

The MAST Journal

Theology in Ministerial Context

History of Religious Women as Sacred Story

—*Dolores Liptak, R.S.M.*

Why Read Theology?

—*William R. Scott, Ph.D.*

HIV/AIDS and Our Journey in Faith

—*Margaret Farley, R.S.M.*

The Heart of the Matter

—*Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M.*

Jesus Heals: A Model for Re-Imagining Religious Life

—*Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.*

From Pharaoh to Caesar: Imperial Dominion and the Bible

—*Mary Criscione, R.S.M.*

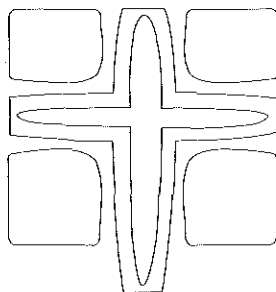
Never Again versus Ever Again

—*Carol Rittner, R.S.M.*

A Reflection on Belden Lane's *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*

—*Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.*

The Journal of the
Mercy Association in
Scripture and Theology



Vol. 15, No. 1
2005

Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

This issue considers "Theology in Ministerial Context." Even if theologians all read the same authors in their academic training, and even if they studied at roughly the same period after Vatican II, and even if they had a similar linguistic, religious, cultural, and social background, nevertheless, their theology can undergo a reshaping as a result of finding themselves in different contexts subsequent to their academic formation. It is noted that the newly elected pontiff, Benedict XVI, was deeply affected by the student revolts of the 1960s in Germany when he was a young professor, and some commentators note this shaped his subsequent theology aimed at preserving and protecting what he considered to be essentials of the faith. Those familiar with philosophical hermeneutics know the principle developed by Gadamer and Ricoeur that nothing is known or experienced without some kind of mental preconditioning of the feelings, instincts, and intuitive way of grasping the world. The same garden can be gone to seed in a suburbanite's view, but for a farmer, be ground ready for tilling and planting. Many families would verify that siblings, each in their turn, can report significantly different experiences of parenting, schooling, socialization and religious sensitivity, even though they all lived in the same house, attended the same schools, and ate the same food growing up. These perspectives are attributable to contextual factors more influential than extroversion or introversion.

Another example of context is the movement in feminist theology in the mid-1980s and 1990s that anthologized writers according to their representation of "social location." Contributors made it a point to show that their race, gender, family of origin, geographic setting, economic class, and political affiliations all conditioned their theological focus, and accounted for the scripture passages they selected as paradigms to describe God's presence and give meaning to the suffering of people they called their own.

In this issue of *The MAST Journal*, the effect of context on theology—we see from where we stand and we imagine from what we see—is demonstrated through a number of lenses. Dolores Liptak, R.S.M., attends to the historical period of Catholicism between 1830 and 1860 when more than thirty European-based apostolic communities of women religious, including Mercies, came to the United States, inspired by the missionary desire to save souls, and pioneered work in schools, healthcare institutions, caring for orphans and poor, and battlefield nursing. She proposes that the context of this past ministry can inspire our sense of purpose in re-imagining the Institute. William R. Scott, publisher of *The MAST Journal*, himself a theologian, also takes an historical approach, confessing that during his seminary days, "all those dead Germans had left me cold," because as he later realized, "we had the same Bible, but not the same culture." Attending to context as one's own culture, he describes how his theology evolved over decades, from seminary days' focus on redressing old wrongs of racism and sexism, to current questions involving common ground and building community.

Three experiences of ministry involving needs of persons outside the U.S.A. shape a set of essays oriented to the theme of health and healing. Margaret Farley, R.S.M., a renowned ethicist at Yale University, has been publishing her work on the relationship of faith and response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa for the last three years. In a talk presented to religious women in Nigeria, she shows how confronting AIDS is a context that requires both merciful action and new theologizing about God, Trinity, creation, incarnation, redemption, church, salvation and human solidarity. Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M., who has directed Refugee Services in California for many

years, records in a poetically-crafted account how her work with Asian refugees has the power to transform theology from a model of "God-and-me-serving-a-few-others" to a spiritual vision of God who sits with the abandoned and "limps with the poor." Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M., a theologian who is an administrator in Provena Health and Provena Senior Services in Chicago, visited a leprosarium in Ecuador where the ancient disease is still being battled. This experience serves as her context for interpreting Mark's account of Jesus healing a leper and she then offers its application to the present Institute task of re-imagining religious life.

Mary Criscione, R.S.M., who teaches New Testament at Santa Clara University, speaks of context as one's assumption about power. She synthesizes the biblical tension between imperial authority as access to God through the king, and the resistance to patriarchal power embodied in the "kingdom talk" of Jesus. The biblical context we choose determines the focus of our ministry. Carol Rittner, R.S.M., noted scholar of Holocaust studies, insists that prevention of genocide requires not only teaching about this historical tragedy. There must also be analysis of other genocides in the 1990s, such as the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and the Hutu-Tutsi massacres in Rwanda. Finally, Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M., a philosopher and Catherine McAuley scholar, who has led a cancer-patient support group for many years, locates the context for spirituality in the ecological vision of Belden Lane's "exquisitely beautiful account of the meaning of death." Her book review is itself a meditation on Lane's 1998 *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*.

Readers are invited to reflect on the discussion questions, or respond to these and prior articles by sending shorter pieces to MAST Board member Carol Rittner, R.S.M., at CarolRittnerRSM@aol.com.



Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

THE MAST JOURNAL, begun in 1990, is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Sisters Eloise Rosenblatt, Editor (Burlingame), Doris Gottemoeller (Cincinnati), Mary Sullivan (Rochester), Patricia Talone (Merion), Mary Daly (Connecticut), Carol Rittner (Dallas), Kathleen McAlpin (Merion) and Maureen Crossen (Pittsburgh). Institute liaison, Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. Subscriptions correspondence to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., Managing Editor, 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.

History of Religious Women as Sacred Story

Dolores Liptak, R.S.M.

The lens of history can be a powerful tool in interpreting the mystery of religious life. This is certainly true with regard to the historical phenomenon that gave rise to the hundreds of religious communities of women that were established in the United States over the past two centuries. Mercy congregations would do well to focus more seriously upon the grace-filled stories of religious life in the United States just as we have wisely studied the stories of women in the Scriptures. Only in this way, it seems to me, will the tradition begun by Catherine McAuley and carried faithfully to the United States give us the direction we need to approach our corporate future.

Just think, for example, how much richer discussions of the reorganization of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas could be if we gave more time to considering the inspiration that animated our first American Mercy women. Just think of the renewed energy that could be enkindled if we used the examples of the unheralded women of our rich past to help guide us into the future. Just think, moreover, of the sense of direction that could be ours if we reflected upon what motivated the many other religious congregations who together built the institutional Church of the United States. One can successfully argue, in fact, that, in the end, it was the labors and genius of thousands of women religious that virtually created the framework and overall design of today's American Catholic Church. Moreover, one can make a case that it was the spiritual strength and insight of Sisters that became the animating force that guided generations of Catholics to find their roles within both Church and society today. Finally, one can argue that it is the model of religious life initiated over two centuries ago here in the United States that should guide us in our re-imagining our future.

After all, what is today's Mercy life in the United States if it is not the continuation of the

response to challenge taken on by Sisters of Mercy from coast to coast, in urban areas and on the frontier, from the time of the first planting of U.S. Mercy in 1843 until the present? For this reason, I would argue that historical research should be the *hermeneutic*, the *key theological tool*, for fleshing out what has been and what can provide the leitmotif to guide Mercy life into the twenty-first century.

Situating Mercy in a Larger Context

To see ourselves properly, however, it is important to situate our story within the larger history of the advance of religious life in the United States. Like that of hundreds of other American communities, this history reflects the encounters of pioneer women who faced New World challenges and broke Old World cultural barriers in order to accomplish necessary goals. Invited by bishops and clergy, women religious willingly took on missions of mercy from the start. Unable to assume the same roles to which the clergy were called, they nevertheless recognized that they were in the best possible position to be key instruments in providing immediate physical and spiritual assistance to the nation's minority Catholic population. Their stories tell us that over the past two centuries, tens of thousands of vowed religious women became premier witnesses to God's loving providence. In-

It was the labors and genius of thousands of women religious that virtually created the framework and overall design of today's American Catholic Church.

deed, vowed religious became the gateways to grace for countless American Catholics.

