency might include: one's motives for acting, still inchoate and not yet fully formed desires and leanings, clarity and confusion about one's gifts, one's capacity to render specific service within or outside the congregation, and honesty about disagreement and differing perceptions about a given course of action. Thus as Const. §28 states, "The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God's will in fidelity to our mission."

Third, the kind of obedience envisioned in this article is intensely dialogical. The new asceticism requires openness and discussion, prayer and dialogue, risking to speak the truth in love, an expectation that the other will listen and respect differences among members. This kind of dialogue is rooted in a shared theology that God speaks through all of us, not just some of us, and that the Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and courage to live this way. As this process draws to some kind of conclusion and decision, if we truly do desire the greater good and trust God's activity in our midst, we are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in our lives. Desiring to do God's will includes the commitment to act on the outcome of the discernment regardless of the suffering this may entail.

An Alienating Relationship with Authority

However, if experiences with dialogue and relationship with authority have been untrustworthy, it will be very difficult to engage in this kind of robust give-and-take. An alienated relationship with authority leads to distrust, deception, withholding of information, and active and passive non-compliance with decisions. We may have quite different assumptions and practices of authority throughout the institute. Each regional community has its own

history in relationship to styles of leadership and degrees of participation in governance. The vast majority of present members have mixed experiences in our history. We have known both respectful and dialogical authority and we have known exclusion from decision making and controlling authority that needed no input from the members or those affected by decisions. We may have quite different expectations about how we expect to be treated, how we expect to participate in governance, and how we expect to arrive at decisions both personally and communally. Our conversations about reconfiguring bring these differences to the fore. It matters how we arrive at decisions as well as who participates in such decisions if we desire to continue to foster discerning obedience.

To complicate the picture even further, many of us have experienced alienating authority in the church and in other institutions in which we serve. How resilient we are in responding to these multiple challenges is often rooted in our personal histories and our subsequent working through of these earlier histories both therapeutically and spiritually.

Leadership and Obedience in a Discernment Model

Leadership and governance in this model is not easy. Where imbalances of power exist in dialogue, it is incumbent on the more powerful to create the conditions of safety that foster dialogue and integrity of word and deed. Leadership needs to share the emerging data not just with other positional leaders, but with the actively participative members as well. Leadership and power reside in members as well as in elected leaders. When authority respects these dynamics, the base is mobilized toward support for emerging outcomes of the whole drift of accumulating information, feelings, interior movements, and espoused values. But this cannot happen unless information is shared in a timely fashion and if resistance to change is not carefully respected and challenged.

It is impossible to predict where we will be as an institute in our reconfiguring process in months to come. However, despite intense feelings of disempowerment, resistance, disagreement, shock, dismay, resignation, and fatalism to the unveiling of the template and the survey, the Institute

Leadership Team in its Foundation Day Letter of December 12, 2003, demonstrated a discerning and dialogical response to the response of the members. The team had intended to initiate an invitation "to be a listening, discerning community." The multiple forms of response led to shaping a different kind of decision for May 2004. They then outlined action steps to reach this new decision and invited further prayer and reflection in our reception of the survey results. It became clear that members needed to be more involved than they had been prior to the template meetings. They initiated a new mode of dialogue of members with the ILT in the call-in sessions, as well as engaging different constituents in various modes of conversation, reflection, and dialogue.

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It might be helpful for us to reflect on whether or not we filled in the survey. What was going on inside of us if we did not fill it out? Did we talk to anyone about our feelings and our thoughts? If we did complete the survey? What did it take to work through it? What kinds of feelings arose? What were some of the internal voices that clamored for attention? Were they voices from the past of an alienated relationship with authority? What was threatened? What were the values we wanted to preserve? Did we e-mail the ILT as well as write comments on the survey? How much conversation and reflection did it take for us to do that? Did we participate in any other formal or informal forums that helped us shape our response? Did we consider any of this obedience? Did we consider any of it discernment?

The survey is only one potential kind of expression of the spirit of obedience and participation. Were there other ways we would have preferred to be involved in giving feedback on the

emerging reconfiguring? What have been some of the fruits of the ILT's getting membership's attention on more dramatic organizational change than some expected? Where does this excitement and energy come from? Are we feeling a deeper connection between our vow of obedience and the reality

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of institute members? How might we embrace this as challenge and growth into a new reality?

This extended example of one dance of authority between leaders and members suggests the potential for deepening our appropriation of vowed obedience in the context of institute membership. As we continue to work through the re-imagining and reconfiguring process across the Institute, are we as members willing to expand our communal identities? Do we take the claims of Chapter decisions and directions seriously? Do we recognize that they need to reach down to the grassroots or they are relatively meaningless if we do not receive them? What might be required for ownership of these decisions when the Chapter takes on a life of its own during the course of its deliberations? Do our present processes and preparation for Chapter enliven and empower participation and thereby ownership?

Where is the voice of God in this process and what is it calling asking of us? Can we embrace

God's will as Catherine did even when it unfolds in unpredictable and unexpected ways?