Long before the entry of the Sisters of Mercy onto the American scene in 1843, American clergy had recognized the key role that women religious needed to play if the Church of the United States was to survive within a hostile society and witness to the gospel. Immediately following the reassurance, in 1790, that "religion was now free," three Maryland-born women—members of the Carmelite Order—accepted the invitation of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore to leave their European cloisters and form the first religious congregation to be established in the United States. These women fully recognized what the power of their presence could produce. Believing firmly that their cloistered lives would provide an excellent antidote to prejudice as well as a fitting witness of God's Love, they chose to retain the hidden life style that had sustained them abroad. Because of this decision, contemplative life for women was firmly established on American soil.¹

Long before the entry of the
Sisters of Mercy onto the
American scene in 1843,
American clergy had recognized
the key role that women
religious needed to play if the
Church of the United States was
to survive within a hostile society
and witness to the gospel.

Baltimore, Kentucky, and South Carolina

It would take Elizabeth Seton, now a canonized saint, to alter this pattern. For her, the public life of Christ and the needs of American Catholics compelled women to emphasize a second kind of witness. Her particular desire was to represent God's redemptive, healing, educating, outreaching presence. Heeding the invitation of the same Bishop of Baltimore, she formed the Sisters of Charity (today represented by both the Sisters and Daughters of

Charity) in 1809. Her followers had as their principal aim alleviating the desperate poverty, illiteracy, and debilitating spiritual want that characterized the Catholic immigrant and minority population. Soon, side by side with the Oblates of Providence, an African-American community "of color" that was organized in the late 1820s under the leadership of Mary Elizabeth Lange, these two communities continued their public ministries in the greater Baltimore area. Meanwhile, in Georgetown, the Visitandines also accepted teaching as a vital missionary aim. Albeit emphasizing the contemplative dimension of their lives, they, too, knew that they must provide social services, including education for young women as well as religious instruction for the neighborhood poor. Like the patron saints of their congregations—St. Louise de Marillac, St. Frances of Rome, and St. Jane de Chantal—these three congregations became active responders to need even as they continued to represent lives of contemplative prayer and sacrificial love.²

On the Kentucky frontier, laywomen recognized the same call to prayer and service within the context of committed, vowed life. They quickly became involved in the care of orphans, the sick poor, and those in need of religious education even as their brother clergy continued to confer the sacraments and preach. At Bardstown, two religious congregations, namely, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth and the Sisters of Loretto, received their guidance from European clergy who stressed the sacrificing love of service as exemplified by Christ's Passion and Death. By 1830, a third Kentucky group of women religious, adjuncts to the Dominican clergy established there, also committed themselves to evangelization.³

Meanwhile, in Charlestown, South Carolina, another congregation begun by Americans would emerge even before the 1830s. Under the guidance of a brilliant Irish immigrant bishop, John England, these Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy proposed to dedicate themselves to teaching the children as well as "instructing the negro slaves in faith and morals, and . . . caring for the sick and infirm . . ." Delighting in their work, Bishop England told Roman officials that he had coworkers who were prepared to join him in spreading the Good News.⁴

With these original communities of American women, then, the pattern of religious life that

mixed contemplative prayer with active ministry was set. Church officials could depend upon growing numbers of women religious—whether in urban or frontier environments—to join them as bearers of the Good News through their lives of prayer and service.

By the time that Sister Francis Xavier Warde came to the United States in 1843—especially to assist Irish immigrants—there were almost twenty communities of women functioning in this rapidly expanding nation. By then, however, a number of these newer congregations had distinct European origins. The histories of these communities, especially those from Ireland, Germany, France, and the Low Countries, were very much like that of the religious congregations founded here. Their records make clear that these women religious intended to be missionaries. Their love for God especially prompted these newcomers, as it had their brother clergy, to bring the Word of God to “pagan” Indians, and, to a lesser extent, to the destitute immigrants who rushed to these shores for survival’s sake. For some of the Sisters who migrated at this time, suffering service actually meant the willingness to be martyred for the sake of saving the “souls of pagans.”⁵

Religious of the Sacred Heart and Native Americans

The first European-founded group of women religious to insist that they could achieve such a privileged aim was a congregation begun in France by Mother Madeleine Sophie Barat and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In many ways, these Sisters illustrated how European contemplative aims could easily become entwined with American missionary purpose. Because of their willingness to alter European patterns for the sake of their mission, moreover, these Sisters of the Sacred Heart set an example of the kind of flexibility and willingness to sacrifice that women religious anticipated to be their lot in the American setting. The example they provided would be repeated many times as the century matured.⁶

Mother Barat’s assistant, Philippine Duchesne, was among the first of her Sisters to be inspired by this clearly missionary call. So insistent were Philippine’s requests to go to America in order to

evangelize that Mother Barat’s priest-brother incredulously advised Philippine that:

Those who went to America must be great souls, and among women great souls are very rare. That thought may discourage you, but you have sighed so long a time for your savages and with such constancy, it is probable that God will make an exception in your case and not require you to be a wholly great soul.”⁷

Undaunted, the forty-eight year old Mother Duchesne refused to let the dream to be an evangelizer die. Finally, in 1818, she was allowed to lead a contingent of Sisters to the frontier diocese of St. Louis. Primarily prompted by the desire to save the souls of the “savages,” she willingly accepted the Will of God in any assignment she was given. Once here, moreover, she recognized that lifestyle changes were necessary if Sisters were to achieve their goal to save souls. Although deeply attached to the security of cloistered life, she altered its stricter demands. For the first thirty years of her mission to the United States, moreover, Sister Philippine accepted the hard discipline of obedience, remaining in the heart of St. Louis’s booming metropolis where she organized and conducted academies for the wealthy.

Finally, at the age of seventy, the future saint was given the opportunity to fulfill the dream that originally inspired her . . . the missions.

Finally, at the age of seventy, the future saint was given the opportunity to fulfill the dream that originally inspired her. Allowed to go to the missions, she settled in Sugar Creek, Kansas, hoping to bring the Good News to her beloved Indians. Unable to learn their language, however, she chose to pray for hours each day in the tent that housed the Blessed Sacrament. There she so fully witnessed to her love for God that she became known by the Indians as “Woman-who-prays-always.” In this way, St. Philippine personified the mission of the nineteenth century American nun.

Through prayer, she had united contemplative desire to apostolic service. Her example solidified the message conveyed by the Sister to American society as a whole. All that mattered was that God's message of love be spread to all God's people.⁸

**If the Church did not turn to
Sisters to be their sacramental
or liturgical leaders, then, every
Catholic recognized what Sisters
were attempting to do.**

Catherine McAuley and Immigrant Catholics

As increasing numbers of apostolic communities of women religious came to the United States and swelled the numbers of Sisters, this same desire to bring Christ to the Native Americans of the new continent continued to be a strong incentive for the nineteenth century nun. For the Sisters of Mercy, however, this aim was quickly coopted by a greater need that confronted them: bringing salvation to their own impoverished immigrant brothers and sisters in the ghettos of the nation's industrializing cities. Assured by Catherine McAuley that their community had been "founded on Calvary, there to serve a Crucified Lord," the pioneer founders accepted the mission to serve the poorest of the poor, not on the fringes of civilization, but among the urban poor. From Pennsylvania and Illinois, to New York, New England, and Maryland, they immediately assumed the task of alleviating the tragic conditions that had befallen so many immigrants. Only in Maine and, later, in Louisiana, were they able to pursue the missionary dream of evangelizing minority races.⁹

Between the years 1830 and 1860, more than thirty other European-based congregations joined the Sisters of Mercy in similar ministry to immigrant Catholics and Indians. Especially after the 1860s, dozens of communities spread to the far western mission territories. By 1900, some hundred congregations had been established throughout the United States. At least forty thousand Sis-

ters comprised the ranks of women's communities. Their diaries and letters back home tell us that these Sisters saw their role in simple terms. Their desire was to save "souls." One Ursuline Sister had epitomized this aim in a letter she wrote in 1852 to friends that she had left in Europe:

As you cannot be missionaries, you must at least pray that those [of us] who labor in this benighted land may bring back many sheep who have strayed from the fold of Christ.¹⁰

If the Church did not turn to Sisters to be their sacramental or liturgical leaders, then, every Catholic recognized what Sisters were attempting to do. They recognized Sisters as visible partners in the task of bringing the Good News of salvation. rule books, constitutions, annals, and memoirs of the many congregations testify to the Sisters' understanding of this dedication. Repeatedly, one theme appears: the salvation of souls remained a primary motivator of their lives.¹¹