Consonance with Catherine

Catherine McAuley approached discernment and obedience in her own way within the context of her times. Her "Suscipe" was born from a trusting relationship with God. Her God-centeredness yielded a peaceful serenity with which to cooperate with God and others in creating and sustaining the Institute. She founded a religious community that was not part of her original plan. But when she realized the church would only support her project if she embraced religious life, she made the required novitiate. Although she wrote that she experienced considerable joy in her novitiate process, her novice director's training in obedience imposed opportunities to practice virtue when she was publicly reprimanded for her mistakes or faults. Catherine softened this kind of ascetical process in the Rule.

She was concerned that all her sisters share the same lively confidence and trust in God that she did. She focused their vision on the possession of God, and tried whenever possible to alleviate their anxiety. Catherine maintained a highly dialogical style of leadership within the fledgling community. She encouraged a discerning and creative attitude in the sisters that she sent on new foundations. She expected them to adapt to local circumstances. She left them free to discover how best to develop their ministries within the new context. She fostered independent yet connected local authority.

When she dealt with obedience directly, she made a number of changes in the Presentation Rule. She limited the role of the superior in the interior lives of the Sisters. She "recommended that the sisters make known their penitential works and mortifications"¹² but she omits practically a whole sentence that placed the Sisters under the spiritual direction of the local superior.¹³

She left her Sisters free, monitoring only their voluntary penance that could have debilitating effects on their ability to undertake the works of mercy. Catherine's Rule describes an attitude of

love between the Sisters and their superiors. She did not want a fearful obedience. Catherine also omitted a sentence that encouraged the Sisters "not only to fulfill the commands of their superiors but to endeavor to anticipate their wishes"¹⁴ as well as reworking the section of necessary absence from communal exercises. The direction of Catherine's revisions is toward leaving considerable judgment to the Sisters themselves. She appears to have wanted her Sisters to make prudential judgments themselves first when faced with conflicting responsibilities and to make explanations later.

Religious obedience in Catherine's day clearly involved "renouncing one's own will and resigning it without reserve to the direction of . . . superiors."¹⁵ Despite this, there is much evidence in Catherine's life of a creative fidelity to the deepest impulses of God's Spirit. This is most clearly manifested in her letters to the leaders in the new foundations and in the clarity with which she articulated her vision of active apostolic religious life in *The Spirit of the Institute*.¹⁶ Catherine learned to trust deeply "that God's will would be manifest when God wished and that the timing would be right. So even through she suffered from impatience at times, in the larger picture she knew that God's will would be known and that God's grace would be sufficient for her to do it."¹⁶

Conclusion

This kind of trust and patient waiting on God is one of the fruits of discernment. Discernment develops organically over time in different ways corresponding with our spiritual development. Ordinarily, we first come to know and understand ourselves by sifting through and reflecting on our experience. We then come to distinguish the truly good from evil or to distinguish the good from apparent goods. Finally, God's Spirit gifts us with illumination not only for ourselves but for others we may accompany in ministry or serve in community leadership.

The Quaker, Patricia Loring, describes discernment as:

The ability to see into people, situations, and possibilities, to identify what is of God in them and what

is of the numerous other sources in ourselves—and what may be of both. It is that fallible, intuitive gift we use in attempting to discriminate the course to which we are . . . led by God in a given situation, from our other impulses and from the generalized judgments of conscience.¹⁷

Catherine's patient waiting, thoughtful reflection, contemplative spirit, and deep trust in God's providential care for her enabled her to develop discernment to a high degree. She consulted, she listened, she prayed, she learned from experience. Do we have the courage and deep trust in God and in the goodness of the members of our Institute to join with one another for the well-being of the whole institute through our discerning obedience as we search for God's will together?



Notes

- 1 Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, 43.
- 2 Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wine-Skins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986) 165.
- 3 Ibid., 165.
- 4 Hesse, 43.
- 5 Const. §1.
- 6 Const. §3.
- 7 Const. §7.
- 8 Const. §9.
- 9 Const. §27.
- 10 Const. §28.
- 11 Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) and Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976, 1992).
- 12 Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 313
- 13 Ibid., 313, n.55.
- 14 Ibid., 314, n.56.
- 15 Ibid., 313, Rule, 19.1.
- 16 Helen Marie Burns and Sheila Carney, *Praying with Catherine McAuley* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1996.), 105.
- 17 Patricia Loring, "Spiritual Discernment: the Context and Goal of Clearness Committees." Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305(Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), 3.

Direct Service and Systemic Change

Marilee Howard, R.S.M.

In keeping with the long heritage of Mercy tradition and practice, the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas call and challenge Sisters of Mercy to integrate work for justice in their daily life and ministry. The call to Mercy is a call to “serve the poor, sick and ignorant.”¹ Just as Catherine McAuley reached “out with courage and love to the needy of her time” (Const. §2) in ways that met immediate needs and changed systems, so, today, Mercy life and ministry include both direct service and efforts for systemic change in dynamic expressions of service. This article will examine the ways this call to direct service and systemic change is expressed in the Constitutions in the context of Catholic social teaching, and consider the challenge of these sections of the Constitutions for Mercy life and ministry today.