Religious Women and the American Civil War

Such resolve often brought the Sisters into arenas of crises and conflict. Few sacrifices seemed to daunt them. During the dread mid-century decade of the Civil War, for example, twenty-one communities of women religious answered the government's call to serve as army and navy nurses (sometimes against the wishes of their bishops). Eventually, more than six hundred women religious chose this heroic ministry. Together, these Sisters numbered one-fifth of the nation's entire nursing corps.¹²

Daily, the nursing routines of the Civil War Sisters amazed both soldiers and generals alike. Despite a continued, strong attachment to their secluded lives of prayer, the Sisters spent grueling hours against the ugly, bloody backdrop of raging battles and within the wards of the dying. Witness after witness reported how selflessly they served. Exhausted by their nursing chores, the Sisters found time to write letters dictated to them by wounded soldiers; to kneel and pray by the bedside of the dying; to prepare corpses for proper burial. As they tended the wounds and kept vigil, moreover, they were ever ready to administer the sacrament of baptism or bring spiritual comfort.¹³

In the words of one Cincinnati Sister of Charity:

Our duties [were] fatiguing and often disgusting to flesh and blood, but we were amply repaid by conversions, repentances, and the removal to a great extent of certain prejudices to our Holy Faith.¹⁴

A Daughter of Charity admitted:

Day and night our sisters constantly administered by turns to soul and body; nourishment, remedies, and drinks to the body and, as best they could, "living waters" to the soul.¹⁵

As the second largest contingent to volunteer, the Sisters of Mercy were often cited for both their bravery, their commitment, and their competence. Furthermore, the Baltimore Sisters of Mercy earned the distinction of being the first of the "nuns of the battlefield" when they offered the infirmary they managed in Washington for the care of the first casualties of the fighting. By war's end, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Vicksburg, Chicago, New York, and Little Rock Sisters of Mercy had earned great praise. As a group, they were singled out for special notice, even by President Lincoln, who reportedly gave them *carte blanche* for any medical request they submitted.

Still, it was the soldier who understood their real contribution. Records confirm that even the most hardened soldier became overwhelmed in the presence of these amazing "Angels of Mercy" or "of Charity." Eyes literally followed the step of the nursing Sister. As one Charleston, South Carolina paper reported:

... there is probably no one in our midst whose eyes have not followed with interest the quiet and modest figure of some Sister of Our Lady of Mercy as she passed upon her rounds . . . Nor is the large kindness of these ladies solely displayed in the personal cares which they bestow upon the sufferer. They give generously from their limited means at the same time and many a want is then supplied which might otherwise have been left unsatisfied. Since the beginning of the siege of our city their presence has diffused its blessings in every hospital and their unmarred attention to the soldier has done incalculable good.¹⁶

Hostility on the part of Protestant soldiers abated rapidly during, and especially after, the war as the care and concern of these Catholic workers became more and more evident. Today, a monument to Sister nurses stands in front of St. Matthew Cathedral in Washington, DC, in quiet testimony to the

reality of the remarkable service provided by the Sisters of the Civil War. Even now, it is exciting for Sisters of Mercy to see that the central figure in this impressive *bas relief* is one of our own numbers. Through the entire war, Sisters had responded to a need that they knew would draw them close to those who suffered. Fully exhausted by the horrors around them and not questioning the wisdom of a war between brothers, their hearts remained fixed on the message they could offer. For this, they were willing to give up their lives.¹⁷

By war's end, Sisters of Mercy had earned great praise. As a group, they were singled out for special notice, even by President Lincoln, who reportedly gave them *carte blanche* for any medical request they submitted.

Sisters and Prison Ministry

The pattern of loving service set by the Sisters during the Civil War years endured well beyond that conflict. Wherever the nineteenth century nun chose to minister in the years that followed the war, in fact, onlookers recognized that essentially the aim of Sisters largely involved the keen desire to be witnesses to Christ, to "save souls" through the spiritual and corporal ministries they provided. As the following comment of a San Francisco reporter suggested about Mercy Sisters who regularly visited the prison at San Quentin:

Their power was next only to that of a priest . . . Many a man has been made to see the light and find a cure for his despair in the kind words and Christian teaching of these good Sisters.¹⁸

During the same period, an obituary of a New Haven, Connecticut Sister of Mercy, reported another version of what the Sisters of Mercy hoped to fulfill in their mission to "souls":

[S. Lucy] exemplified the perfection of charity according to St. James, as naught but words of love fell from her lips. Like all the early members of her order, her zeal for souls was remarkable. She loved to bring the wayward to repentance; and no one, however hardened, could resist the honeyed words of Sister Lucy while describing the beauties of virtue and the happiness of a good conscience.¹⁹

According to the newspaper article, this unheralded nun knew what she had to do for the sake of the God who inspired her life. In her case, as the paper specified, this meant that, besides educating the little ones, she had taken it upon herself to spend every Sunday morning going door to door in order to rouse the fathers of the children to rise and fulfill their Sunday obligations.²⁰

Still another New Haven paper reported how Sisters of Mercy were regular visitors to the city prison. Naturally, the paper emphasized the presence of a priest who had joined the Sisters in visiting one young Irishman imprisoned for murder and awaiting execution. But it was made clear that the visits of both priest and Sisters is what made the right impression. What man could ignore the faithful love of these women religious as they visited with and ministered to a condemned prisoner?²¹

Institutional Permanence

Most observers realized, even then, that the role of the nun of the nineteenth century was far greater than that of teaching or of caring for orphans and the sick poor. They realized that, by such works, they were also building something

Sisters continued to approach their lives with the firm belief that they were part of the grand enterprise of saving souls. For the Sisters of Mercy, the realization that their communities had been organized around this motive proved a mighty incentive.

greater: a Church that would stand as a monument to God's love. They were equally aware that the service of nuns transformed hearts and minds and gave good example to hundreds of thousands of lives. In a word, schools, orphan asylums, and hospitals were the means to salvific purpose. As one guidebook of the Chicago Sisters of Mercy, written in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, succinctly worded it:

To labor generously in the schools is to deal in the salvation of souls by wholesale. [It is] to be God's coadjutor.²²

Mother Teresa Gerhardinger, founder of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, had echoed this same sentiment to an earlier generation of nuns. Serving God's needy ones, she had written, was a mission as "necessary as [that] of priests, if Catholic Christianity is to take deeper roots in families, and is to blossom there, and to remain permanently effective." Sisters instinctively understood that their most important goal was preaching the Good News of salvation.²³

The twentieth century Sister advanced the many apostolates begun during the previous century with the same aims in mind. Religious life had given them strength for the task and the freedom to advance God's mighty agenda of bringing the Word of God to all peoples. This same inspiration was the force that continued to give purpose to their lives. From the first Carmelites of Baltimore through the present generations, Sisters continued to approach their lives with the firm belief that they were part of the grand enterprise of saving souls. For the Sisters of Mercy, the realization that their communities had been organized around this motive proved a mighty incentive. Nursing the soldier, praying with the Indian and other oppressed minorities, teaching the urban immigrant laborer and his children had provided them the opportunity to be God's coadjutors. It allowed them to approach the complexities of the twentieth century with the same willingness to pursue the goal of bringing the Word of God to others.

Conclusion

As we Sisters of Mercy develop our goals and action plans, we need to look back to see what such simple and single-minded patterns of past ministry are saying to us in story form. Just as the nineteenth

century nun understood her role, we, too, can hope to perceive what is our purpose in the secular, technological world in which we now live. If we can read their stories, we will not fail to see that a simple faith and a strong relationship with God is what forged the past and prepared the fertile soil that the Sisters of yesterday have bequeathed to us. If, in particular, we listen to the stories that the Sisters of our regional histories have kept for us in memory, we will want to extend that simple, yet sacred, story further into the future. As we move toward reconfiguration, each Mercy congregation owes it to all others to try to do this. It is not too late for Mercy Sisters to use history as our way of fleshing out what has been and should be the essential way for Mercy to extend itself into the twenty-first century.



Notes

- 1 The first history of the Carmelite experience was written by Rev. Charles Currier. See Rev. Charles Warren Currier, *Carmel in America, A Centennial History of the Discalced Carmelites in the United States* (Darien, IL, 1989), passim. See also George C. Stewart, Jr., *Marvels of Charity: A History of American Sisters and Nuns*, (Huntington, IN, 1994), pp. 48–51.
- 2 Dolores Liptak, "Full of Grace: Another Look at the 19th-Century Nun" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 1996, p. 629.
- 3 Stewart, pp. 60–65.
- 4 Quoted in Stewart, *ibid.*, p. 73. See also, pp. 72–74.
- 5 Stewart, "Appendix B: Original American Foundations (Partial Listing), pp. 487–489.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 66–68.
- 7 Quoted in Catherine M. Mooney, R.S.C.J., *Philippine Duchesne*, (New York, 1990), p. 111.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- 9 Mary Ewens, "Women in the Convent," in Karen Kennelly, ed., *American Catholic Women* (New York, 1989), pp. 28–32.
- 10 Sister M. Patrick Joseph, San Antonio, August 1852, quoted in M. Christine Morkovsky, C.D.P., "The Challenge of Catholic Evangelization in Texas: Women Religious and their Response," *Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture*, Vol. 4, (1993), p. 88.
- 11 Liptak, p. 632ff.
- 12 For details and statistics of the nuns in the Civil War, see Mary Denis Maher, CSA, *To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War* (New York, 1989), pp. 69–71; 116–120.
- 13 Maher, pp. 116, 120, passim.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Judith Metz, SC "In Times of War" in Ursula Stepsis, CSA, and Dolores Liptak, R.S.M., *Pioneer Healers: The History of Women Religious in American Health Care*, (New York, 1989), p. 47.
- 17 Stewart, p. 218, fn 1.
- 18 Kathleen Healy, R.S.M., ed., *Sisters of Mercy: Spirituality in America 1843–1900* (New York, 1992), p. 20ff.
- 19 Sister Lucy Lyons, Deceased Files, *Archives of the Connecticut Region of the Sisters of Mercy*. Sister Lucy's obituary appeared in a 1903 issue of the *Connecticut Catholic*.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 This was a case that involved Fr. Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus. The story appeared in the July 29 and September 2, 1882 issue of the *Connecticut Catholic*. See Christopher J. Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus* (rev, New York, 1992), p. 28, n. 86.
- 22 Quoted in Eileen Mary Brewer, *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women*, (Chicago, 1987), p. 36.
- 23 Quoted in Liptak, "Full of Grace," p. 633. The quote came from the *International Heritage Research Group, Mother Theresa: Woman of Vision* (Baltimore, 1979), p. 49.

Why Read Theology?

William R. Scott, Ph.D.

I was delighted, but surprised to be asked to submit this article to *The MAST Journal*. I am, after all, both male and protestant. It's true that I believe that I am one of the journal's most faithful readers. For the last twelve years, I have read every single article at least three times. That's because I have been doing proofing and layout for the journal since 1993. While this task has opened a new world to me, I am very much aware that I can only guess at the needs, interests, and desires of women religious. That said, I've finally decided that the best I can do is to share my experiences with you in the hope that they may somehow prove useful.

I attended seminary in the 1980s. It was a consortium in Berkeley, California that was composed of nine separate seminaries. Three of them were Catholic: Dominican, Franciscan, and Jesuit. We could all take each other's classes, so it proved to be a marvelous opportunity for ecumenical development. In fact, the bulk of my master's level preparation

for training as an Old Testament scholar was at the hand of the Jesuits and Franciscans.

Kitchen Theology

While I loved the courses on Bible, I was not at all enamored with "theology." It seemed to me to be nothing more than nearly incomprehensible writings, mostly by dead Germans, that had little or nothing to do with real life. And so I continued for nearly two years of study. Then I was asked to read a book by Kosuke Koyama called *Waterbuffalo Theology* [1974, SCM Press] that changed my entire understanding of the field of theology and, in fact, of what I was doing with life itself. Years later, I had an opportunity to meet Koyama at a conference and was so overcome with gratitude that all I could do was gush like some rock star groupie as I tried to thank him for his work.

It wasn't so much the details of Koyama's theological perspectives that overwhelmed me as it was his general approach.

As he talked about "kitchen theology," the theology that develops as Thai women talk to each other in their kitchens [p. 83], I finally realized that "theology" was nothing more than talking and thinking about God. Seen from this perspective, it becomes obvious that anyone who is committed to a life of religious service cannot help but "do" theology. Whenever we are confronted with some common dilemma—"What should I do in this situation?"—we inevitably are faced with the necessity of thinking about what God would want us to do and that presumes and requires that we have some sort of image of God and of the God-human relationship. Reading theology, then, can be understood as just one part of that experience—an attempt to introduce into our conversations and reflections the insights of those who have specialized in thinking about issues and concepts that usually occupy our minds only in moments of need.

Exegesis of Scripture and Culture

A few pages later [p. 91], Koyama laid out an understanding that has since become pivotal in all my efforts to understand and teach Scripture. An exegete needs to do two kinds of

Anyone who is committed to a life of religious service cannot help but "do" theology.

exegesis. One must exegete both the Scripture and one's culture. At last I understood why all those dead Germans had left me cold. We had the same Bible, but not the same culture. Their efforts to fully understand Scripture made little sense to me because their minds were occupied with different concerns, problems, and worldviews than mine.

In short order, I began to read some books that were written by people who were dealing with issues affecting my country and my culture and I was amazed to discover that they not only were understandable, but they were helpful—even when I disagreed with them. I read liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, and even a work on blue collar theology. I couldn't get enough. I soon realized that theology isn't an academic discipline, it is the framework for one's approach to life.

Why Read Theology?

Reading theology, as a supplement to reflection and meditation, seems to me to have three major benefits.

The most obvious benefit is that it helps one lay a strong personal foundation of belief that can weather the storms that arise in times of crisis or when faced with the necessity of a new kind of decision. As a pastor, I've seen people abandon their faith when confronted by a tragedy for which their theology had not prepared them. "I've been good, I've done everything right. Why would God let this happen to me? There can't be a God or this wouldn't have happened." (Or a

variant: "I still believe in God, but I'm mad at God and am not going to worship anymore.")

A similar process often happens when one is unexpectedly confronted with the need to make a decision unlike any that that person has made before. Journeying through completely new ethical terrain, one can easily get lost without having a sound compass. In our modern world, in which change is so much more prevalent than at most other times in history, this sort of situation is not at all uncommon.

During the course of our years on earth, we change and the culture around us changes.

If Koyama is right, then our exegesis of our culture must change over time, and thus our understanding of Scripture will also change.

The best time to work through these sort of issues is before one is confronted by them. Time spent thinking about the truly basic questions—Who am I? Does God love me? Why do people suffer? Can wrong ever be right?—is most productive when one is in an environment of relative tranquillity. Crisis rarely brings immediate clarity. It is best for clarity to precede crisis. After the crisis is over, reflection may bring increased clarity, but during the confusion of the crisis itself, one must most likely rely on the foundations that have already been laid.

A second benefit of reading theology is that it can help with personal development. Most people regard spirituality as a

journey rather than an event. During the course of our years on earth, we change and the culture around us changes. If Koyama is right, then our exegesis of our culture must change over time, and thus our understanding of Scripture will also change. This means that most of us will find that understandings that once worked well for us are no longer as effective in dealing with life. It seems to me that much of the alienation and depression that one sees today is a result of the fact that so many

people just let life happen without doing routine maintenance on their spiritual foundations. After a while, the disjoint between one's spiritual worldview and the actual environment can become so great that one is overwhelmed and finds it difficult to cope with part or all of everyday life.

A third benefit of reading theology is that it helps us understand others. Naturally, we will be drawn to books that deal with the issues and questions that are central to our lives, our ministries, our situations. Just as naturally, we will most appreciate those books written by authors with whom we agree. However, I have found great benefit in also reading books written by

those on the other side of positions that I've adopted. It helps to see people who disagree with you, not just as adversaries, idiots, or evil minions, but as children of God who, like you, are doing their best to serve God, but with a different understanding. One does not have to agree with a view to recognize its integrity. Sadly, this sort of collegial disagreement is not much in vogue in current American society. Even on our campuses, it can only be seen in fleeting glimpses. There, almost as much as in politics and other discussions around corporate water coolers, we seem to be becoming ever more polarized and to feel that those who disagree with us are somehow our enemies. Constantly in my head there is a vision of times past when ladies and gentlemen regarded each

publishing: Larry Holben's *What Christians Think about Homosexuality* [1999, BIBAL Press]. Instead of arguing for a certain theological conclusion, as most theologians do, Larry laid out, as objectively as possible, the theological justifications of six different Christian views on homosexuality, which cover the spectrum from one end to the other. He also pointed out how each one has been criticized and how the proponents have responded to that criticism. Larry's goal was not to convince us to adopt one position or the other, but to get all of us to treat each other in love as God's children, regardless of the differences in our views. Holben is not a trained theologian, but I don't believe that a finer goal has ever been pursued in any theological work.