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Systemic Change in the Constitutions

Article three of the Constitutions is the primary point calling for the integration of direct service and systemic change as aspects of Mercy life:

Recalling the word of Jesus that he is one with his suffering members, we respond to the cry of the poor. The interdependence of peoples and Christ’s mandate to proclaim the gospel to all nations challenge us to develop a global perspective on the works of mercy. Through direct service and through our influence we seek to relieve misery, to address its causes and to support all persons who struggle for full dignity (Const. §3).

The focus of both direct service and influence is on relieving misery and addressing its causes. Seeing someone in misery, or recognizing that a person or group are struggling for

the respect that is in keeping with their dignity as human persons provide fundamental motivation for Sisters of Mercy to take action. This article of the Constitutions recognizes that for Mercy, either direct service or influence for systemic change, if considered alone, is not an adequate response to the needs of individuals and societies. It is the integration of the two that fully expresses the wisdom of the charism of Mercy, addressing both immediate need and its causes.

Other sections of the Constitutions offer insights into the way this call to service is to be understood. Article four clarifies the areas of ministry through which Sisters of Mercy live out their call to mercy and justice. These include “education, health care and other ministries that further social, political, economic and spiritual well-being”(Const. §4). The ministries mentioned in these articles of the Constitutions lend themselves well to the integration of direct service and systemic change. Education meets a fundamental human need. When it prepares a person to participate effectively in the work of his or her society with a sense of personal dignity and worth, it also has an essential transformative effect. Health care responds to

very basic human needs and can model the compassionate care that all deserve in times of illness. Given the systems and structures by which health care is provided in western society, health care institutions and services are also in a position to have profound influence on critical societal structures, beliefs and practices. The very description of the "other ministries" places them at a critical point of addressing need, both immediately and systemically. All of this is well in line with article five, which speaks of sponsorship of institutions and calls Sisters of Mercy, along with coworkers and those who are served to "endeavor to model mercy and justice and to promote systemic change . . ." (Const. §5).

Article six represents a call to solidarity, saying, "By collaborating with others in works of mercy we continually learn from them how to be more merciful" (Const. §6).

Certain priorities for ministry are identified in article seven which mentions, "Catherine McAuley's preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women, (and) the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church . . ." (Const. §7).

Catholic Social Teaching

These articles of the Constitutions reflect key principles of Catholic social teaching. The way in which efforts for justice are interwoven and integrated into the vision of Mercy life presented in the Constitutions is very much in keeping with the insight of the Synod of Bishops,

Second General Assembly in 1971, that "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."² This is an understanding of the gospel that recognizes that love of neighbor does not end with works of charity. When faced with systems that cause or perpetuate poverty, oppression and violence, the gospel calls persons of faith to efforts to alleviate the effects of systemic injustice while working to change social, economic, cultural, and political systems to more adequately reflect the vision of human dignity and solidarity.

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Respect for the dignity of the human person is a foundational principle of Catholic social teaching, and the documents repeatedly present this principle as the foundation of a moral vision of society.³ Both theological and philosophical reasons are given to respect human dignity. It is this respect that requires that individ-

uals have the opportunity to obtain all that is needed for a decent human life and be treated with respect and fairness. It is also this respect that requires efforts to establish societal structures and norms that adequately protect and provide for the dignity and needs of each person. Indeed, the structures of a society are to serve the good of persons, and persons have a responsibility to contribute to the good of the society.⁴

The theme of concern for the dignity of the person is clearly reflected in the Constitutions. Article three, cited above, states that one focus of Mercy is to support persons who are struggling for full dignity. Arti-

cle eight says that "We strive to witness to mercy when we reverence the dignity of each person . . ." Drawing on the insight of this principle, many Mercy ministries do not simply offer assistance to persons in need, but help them find the resources and gain the skills that will allow them to be more in command of

their own lives. These ministries also seek effective ways to consult those in need to determine how to structure services and programs that engage the participation of those served while meeting their needs.

The preferential option for the poor is another essential result of the concern for the dignity of each person. The teachings recognize that those who are poor or disadvantaged have a special claim on the concern and care of individuals and society.⁵ Throughout the Constitutions and in the life and work of Sisters of Mercy, special concern for the needs of persons who are poor or disadvantaged is evident. It is, in fact, responding to the cry of the poor that is the key motivator for both the direct service and systemic change that is integral to Mercy's efforts for justice.

With Catholic social teaching, the Constitutions recognize the essential unity of the entire human family. The Constitutions speak of the interdependence of peoples (Const. §3). This reflects the critical insight of Catholic social teaching, that we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, or ideological differences.⁶ This global perspective is spoken of as a solidarity among all peoples, and is reflected in the Synod's call to "participate in the transforma-

tion of the world."⁷ It is also reflected in the Constitutions' call that Sisters of Mercy "develop a global perspective" (Const. §12).