The benefit of analyzing one's own culture is that the effort can cast a spotlight on the questions and issues that will most likely impact your own life for the foreseeable future. Reflection and study of Scripture with these questions and issues in mind will help build theological foundations that can help us to weather the storms that we will inevitably encounter.

I see current American culture as being dominated by an emergence of what I call "wisdom theology." Going all the way back to ancient Egypt, this sort of theology has been popular from time to time and keeps popping up in slightly different forms; today it is called New Age. It is a theology that holds that we are all a part of God and that humans have within themselves the power to save themselves if only they know the right things. Wisdom has a place in Scripture (the Old Testament Writings), but in the Bible it is given limits (Ecclesiastes) and is balanced with discipline (the Pentateuch) and with openness to the spirit (the Prophets). It seems to me that one can see a historical correlation between periods in which great numbers of people adopt Wisdom exclusively and a noticeable increase in division and alienation. Wisdom theology focuses one's mind on self rather than on community—what is right for me is right. This can lead to increasing fractionalization and hostility. A prevalence of Wisdom theology is also often accompanied by a natural reaction to it—fundamentalism, which is the complete rejection of the value of

**The benefit of analyzing one's own culture
is that the effort can cast a spotlight
on the questions and issues that will most
likely impact your own life for the
foreseeable future.**

other as friends and colleagues, even when their most basic beliefs were in conflict. I don't know if there ever was a reality that coincides with this vision, but I do know that such a reality would be far better than the one I see with my eyes open and I firmly believe that it is just such a reality that Jesus wants for us.

One of the best examples of this approach to reading theology resulted in a remarkable book that I had the privilege of

Exegesis of My Culture

Each of us lives in a different world because, while culture influences us, we also influence our culture and shape our immediate environment to a much greater extent than most people realize. For this reason, my description of my culture might not appear valid to you, but I hope that understanding the process that I've gone through might help others to conduct their own journeys.

human wisdom. With science developing at an astonishing rate, we are thus confronted with two antithetical and hostile approaches to dealing with new realities.

Having arrived at this understanding of my culture, I have then refocused much of my thinking. I am now more interested in issues being addressed by ecumenical theology because I see the increasing importance of people being able to get along with each other. I am also interested in issues of bio-ethics such as cloning, stem cell research, assisted suicide, extraordinary life support, and abortion because it is obvious not only that these are divisive questions, but it is nearly inevitable that most of us will have to confront one or more of these issues in our own lives. In addition, I have been absorbed by the concept of just war, primarily because my career in the military forced me to think about such things. Finally, I am still interested in some of the approaches to theology that were popular in my seminary days, liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology. But my approach, which was once focused on redressing old wrongs, is now more focused on questions involving how we can find common ground and how we can build community.

What Books Should You Read?

Initially, I had planned to include a list of "good" books that you might want to read. But reflection led me to abandon the pursuit. Aside from the fact that

it seems blatantly imperious (why would my judgment be better than yours?), it ignores the basic reality that we are different and what is good for me may not be helpful for you. I then decided to put forth a list of internet web pages that have useful lists and summaries of theological works. Again, I abandoned the pursuit. You can google as well as I, and these web sites keep changing anyway. Just enter the word "theology" in your internet search engine and you will be confronted with a plethora of resources. Restrict your search by adding key words, such as "ecumenical theology" and you'll be led right to

that address issues that are prominent in your ministry and are written by those in the Catholic tradition. Second, I'd recommend a few similar books that address other issues and/or are written by authors from different traditions. I also really think that you'll benefit from reading an occasional book with which you disagree. Finally, I'd recommend a very limited number of traditional "systematic theology" works (yes, I even get something out of the dead Germans now). These books are usually not exactly light reading, and I almost never try to read one from cover to cover, but instead read first the sections that

It is when you gather for a comfortable cup of tea that you will be doing real theology.

pages dealing with your own specific interests. (If you don't have access to the internet or don't know how to use a computer to search it, please rectify that situation as soon as possible. It's now almost a necessity—like knowing how to use a telephone). One caution: read with a jaundiced eye and look for pages created by reputable academic and religious institutions. There are a lot of kooks on the internet.

What I do want to do is to suggest the kinds of books that you might want to consider reading rather than the specific books.

First of all, I'd suggest that the bulk of your theology reading should be practical books

are of current interest to me. They are useful in that they enforce a certain rigor in one's thinking and they often pose questions that I've never considered before and that lead me to new areas of interest.

That's about it. Your own natural interests, needs, and curiosity will take over and direct you to the most fruitful works as long as you actively try to supplement your conversations and reflection with written theology. However, I hope that you do not limit "theology" to reading. As in the Thai kitchens, it is when you gather for a comfortable cup of tea that you will be doing real theology.



HIV/Aids and Our Journey in Faith

All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister Enugu, Nigeria, February 9, 2005

Margaret Farley, R.S.M.

I am honored to have been invited by the Coordinating Committee to reflect with you on questions regarding our faith and our understandings of the AIDS pandemic. The voices that need to be heard on these questions are not so much mine as yours. It is true that we share a common faith, and we belong to a world church. Yet the Christian gospel is heard by you here, where you live and work; and it must be spoken by you to the whole church in the light of *your* understanding, in the light of *your* experience. Where, in the experience of this infection and disease in your countries and cultures, is God to be found? What light do the Christian gospels shed on *this* experience? Whatever I say, therefore, must be tested by your own reflections, questions, and insights. And as we reflect together here, it is my hope that your own wisdom will be voiced in ways that are more powerful than anything I can say.

All major world religions, at least in part, have had something to say in response to the large questions of people's lives—questions of God, of human destiny, and of how to make sense of human suffering. If religious traditions have anything at all to say to situations like the AIDS pandemic, they must speak about God (or whatever is divine and ultimate for them) and about human responsibilities to one another in relation to God. They must speak about hope and the reasons for hope, even when lives are disrupted and ordinary hopes are challenged in every way. We who are gathered here believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. We all have sisters and brothers who are threatened with grave illness, or who are already sick unto death. How shall we remember what God has promised to us in the face of such suffering? How shall we understand what God asks of us in the face of so great a challenge?

On this morning, let me only begin to respond to these questions by looking for clues in two particular biblical texts, two stories that you know very well. The first appears in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, and the second is told in the gospel of John. The first focuses on a question that Jesus asks of his disciples: "Can you drink the cup that I will drink?" The second has at its center Jesus' words to women mourners who accompany him on the way to Calvary: "Weep not for me but for yourselves and for your children."

Mark 10:35–40: "Can You Drink the Cup?"¹

We all know this story, told in the gospel of Mark (as well as Matthew). James and John come forward out of the group of disciples and ask Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. Jesus says, "What is it you want me to do for you?" They say that they want to sit at his right hand and his left when he comes into glory. Jesus tells them that they do not understand what they are asking. So instead of answering their question directly, he asks them another question: "Can you drink the cup that I will drink?" And they answer: "We can." We know the irony of their quick

If religious traditions have
anything at all to say to
situations like the AIDS
pandemic, they must speak
about God and about human
responsibilities to one another in
relation to God.

and easy response—for they did not yet “get the point” of Jesus’ question to them; nor would they understand it until the final terrible day of Jesus’ life. In retrospect, we know the mistake made by James and John, yet we may have difficulties of our own in understanding what Jesus meant. The “cup” we know to be a symbol of the cross, which in turn symbolizes for us the suffering that Jesus was to undergo. But what does it mean for any of us to drink this cup, or to be called to the cross? And what are its implications for us in a time of AIDS?

We, too, like James and John, can make mistakes in our interpretation of Jesus’ question. We can think that Jesus is telling us that it is good for us to suffer, that it holds for us something of intrinsic merit; or that suffering is the test of our love for God; or that suffering may be a kind of atonement for our or others’ sins. We can think that we are to be passive in the face of suffering, that we are simply to accept it, bear it, endure it, expecting relief and happiness only in another world. Others have interpreted the question in these ways. And critics of Christianity have long charged that Christians are preoccupied with suffering and death, a preoccupation that prevents us from resisting oppression and other forms of injustice. Opponents of Christianity have claimed that it is a religion for victims, and it can provide a spirituality only for weaklings. Christianity, in this view, seduces its followers and makes them passive, docile, resigned to all forms of suffering, even exploitation, oppression, stigma.