Care for God's creation is also a principle of Catholic social teaching reflected in the Constitutions. In Catholic social teaching, "We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation."⁸ Catholic social teaching views care and stewardship of earth as an aspect of our respect for God who created all things. Articles twelve and twenty-six of the Constitutions refer to our relationship, in Mercy, to creation. In article twelve, an aspect of our participation in Eucharist is being "drawn into communion with all creation." Article twenty-six makes a connection between living out the vow of poverty and concern for the earth, "We value the resources of the earth as gifts of God and use them in a spirit of stewardship . . ." Balancing ". . . concern for our future with compassion for the poor and needy."

The ART of Catholic Social Teaching as a Tool for Integration

In the "Leader's Guide to Sharing Catholic Social Teaching" there is a tool that may be helpful in considering how the

Constitutions call Sisters of Mercy to integrate direct service and efforts for systemic change. This is the study guide on "The ART of Catholic Social Teaching," which presents a two-fold cycle of Action and Attending, Reflection and Research, Transformation and Transcendence.¹⁰

Act and Attend

Those who want to live out the gospel commitment of justice are called to act to meet immediate needs, direct service. This brings them into contact with issues such as poverty, oppression, and violence. It also puts them into a position to attend to all persons involved in the issue, those served and those doing the service. Acting and attending are not simply a matter of setting up a method of meeting some perceived need. Rather, they involve recognizing that those who are served and those who serve are persons, created with great dignity, who are deserving of respect. One hallmark of Mercy ministry is this attention to the personal in meeting immediate needs.

Reflect and Research

Having come into contact with issues such as poverty, oppression, and violence, it is not adequate to simply reach out to meet the immediate need. Persons of faith are also called to reflect on the root cause of these issues in light of the Gospels and the principles of Catholic social teaching. This means really listening to those who are affected by a given situation. It also means asking questions that challenge the prevail-

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ing systems such as: "Why are persons poor in our society today?" and "What factors in our society make it difficult for some persons to determine the course of their lives effectively?" and "What are the roots of violence in the world at this time?" Seeking the causes of situations of poverty, oppression or violence also means that doing serious research will be needed to reach to root causes. Without the research, one might settle on the obvious or surface level causes that are only secondary sources of a given problem. The social sciences offer many tools for investigating the effects of the systems and structures of a society.

Transform and Transcend

Having met the problems faced by persons in a given social, economic, cultural, political setting and done the reflection and research needed, persons of faith are called to take transformative action. This is action that "gets at the root causes; it does not stop at alleviating symptoms."¹¹ But whatever transformative action is taken and however effective it may be, persons of faith are also called to remember that societal change in and of itself does not bring about the reign of God. The outcome of transformative efforts are ultimately in the hand of God. The effects of transformative efforts may come quickly or slowly, and may or may not have the desired effects. And, when these efforts succeed in bringing about a desired societal transformation, God's reign will continue to draw the faithful more deeply into the mystery of God's

transformative action in their lives. This realization is both sobering and comforting. While it may be necessary to do whatever we can to alleviate suffering and address its causes, ultimately the work is God's and the outcome is in God's hand. We may further the realization of the reign of God by our efforts, but it is not our job to bring it to fullness.

engaged in various forms of advocacy directed toward transformation of unjust structures in society. This may be by participation in local city and county governmental processes to assure that local issues are being addressed with the needs of the least advantaged in mind. It may be by legislative advocacy at state and national levels. It may

The charism of Mercy rarely stops at meeting an immediate need when there are systemic causes to be addressed. And Mercy is deeply committed to entrusting efforts and outcomes to God's care.

Many Mercy ministries integrate the element of transformation and transcendence in at least one of two ways. The character of the direct service that helps alleviate a need may, in some cases, also contribute to changing systems. When poor women are empowered to change their lives and have more confidence in themselves through a basic literacy program or a program that helps them gain employment skills, the system begins to change a little at its roots. When children learn to resolve their personal conflicts peacefully, the system begins to change a little at its roots. When a community learns to come together to oppose street violence, the system begins to change a little at its roots.

In addition, many Sisters of Mercy, Mercy associates, and Mercy coministers are actively

be by supporting and promoting the efforts of organizations that are addressing the issues involved. The charism of Mercy rarely stops at meeting an immediate need when there are systemic causes to be addressed. And Mercy is deeply committed to entrusting efforts and outcomes to God's care.

The Constitutions as a Guide for Mercy Life and Ministry

Reflection on the articles of the constitutions related to social justice in Mercy life and ministry is a valuable guide in individual and communal assessments, discernment, and decisions regarding ministry. Key questions can be asked: Who is being served? What needs are being met? Who benefits from this particular ministry (including those being

served, those providing service, any others affected by the ministry or with whom it does business)? How are the needs and concerns of persons who are poor affected by this ministry decision? How is the human dignity of each person, those served and those providing service, being respected? How are persons engaged and empowered to meet their own needs more effectively and to seek the systemic changes needed to make this possible? What are the underlying systemic causes of the need, and what will bring about change at the level of those causes? How do I/we engage in efforts to influence public policy to benefit those most in need? How are the resources of the earth that are to be shared by all used by this ministry? Can this ministry be done in a way that contributes to good stewardship of the goods of earth, preserving, restoring or protecting them for the needs of all? How can both direct service and systemic change be integrated in this ministry?