When we think of suffering that is like the pain and fear and death at the heart of the AIDS pandemic, however, we cannot believe that its meaning for us and our people is simply a test, or least of all a punishment, or something to be accepted passively as perhaps good for us. What AIDS brings to us is so profound a suffering that it would be blasphemy to think that the God of Jesus Christ would impose it on us or anyone for such reasons. This disease and its rampage over lands and peoples fits within our perception of what are truly major forms of human suffering—what some have called “tales of terror” and “whirlpools of torment,”² where bodies are destroyed, minds ravaged, and spirits broken; sufferings that go on in human history, sometimes generation after generation—a “voice heard in Rama weeping,” peoples subjugated by peoples, families rent asunder, stories of rape and starvation, aban-

donment, confusion, violence, and relentless dying. This is the sort of suffering that some have named “affliction” (distinguishing it from suffering in an ordinary sense).³ It is suffering that is both physical and spiritual—never only physical and never only spiritual. Affliction when it is of the soul always afflicts, leaves wounds in the body; and when it is bodily, if it goes on long enough, it affects the spirit.

This is the kind of suffering that has the power to uproot life, that almost always includes some form of humiliation, that has the potential to pull to inertia and despair. In its ultimate forms, this kind of suffering perhaps always includes finally an element of an experience of the absence of God—an experience of the God-forsakenness that overwhelmed Job or that made Jesus finally cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” AIDS, or even HIV infection, can in some persons’ lives be this kind of suffering.

Opponents of Christianity have claimed that it is a religion for victims, and it can provide a spirituality only for weaklings.

Given human experience of such suffering, what does “Can you drink the cup” mean? Surely it means “Can you enter into life even unto affliction, even to the point of death?” But it means more than this. For what Jesus tried to reveal to his first disciples, and through them to us, was not only that they must be willing to suffer, to endure a suffering that might be like his own; but rather: “Can you drink the cup *that I will drink*?” The cup to be shared was and is the cup of Jesus Christ. But what do we know now about this cup? We know, first, that it is the *cup of the suffering of all persons*. If we are to drink this cup, we are to partake in the sufferings of everyone else. And to stand with or among those who suffer, we must have some understanding of the possibilities of sufferings that are theirs—sufferings that attack the body and the spirit, that in themselves may lead to destruction and despair.

We know more about this cup. We know that the cup signifies all human suffering—suffering

in the forms of sickness and tragic accident, human limitation, natural disasters of drought and flood, earthquakes and storms, catastrophes great and small. Yet something in particular characterizes some of the sufferings pointed to by the symbol. Given the context and nature of the final sufferings of Jesus, we cannot fail to see that it is suffering that is the *consequence of injustice* that is somehow central in the cup. This is suffering that *does not have to be*, suffering that results from exploitation and poverty, violence, and abuse, human indifference and false judgment, cruelty and abandonment. Here is the suffering that cries out for an end not in death but in *change*.

The meaning of the cup and the cross is that the relationship between God and humans was healed forever in and through Jesus Christ.

We know even more than this about the cup. Those who think that Christianity is a religion obsessed with love of death and pain are wrong to think that the meaning of the cup or the cross is finally suffering and death. The meaning, rather, is that a relationship holds. The cup that Jesus drinks is first of all a cup of love, a cup of covenant that seals the promise of a God who drinks, too, of human suffering, in order finally to transform it. This cup signifies the relationship between God and Jesus Christ; and—in Jesus—the relationship between God and all human persons; and finally the relationships among human persons, held in the embrace of God. There *is* a love stronger than death, a love that is willing to withstand whatever the forces of evil may do against it, and that holds every suffering in its embrace until it is all transformed into a fountain of life. Here, in the cross and the cup, is a love that is a crucified love, a love that does not turn away from swords of sorrow, that holds unconditionally no matter what the cost. The meaning of the cup and the cross is that the relationship between God and humans was healed

forever in and through Jesus Christ. A relationship holds, and now all relationships can hold.

The meaning of Jesus' question to James and John and to all of us, then, is a call to love and to bear all things for love. It is not a call to passivity in the face of suffering. Like Jesus, we may ultimately experience a suffering and surely a death to which we must finally surrender. But like Jesus, we must resist suffering and pain as long as we can, remedy it in others as far as we are able, oppose the forces of injustice until we can do no more. We must not surrender prematurely, before it is time. And when we reach the point of our own surrender, it need not be to the disease, not even to the dying in itself, but to the embrace of God. Our final dying can be our entry into eternal communion. This is what we believe.

Luke 23:27–31: “Weep Not for Me But for Yourselves and Your Children.”

I come now to the second text that may hold clues for us regarding what we believe and how it shapes our understanding of our journey into the AIDS pandemic. This, too, is a story we all know well. There were women, daughters of Jerusalem it is said, who came to the execution of Jesus. These were not the same women from Galilee with whom we are more familiar. They may have been simply part of the crowd; they may have been professional mourners; they may have been women who listened to Jesus in better times. In any case, they wept. They raised a wail of death for Jesus. And Jesus turned to them and raised a death-wail for Jerusalem, for the women and their children. Behind the words of the gospel lies a living bond between the suffering of Jesus and today. We understand this Passion only when we see it stretch to the lives of others, the suffering, the passion, of persons through the centuries to today. The text that points most explicitly to this bond may be this one: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but for yourselves and your children.”

Why would Jesus point at such a moment to the suffering of the future? I think he did so only because he truly grieved for these women and their children. In the midst of his suffering, attention was paid to them. More than this, within it and under it, lies the deeper mystery: As we have already seen in the symbols of the cup and the cross, the

suffering of Jesus Christ is one with the suffering of the generations to follow. Here is the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Jesus is mysteriously identified with human persons across time and space; his life is in us all. We have here a new reality by reason of his holding us in relation to God while remaining one with us in our continued suffering. To the extent that we understand our own solidarity with one another, and the implications for this of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, to that extent can we hear Jesus' words to us. And we hear them not finally as "Do not weep for me," but "*Weep for me*—in the person of your sisters and brothers." "Weep for yourselves and your children," and in so doing you weep for me as I weep for you.

But something must be said about weeping. Persons wise about the spiritual life have often told us of different kinds of tears. In relation to suffering, there are at least two sorts of tears. There are, first, tears of desolation, which, when they have all been shed, leave the well dry. These are tears of sorrow that empty the heart of its strength and prevent real love. But there are also, secondly, tears that water our hearts and give us strength and peace in real union with Jesus Christ and with one another. These are tears that do not turn us in upon ourselves, but open us to relation.

We begin to see, then, that the meaning of this text moves in a number of directions. It may touch and help to change our futures in a number of different ways. One of these we may see if we ask the question: Why has this text been a source of consolation to so many women? Consolation has come not just because attention has been paid to our pain and tragedy from the midst of Jesus' own suffering; nor even because forever the connection is made between the Passion of Jesus Christ and our own. The text is a source of consolation because it holds within it, like the cup and the cross, a call to action. To live the connection between the Passion and today is to mourn not with tears that leave us empty and alone, but with tears that move us to struggle against suffering and death, even to the point of laying down our own lives. It is to mourn with tears that water us down to the sea of action, even if the price is sharing one another's suffering even unto death.

In the context of the AIDS pandemic, we know that we are called to compassion for our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, children and

grandchildren, members of our communities and churches. We also know that genuine compassion is not just an emotion, not just a concern, not just felt sympathy. True compassion requires action that is fitting and possible. This is why Christians, as well as others in many communities, families, villages, countries, parishes, have been caring for the dying and for the living. It is why they have begun to work at prevention and advocacy for the needs of the people. At the individual, local, regional, national, and international levels, we know of dramatic examples of new projects and longstanding ministries. Yet our presence here indicates that we also know that both here and across the world more is required.

**To live the connection between
the Passion and today is to
mourn not with tears that leave
us empty and alone, but with
tears that move us to struggle
against suffering and death,
even to the point of laying down
our own lives.**

Our tears have moved us, then, to ask what is directly required of religious traditions and faith communities as interpreters of the AIDS pandemic and as transformers of some of its causes. Care is needed in ways that religious traditions can give and in ways that they cannot by themselves provide. As members of the human community, the whole world is responsible to advocate and act to stop the pandemic and to care for those caught in it for now. As members of a world church, the whole church is required to share in the tears and in the actions of the church in Africa. As members of women's religious communities, from all over the world we are called to stand together in solidarity with one another and with all of our peoples, weeping and acting in the face of so much loss and suffering.