The final article of the Constitutions reaffirms the call to rely on God's constant care in the continuing commitment to integrate efforts for justice in the life of Mercy:

To celebrate our corporate word in a discordant society requires the courage of a deep faith and interior joy. We believe that God is faithful and that our struggle to follow Christ will extend God's reign of love over human hearts. We rejoice in the continued invitation to seek justice, to be compassionate and to reflect mercy to the world (Const. §84).

When Mercy life and ministry is lived with this commitment at heart, God's justice and compassionate care can be revealed more fully in the lives of persons who are most in need of that justice and care.



Notes

- 1 Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Approved June 1991, Article 2.
- 2 Justice in the World, Synod of Bishops, Second General Assembly, November 30, 1971 in *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1976, p. 514, §6.

- 3 Peter J. Henriot, Edward P. DeBerri, Michael J. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, Third Edition, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY and Center of Concern, Washington, DC, 1992.
- 4 *Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*, Office of Social Development & World Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, 2003. An in-depth discussion of the development of the principle of the dignity of the person can be found in Marilee Howard, *The Relevance of Catholic Social Teaching for Determining Priorities for Rationing Health Care*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University), Marilee Howard, 1990), pp. 38-50. See revision in M. Howard, "Respect for the Dignity of the Person in Catholic Social Teaching" *The MAST Journal*, 13.4 (2003), pp. 2-7.
- 5 See *Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*; and Howard, *Relevance of Catholic Social Teaching*, pp. 67-80.
- 6 *Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Leader's Guide to Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, prepared by Dr. Stephen M. Colecchi for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC (2000), p. 36.
- 11 Ibid.

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 Gottenmoeller (Cincinnati), Mary Sullivan (Rochester), Patricia Talone (Merion), Mary Daly (Connecticut), Carol Rittner (Dallas), Kathleen McAlpin (Merion) and Maureen Crossen (Pittsburgh). Institute liaison, Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. Subscriptions correspondence to Marilee Howard, R.S.M. (Auburn) at 8300 Colesville Rd., #300, Silver Spring, MD 20910, e-mail mhoward@sistersofmercy.org. Manuscript submissions to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., at 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129, 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, sales@dfscott.com or www.dfscott.com.

Of Butterflies, Kingfishers and Mission

Mary Daly, R.S.M.

I. Butterflies

August brings the butterflies to our gardens here at Mercy Center on the edge of Long Island Sound. They love the purple flowers on the butterfly bushes and the other violet, mauve, and pinks in the various gardens. They spend their days flapping from bloom to bloom sipping, I suppose, the sweet nectar. They also mate and lay their eggs. This August we found one little white speck of an egg on the underside of a milkweed leaf. Under the magnifying glass it looked gorgeously scalloped. We brought it indoors to watch its transformation during the Ecology Retreat, "Walking in Love through God's Creation." Sure enough, within days, the round miniscule egg was gone, replaced by a very small black line. Only under the magnifying glass could we see the black and yellow stripes of the caterpillar. Day after day during the retreat the little critter munched on the fresh milkweed leaves placed in its fish bowl house, shedding skin after skin as it grew almost to the size of my little finger. Then came the day when it stopped eating, hung itself in a J shape from the top rim of the bowl and wriggled out of its last skin revealing a beautiful jade green chrysalis.

Retreat ended and still the pupa remained hidden within its jewel-like case. Days after the retreatants were gone, the covering opened and the limp winged butterfly emerged, rested, pumped strength into its regal wings and flew off to find a flower. Its journey to the mountain forests of Mexico was in progress. That journey that had begun with the first hurling of matter and energy from the dense still point of creation into the exploding and coalescing of the stars and planets, now was poised on the delicate wings of the monarch butterfly wafting its incredible way over land and sea to its winter destination thus fulfilling another stage in the enduring life of the universe and

in the mission of this one small piece of it, the monarch butterfly.

It all gave me pause to think in a new way of my own mission, of how I am sent, of how God and God's work unfolds in me. The story of the cosmos is the story of the unfolding energy of the Self-Giving Love that is God. Through the fifteen billion years of self-organizing, self-differentiating energy the Self-Giving Love of God finds expression here and now in the butterfly setting off on its journey and in me who enjoy its beauty, both of us bearers of that Love of God poured out.

How often retreatants and those who come to our programs here at the Center have remarked on the gift of grace that has come to them in their experience of the butterfly. In the butterfly being what it is meant to be, God is present to them.

II. Kingfishers: Mission as Being

Gerard Manley Hopkins captures both wonder and this sense of mission in his poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

*As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.
I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.¹*

"What I do is me: for that I came." The butterfly simply expresses its being unthinkingly. But I can reflect on what I am and how I come to express that. For in me, the universe finds its consciousness. Wherever I journey to Mexico or Guatemala, or indeed to that spot on the eastern coast of the United States that is Mercy Center at Madison, it entails on my part a certain understanding and decision. My decision and action brings the ongoing process of creation and evolution in me and in the universe to its next point opening out into the future.

The butterfly goes by instinct. I go by choice, reflecting on who I am, what my desires are, what the needs of the people I serve are, what the Sisters of Mercy are all about, what it is to be Christian and a member of the Body of Christ, a citizen of planet earth and of the universe. As Hopkins says,

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.*

Fundamentally my mission is to be—to self, in Hopkins's words, to deal out the being that dwells indoors. This is our vocation and our mission. As Johannes Baptist Metz notes in the foreword to his book *Poverty of Spirit*, becoming human is a lifelong process.² Human persons are not born whole and complete in their being, but rather move to become who they can be throughout a lifetime of countless choices. To become the person we most deeply are, to find our true selves is to find what it is to be human and to further the movement of the universe toward its fulfillment.

Thomas Merton often spoke of this.

To become the person we most
deeply are, to find our true
selves is to find what it is to be
human and to further the
movement of the universe
toward its fulfillment.

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. . . . Our vocation is not simply to be but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.³

For being itself is an active experience, something transformative. In its very act of being it moves along the "chain of evolution toward its own self-transcendence, emptying itself out, giving itself up in its very act of being, always toward the greater fulfillment of creation itself."⁴

It is in the stillness of prayer and reflection on our day-to-day life experiences that we come to know that being of ours, that self. In prayer and contemplation, we touch our deep self and can choose to be and act in harmony with that inner core.

The task of advancing toward contemplation is the task of moving toward identification with the true self, which Thomas Merton points to: "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness, which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God."⁵

Here in touching into our deepest being, we strip away the masks and roles, the false and incomplete selves and come in touch with the true mission of our being:

Both the asceticism and the meditation help to strip off the accustomed descriptive identity, "I am so-and-so." When all those predicates fall away, one by one, only the "I am" is left, empty and unmodified, not even known to itself by reflection but only by a noetic coincidence with its own existence. Then the transcendent self is revealed as one that says, simultaneously with its unlimited "I am," "May all be and be abundantly."⁶

Barbara Fiand writes,

The reign of God means being totally, being so much that there is nothing left to have. It means not even having oneself—giving oneself up completely, in utter surrender. It means being possessed by God. Our life is for this and for nothing else, and our death—accepted creatively . . . in complete one-ness with Him—is indeed the final "yes" to this outpouring, a moment of ec-stasis, of standing beyond oneself, completely and finally, into the Light. The reign of God calls us to itself and calls us for no other reason.⁷

And again she says that thought is energy and its transmission has possibilities for both destruction

and redemption. She refers to William Johnson's observation that the "Zen Master sits for the universe."

When we reflect and deepen our awareness and certainly, as Johnston observes, when we sit in prayer, "the very highest form of human energy is brought into play, a human energy that is nothing other than love at the core of one's being. It is precisely this," he insists, "that builds the earth. . . . Here a whole cosmic energy is unleashed and the whole world shakes. More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."⁸

When seen from a cosmological perspective, the movement of each thing more deeply into what it is releases an energy that causes an affinity for other beings.

In Teilhard's view, all of evolution has progressed by a series of creative unions. More complex and more conscious beings are formed by the union of less complex and less conscious elements with one another. The elements unite with one another in terms of their characteristic energies, because of their affinity for one another. Subatomic particles unite to form atoms, atoms unite to form molecules, molecules unite to form cells, cells unite to form organisms. This same pattern of creating something new, something more complex and more conscious, by the union of the less complex and less conscious, recurs at each of these levels.⁹

In this never ending process, we find our true self and we find that that self is a reflection and expression of the Self-Giving Love of God poured out in us and in the universe. We see this clearly in Jesus.

III. To Be Human Is to Be a Lover

Jesus shows us what our mission is, what our destiny is. By knowing who I am and what it means to be human, I can understand Jesus and his mission more fully. In turn, from him I come to know myself more deeply, who I can aspire to be, what my mission is.

In carrying out his mission, Jesus became one of us and was faithful to this mission of being human through all his life. He was faithful to his humanity in all its frailty and limitation. For Jesus knew that in this, his frail limited humanity, he was offspring of the One he called Father. Knowing this, he knew every human being as brother and sister, for indeed all have come from that same loving God.

Sent among us as human, the divine Jesus was true to this mission and lived it out in a ministry of compassion and inclusion with all whom he met, rich and poor, well and ill, Pharisee and publican, sinner, outcast and downtrodden.

Living out this ministry in faithful love brought him to his death. Beyond death it gave him the fullness of life in resurrection, a life that is poured out upon us in the Spirit. So Jesus welcomed each person treating each one with dignity, equality, mutual respect, and freedom, challenging each to be a person living in self giving love. It is this Spirit both of Jesus and the One he called Father that missions us as Body of Christ to live in the awareness of ourselves as offspring of God by grace and to live that same self-giving love that he lived.