We live in a time of growing awareness, too, of the tragic consequences of oppression, poverty, injustice. We have come to understand that the death of Jesus Christ constitutes an ultimate challenge to

an order of things in which persons are exploited, subjected or enslaved, or where their basic needs are ignored. However we understand the laying down of Jesus' life, we know that it was in opposition to forces of evil, to systems and values that lead to the kind of suffering that does not have to be. If there ever was a time to question the misunderstandings, the patterns of relationship, the structures, the taboos, that contribute to the spread of AIDS, it is now. If there ever was a time to protect those who are falsely blamed for the spread of AIDS, it is now. The women of Jerusalem, of Africa, of the world, know—if their tears are fruitful—what is needed for themselves and their children.

Being alive (in spirit as well as body) requires an experience of past and present moving into a future. When we experience our lives as futureless (closed, stifled, stopped), we find them intolerable.

But this text moves in yet another direction. For we may ask, why should we not weep, but weep finally, in despair? Perhaps Jesus' words to the women of Jerusalem were finally words of despair for them. There is, after all, a story similar to this in the Book of Wisdom, to which the women and men respond: For all of our efforts to grasp life, let us invite death, consider death a friend, because "brief and troublous is our lifetime, and there is no remedy for dying." (Wisdom 1:16 - 2:1) Are there not finally tears of utter helplessness? Does not the well of life within us indeed threaten finally to run dry, so that our resources (and those of all the world, for that matter) exhaust themselves? We for whom an experience of a future is essential, for whom hope is for the soul what breathing is for the body—must we not finally weep in despair before so great a suffering as the AIDS pandemic? If this text is going to help us; if it is a clue to how we can sustain our faith journeys; then it must point to something more in what Christians believe.

We believe that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been offered an unlimited future. We also believe that this future contains the possibility, for ourselves and generations to come, not only of life in another world but in this one. We believe that our unlimited future in another world will incorporate this present world transformed. Why is this important to us now? Because human persons are the kind of beings who cannot live without a sense of a future. Our lives are not lived out all at once. They are stretched out in time. Being alive (in spirit as well as body) requires an experience of past and present moving into a future. When we experience our lives as futureless (closed, stifled, stopped), we find them intolerable. This is why without hope we cannot in our spirits breathe. Creation in us groans—not just in travail of evil and pain, but in yearning for fullness of life. We need hope, then, because of who and what we are. We need hope lest we turn away from life and love itself.

In so far as our present is marked by suffering—whether our own or that of those we love—hope takes the form of believing that things will change, that there is a future, near or far, when something of the suffering will change. It also takes the form of believing that, whether we see it or not, our actions to alleviate or prevent suffering make a difference—in this world and in the next. "Theological hope" is hope in God for us. It requires belief that God does not play games with us. Whatever the situation looks like; however devastating and relentless the forces of sickness and death and poverty and exploitation and false blame or shame; we are still called to solidarity with those who suffer the most, to some kind of action (including prayer), and to "hope against hope."

On what can we base such hope? On our belief in the God of Jesus Christ, self-revealed to us as compassionate and just, as promising a future. If we believed God to be a tyrant who wants only our suffering, then we might want to negotiate with such a god; we would not desire to love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength. But the God of our love, revealed in Jesus Christ, is the God who calls us to be no longer servants but friends; the God who comes not to judge us but to save us; the God who has made possible for us an unlimited future; the God who promises a future not only in another

world but in this world transformed. This God is the basis of our hope. With such hope we can sustain our journey—working with God to heal creation, bringing about justice and peace, and accompanying one another in sorrow and in joy.

Yes, we may even think of joy—of present and future joy, despite our walking through a valley of tears. We believe that such joy is not an afterthought on the part of God; that though it seems like a radical break with our lives of mourning, it is nonetheless continuous somehow with the surge of life that our tears also hold. We have faith in this and we have inklings of it in our own “resurrection” experiences even now. If we take such experiences seriously, then we can hear the words of hope whispered and sung to those who wail through the centuries—to Rachel, weeping for her children, but hearing finally the word, “There is hope for your descendants.” We can understand the action of Jesus Christ choosing freely to be with us and to lay down his life for us. We can believe, therefore, that no one need suffer alone. We can do all of this because we are allowed to see the light of God’s mercy in the shadow of death. We can glimpse the fullness of light that the resurrection of Jesus sheds on the bitter pain of his preceding Passion.

So Jesus calls us to weep—for him, but in him for all of us; to blend our lives by our tears; to live our tears in our action; to wash one another’s feet with our tears; to believe in the joy that will one day forever wipe away all tears, console all sorrow, and that can even now give us strength to continue our journey.

There is much more that we could ponder together here today, much more of our faith that we need to share with each other. Let me end, however, with two concluding observations.

(1) *Everything* that we believe is relevant to our experience of the AIDS pandemic: what we believe about God, the life within the Trinity, creation, incarnation, redemption, church, human solidarity, and final communion. But the secret of *connecting* these deep truths with the AIDS crisis is contained in the mystery of the cup and the cross, and it is revealed to us in our own tears. Now it comes together: the God who creates us is the God who works with us to mend creation; the God who saves us is the God who is beside us in our suffering; the God who holds us in relation to God’s own self is the

The secret of *connecting* these deep truths with the AIDS crisis is contained in the mystery of the cup and the cross, and it is revealed to us in our own tears.

God who will hold us in relation to one another. “As I have loved you, so you are to love one another.”

(2) We are called to be merciful as God is merciful, and therefore we are called to action. In the context of AIDS, we know some of the actions we can perform, some of the ways to prevent and to remedy the kind of suffering that does not have to be. But every day we may see new calls to action, new ways to think about the many aspects of this pandemic. It is one thing to be ready to lay down our lives for our people; it is another to risk our ways of thinking, our reputations, our standard patterns of relating. Yet always the cup and the cross remind us that we may have to stand with the outcast, be humiliated with those who are shamed, change laws and practices (whether of church or traditional culture) if they lead to death, learn to forgive seven times seventy times, and stay with one another in life and in death, bearing witness to our belief in a God who does not abandon us. “Can you drink the cup that I will drink?” If so, we may ask for what Catherine of Siena called the tears of fire, whereby the Spirit of God weeps in us, and the fire of love and the waters of life are one.



Notes

- 1 The story also appears in Matthew 20:20–28, though here it is the mother of James and John who initiates the question.
- 2 See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and James Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
- 3 See Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crauford (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 117–25.

The Heart of the Matter

Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M.

A few weeks ago, I received a phone message from a Sudanese refugee facing imminent surgery. Daniel is a thoughtful young man in his twenties, one of the group known as the Lost Boys of Sudan who languished twelve long years in African refugee camps prior to coming to the U.S. During 2001, my Catholic Charities coworkers and I resettled him in San Jose (along with more than fifty of his peers). Daniel and I have since become friends. His voice on my answering machine sounded tense with worry: "Please, Sister, call me." When I phoned him back, we exchanged pleasantries for some time, as is the custom in Sudanese culture, and then I asked him why he had contacted me.

"I will be going to hospital tomorrow."

"Yes," I responded. I knew that he would be having an appendectomy. I asked if he were worried about the operation, which would be his first in an American hospital.

"No, that's not the problem."

"Hmmm," I said. "Something else is bothering you?"

"Well, yes," he answered and then added, with the solemnity of a bailiff parsing out a death sentence, "The doctors told me that when I come in tomorrow, they will ask me to sign

on a paper *whether I want to donate my heart to them.*"

He paused again, swallowed hard, and then blurted out, "Sister, why would I want to donate my heart to a stranger?"

As you can well imagine, Daniel was immensely relieved when I explained the voluntary nature of organ donation, and I am happy to report that he underwent a successful operation the next morning with no complications. But the question he so earnestly posed still percolates in my mind. In fact, it seems to me a profoundly theological question, hinting at the crazy value-reversals revealed in the gospel as essential to "having life and having it to the full"¹ and pointing also to the core of our Mercy charism. Why, indeed, would I want to donate my heart to a stranger?

Changing Expressions of Spirituality

No such thing was on my mind when I first joined the convent. At the time, my eyes were fixed on one thing only: giving my life wholly to God. Entering the convent seemed a fine way to do that, and if it also provided the chance for me to become a teacher, well, that would round out my life nicely, thank you very much. Never did it occur to me

that other people might be involved in this adventure. Ridiculously naïve? Yes, but also symptomatic of the spirituality that was, at least until the 1960s, typical of suburban U.S. Catholicism. Religion was mostly about me-and-God; or, on my better days, God-and-me.