**Self is a reflection and
expression of the Self-Giving
Love of God poured out in us
and in the universe.**

The desire to do this is the animating desire of our call as Sisters of Mercy. Once we perceive that Self-Giving Love of God, it both attracts us and impels us. That love in its aspect of the compassion that we see in Catherine McAuley and her followers has gathered us as Sisters of Mercy within the Body of Christ. Impelled by God's Spirit in Catherine and us, we strive to manifest God's compassion both to ourselves and to those around us.

So we are sent to be what we are both in our living and working each day and in our life as an institute. We have started preparations now for the Institute Chapter. We will wing our way to that Chapter in 2005. Gathered there in prayer that touches the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Catherine McAuley, we will look again at who we are in relation to this moment in the ongoing unfolding creative energy of the universe. How are we called to be? How do we express that being in our structures and relationships? How are we sent? How are we missioned? These are all ways of asking how we are to give flesh here and now through our conscious choices to the Self-Giving Love of God poured out.

We cannot do everything, be everything.

The compassionate mission of Jesus of Nazareth during his lifetime in Israel was limited by his human circumstances. He healed the sick that he encountered, preached to those within his hearing. Upon his death, his Spirit impelled his followers to continue that mission to the ends of the earth and throughout subsequent ages. So we, gathered in the Spirit of Jesus and Catherine, must let that Spirit inform our interrelationships and the dynamic itself of the gathering, that being truly Sisters of Mercy, we may unfold the Spirit that sends us.

The same is true as we each seek to carry out the mission of the Institute. Guided by the broad strokes of our Constitutions, the Direction Statement and other Chapter enactments, we touch deeply within ourselves to the Spirit that called us to be Sisters of Mercy and that now, ever now, sends us into ministry. Discerning among the various movements that impel and attract us, we do our best to make conscious choices that unfold our being and identity in our union as Institute in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, among the brothers and sisters that need mercy and compassion.

It is not always an easy choice. It is hard to know at times whether it is the lure of the nectar on a sunny afternoon or the strength needed for the mission to Mexico that keeps the butterfly on the blossom. But a choice must be made. Sometimes a skin must be shed so that I may become more deeply who I am as Sister of Mercy, member of the Body of Christ whose mission is to help usher in the reign of God.

IV. Conclusion

Mission flows from the dynamism of being. Mission is being true to what we are in our deepest self whether we are butterflies, stardust or Sisters of Mercy. When we are that truth, we are in harmony with the whole universe, evolving in a truth that unfolds the glory of God and fulfills its and our mission.

It is now early October. Still butterflies linger cavorting in the warm sunshine. The first frost has

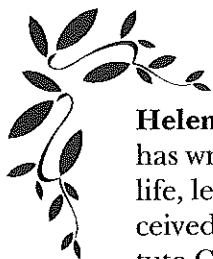
given them warning not to tarry too long. If they do, they will pay the price of a journey marked by ever shorter days and fewer nectar supply stations. The foolish lingerers may well perish on the way. So with us, untrue to what we are, we too may seek to bask in sunlit ways for momentary pleasure and so miss the great adventure of our conscious participation in moving the universe to the ever greater glory of Self-Giving Love poured out, to the reign of truth and freedom, justice, peace and love. Or on the other hand, we may grow in consciousness and harmony knowing ourselves as a Sacred Body, as a Holy Communion¹⁰ sent to announce the good news that we are all one, that this communion in love and well-being is for all. In and through it, we bear one another's burdens and so find life—ours, each others, the planet's, God's.

...for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of [our] faces.



Notes

- 1 W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Selection of His Poems and Prose* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953), 51.
- 2 Johannes Baptist Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, translated by John Drury, inclusive language version by Carole Farris (NY/NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), 3–6.
- 3 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1974), 31, 32.
- 4 Barbara Fiand, *In the Stillness You Will Know: Exploring the Paths of Our Ancient Belonging* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 75.
- 5 Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 39.
- 6 Bruteau, 41.
- 7 Fiand, 73.
- 8 William Johnston, *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 90–91, as quoted by Barbara Fiand, 82.
- 9 Bruteau, 2.
- 10 Bruteau, 4f, 150f.



Contributors

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. (Detroit), is currently a member of the Institute Leadership Team. She has written previously for *The MAST Journal* and has lectured extensively on the topics of religious life, leadership, sponsorship, and the charism and tradition of the Sisters of Mercy. Helen Marie received a Ph.D. from the School of Religion, University of Iowa in 2001. She is codirector of the Institute Commission on Women in/of the Church.

Sheila Carney, R.S.M. (Pittsburgh), is a member of the Institute Leadership Team. She earned a B.A. in English and psychology from Carlow College in Pittsburgh and an M.Div. from Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. She attended the ARC Program in Rome. She has ministered in education at all levels and has served as incorporation minister and president of the Pittsburgh Regional Community. Sheila is also a writer, lecturer, and retreat director, focusing on Catherine McAuley and the charism of Mercy.

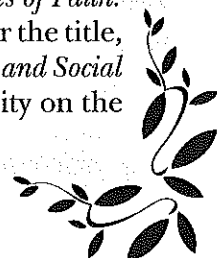
Mary Daly, R.S.M. (Connecticut) has been a Sister of Mercy for more than fifty years, and is a member of the program staff at Mercy Center, a retreat and renewal center at Madison, Connecticut. An artist and theologian, she is experienced in spiritual direction and retreat work offering programs on creativity and on various aspects of the spiritual life. Mary's background includes teaching on the elementary, graduate, and undergraduate level. She has served in leadership positions for the Sisters of Mercy and has been on the staff at Mercy Center since 1992. Mary holds a doctoral degree in religious studies from Marquette University.

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., (Auburn), is a member of the Auburn Regional Community Leadership Team. She received her M.Ed. from the University of San Francisco and a Masters in liturgical studies from St. John's University, Collegeville, MN. Katherine has been active in the field of religious education, retreat ministry and spiritual direction for more than twenty years. A frequent contributor to *The MAST Journal*, Katherine's interpretive biography of Mary Baptist Russell, California foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, *Like a Tree by Running Water*, will be published in August 2004.

Marilee Howard, R.S.M. (Auburn), holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Georgetown University, with a concentration in biomedical ethics. Her dissertation was *The Relevance of Catholic Social Teaching for Determining Priorities for Rationing Healthcare*. She served as ethics consultant for Catholic Healthcare West, and was elected to a term on the Auburn Regional Leadership Team. She currently is a member of the Institute Justice Team in Silver Spring, as well as managing editor for *The MAST Journal*.

Patricia McCann, R.S.M. (Pittsburgh), has served in congregational administration for twenty years including service as the Institute's first Vice-President. She received her M.A. from Catholic University of America and ministered as assistant professor in church history at St. Vincent Seminary, Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Writing is currently her full time ministry.

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 Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University. She has lectured on spirituality and spiritual direction in Ireland, England, Australia, India, Belgium, Canada, and Thailand as well as throughout the United States. She is author of numerous articles, as well as three books: *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Spiritual Direction and Narrative*, which will be revised and republished by Paulist Press under the title, *To Tell the Sacred Tale*; *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* (Paulist) and edited *Mysticism and Social Transformation*. She is currently working on a volume for the Classics in Western Spirituality on the laywoman, Elisabeth Leseur.





Discussion Questions

(Burns) Do you find the vow of poverty expressive of values in your life today? Helpful on your spiritual journey? Hampering any aspect of your growth? Do you fear renaming the vow of poverty? If not, what naming do you prefer?

(Carney) What is your memory of participating in the creation of the Constitutions, our corporate word? What provision would you choose to incarnate?

(Daly) "It is not always an easy choice. It is hard to know at times whether it is the lure of the nectar on a sunny afternoon or the strength needed for the mission to Mexico that keeps the butterfly on the blossom." What criteria have inspired your own ministerial choices of when it is time to stay where you are, and when to depart?

(Doyle) Following on O'Murchu's phrase, what constitutes "the redemption of life-giving intimacy"? To what degree is the meaning of the phrase determined by a moment in the history of religious life, by one's own personality as an introvert or extrovert, by assumptions about marriage, by contemporary psychology, by the collapse of private and public in the media, or by cultural factors which affect women in family and workplace?

(Howard) The Constitutions say that efforts for justice are essential to the life of Mercy. How does your ministry integrate direct service with efforts for systemic change? How are you translating in your own ministry the principles of respect for the dignity of the person, care for earth, special concern for persons who are poor and solidarity with the whole human family?

(McCann) Is faith in God made manifest in Jesus and articulated through the Catholic Church and its theological tradition still our core reality as Sisters of Mercy?

(Ruffing) "We may have quite different assumptions and practices of authority throughout the Institute. Each regional community has its own history in relationship to styles of leadership and degrees of participation in governance." How do you describe the assumptions, practices, and styles of leadership in your own region? Which have illustrated the dialogical character of religious obedience? Which have been alienating?



The Editorial Board wishes to broaden the voice of *The MAST Journal*. Sisters of Mercy and Associates in all fields are invited to submit editorials or opinion pieces on theological concerns arising from topics featured in the journal. Forthcoming issues will address *Religious Life and Constitutions*, *Reading Contemporary Theologians*, *Perspectives on Mercy Association*, *Contextual/Cultural Theology*, and *Racism*. Another welcome genre is reflections on the discussion questions of each issue. Such short pieces are normally between 400–800 words and publication includes the author's name. Submissions should be sent electronically or by mail and disk to Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M., MAST Editorial Board, Regis College, 15 St. Mary's Street, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2R8. E-Mail: k.mcalpin@utoronto.ca.

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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.

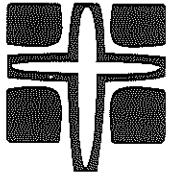
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Burlingame, CA, June 12–14, 2005.

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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