Though I am not a trained theologian, I can see in retrospect the intense individualism of this theology that permeated my upbringing. It emphasized private prayer, even during liturgy; it was grounded in the conviction that the immanent God dwells within each person and desires whole-hearted, free response. It took shape in incense and adoration and longing for union. It found expression in self-surrender and commitment to the living God. To a Catholic of that era, *communion* referred to a consecrated host, not to fellowship with the human family. I was very much at home in this private theology—quite unaware that, although God is always personal, God is never private.²

And so I entered religious life. There I discovered, much to my chagrin, that it involved *community*. Not only were other people present, many of them were also just as flawed as I, just as complex and challenging to live with. It seemed that I would not be allowed, after all, to give my undi-

vided attention to Yahweh Sabaoth. The post-Vatican II church was now morphing into the people of God, with all the pain and promise of the human condition. The convent, no longer a haven where silence reigned, became a place for relating more or less continuously with unrelated adults about all the details of common living and shared mission. God remained my refuge, and prayer the sanctuary to which I retreated to gain strength for these other encounters.

I understood ministry to be the place where I could make concrete my love for God by serving others, so I threw myself into high school teaching. I did it gladly, and had a lot of fun. But it was basically a *God-and-me-serving-a-few-others* theology: I'd been given gifts, and was responsible to share them. Much is expected of those to whom much has been given.³ Like Jesus, I was "going about doing good"⁴ and felt that God would surely be pleased. The motto I chose to be inscribed in my ring at the time of perpetual profession, *mecum* (God is *with me*), summed up that theology and energized me for ministry. Still, it was obvious that I remained apart from those I served. I was the giver; they were the recipients.

Scriptural Insights

Cracks soon began to appear in that unwitting hierarchy, particularly as I delved into the Scriptures and caught glimpses of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the prophets, the God of Jesus. This God did not fit into the comfortable

companionship that described my way of being with the-God-who-was-always-with-me. This God preferred sinners, outcasts, and strangers.⁵ This God searched unwearingly for those who were lost.⁶ This God expressed outrage at mistreatment of the poor.⁷ This God noticed when merchants tipped their scales to cheat,⁸ and turned away when donors trumpeted their own virtues at the city gate.⁹ Indeed, this God castigated religious people for their show of good deeds.¹⁰ This God didn't

I was being converted from my do-it-yourself striving for perfection . . . Listening mattered as much teaching. I was not bringing God to these people; I was meeting God in them.

use power or omnipotence or flashy displays of divinity.¹¹ This God steadfastly valued compassion over perfection.¹² This God spent more time *being with* than *doing for*.¹³ And this God inexplicably identified with the least, the lowest, the expendable ones, the folks on the edges of proper society.¹⁴ It was all a bit disconcerting to my middle-class mind. But if God was opting for the poor, then that was where I wanted to be, too.

So I asked to be missioned to an inner-city high school where I could live and work with the poor. There, amid the messiness of broken families and overcrowded apartments, with police sirens at night and gang-scrawled graffiti

by day, my spirituality began to shift. God was in the messiness, not beyond it. Slowly, slowly, I was being converted from my do-it-yourself striving for perfection. It became just as important to spend time with a neighborhood mom while she baked tortillas or to play soccer with her children on the street as it was to explain quadratic equations or to attend faculty meetings. Listening mattered as much teaching. I was not bringing God to these people; I was meeting God in them.

Contact with Asian Refugees

A few years later I found myself back at our Motherhouse in Burlingame—far from the inner city—just at the time that the influx of Southeast Asian refugees began. All of these refugees transited through the San Francisco Airport, quite near to the Motherhouse. Though I had been transferred away from the poor, God brought the poor to my doorstep! In my spare time I became a volunteer. One Hmong family from Laos with five small children ended up living with us at the Motherhouse for several months while their father was ill, endearing themselves to all of us. After they

moved on to their sponsor in the Midwest, I had a dream.

In the dream I was standing in a large schoolyard. My arms were full of books. The bell for class was ringing. Suddenly, at the far side of the yard, I spied Nhia Bee's five children. They saw me and came running. I dropped my books and scooped up six-year old Chai into a bear hug. I was deliriously happy to see them. They all crowded around me and I squatted down to greet each of them. I had not seen them since they'd flown off to Illinois.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Impishly, Chai grinned back, "We're here to teach you a new way of loving."

With those words I awakened, utterly convinced that this was an invitation from God to involve myself fulltime with refugees. I felt a tremendous surge of happiness and buoyancy. Shortly thereafter I moved to Thailand to spend a year in a Laotian refugee camp. That is where I learned that the name *Chai* means *heart*.

And that is where I began to learn a new way of loving. In the unlikeliest of places. Among non-Christians. Losers, every one of them. People without status or importance. There, in a remote corner of the earth, border-

ing a war zone, I immersed myself in the lives of refugees.

Experience Shapes Theology

Our human experiences shape the questions we ask. And the questions we ask become the grist for the theologies we (consciously or unconsciously) develop. Whether we know it or not, we are all informal theologians, persons forever trying to make sense of our lives in relation to God. Indeed, we are *all* contextual theologians, because as the Caribbean proverb says, *we see from where we stand*. Those among us who suffer infirmity or struggle against oppression, or who work with the dying or stand with refugees or shelter the homeless—we know in our bones that all of these experiences stretch and inform our growing awareness of God. We yearn to know what matters to God, and how to align our lives with God's own ways.

In my own living and working with refugees, I have experienced a God who sits with the abandoned, who weeps with the sorrowing, who encourages those on the verge of losing all hope. I know the God who walks, no, *limps* with the poor. I have met this God in refugees who share their rationed water with

passersby. I have heard God in the songs they sing into the night. I have stood beside God at graveside vigils for those who died of scorpion bite or malaria. I have seen God in the eyes of child soldiers convinced that their deeds are unforgivable.

This God would not be recognized by theologians looking for an All-Powerful Being or an Unmoved Mover. This God lives in hiddenness and seeks the lowest place. This God knows helplessness and sorrow and collects the tears of those who grieve.¹⁵ This God is all too familiar with neglect and confinement and failure. This God returns only love. This God stands solidly against injustice, yet refuses all forms of violence. This God does not kill. This God's face is mercy.

Meeting God Face to Face

People sometimes ask me how I can continue to work with refugees, year after year, and not grow discouraged or heavily burdened. The question always takes me by surprise. How could meeting God face to face nearly every day be disheartening? Am I not the luckiest person in the world? Where else could I hope to find such blessing? And the truth is that in the very thick of it all—in the songs that rise from dry, dusty refugee camps, in the hearts of those who've survived torture, in the forging of new friendships, in the small miracles of life that stare down death—there lives, in Gerald Manley Hopkins' lovely phrase, "the dearest freshness, deep down things."¹⁶ There lives the God of our hearts. And despite

Our human experiences shape the questions we ask. And the questions we ask become the grist for the theologies we (consciously or unconsciously) develop.

the violence and poverty, the losses and the suffering and the insurmountable problems, God is ever present, like a tiny wake flame that can never be quenched.

This same God, of course, also sets the heavens spinning—dances inside van Gogh's brush; delights in the music of Taizé, the poetry of Rumi, and the laughter of children; takes names like Wonderful, Counselor, Friend and Beloved, The One who is always there;¹⁷ shelters with inexplicable tenderness all who come near;¹⁸ is endlessly inventive in wooing back those who stray.¹⁹ But once this God has our attention, this God brooks no excuses for lukewarmness or delay²⁰ and will not long tolerate any competing commitments or clutter in our lives. This God desires our hearts, yes, with a fierce desire, but first wants them connected "with leading strings of love"²¹ to the whole human family and all of creation.

Any theology ("God-talk") worthy of the name must reveal, not doctrines about God, but rather, in the words of the poet Rilke, "why there is so much love in us." It must be able to sit with suffering without offering answers, to comfort those who find life unbearable, to open doors to aliens needing welcome. Like my friend Daniel, we can all consider the question, *Why would I give my heart to a stranger?* There is only one possible reason: because God does. Because in the giving, God draws close to us. Because in that nearness we are transformed and drawn forth from our own self-preoccupations to be with the widow, the

orphan, the alien. Those who have met God find that their circle of concern widens. Theresa of Avila knew this; she wrote that those who reach the innermost chambers [of the Interior Castle] soon find themselves out on the street again. "The truest impulse toward work for social justice," writes Belden Lane in his remarkable book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, "grows not out of an anxious sense of pity for others or a grandly noble desire to serve, but out of the abandonment of the self in God."²²

Amazement and Transformation

Dorothee Soelle describes every spiritual journey as a lifelong movement from amazement, to letting go, to resistance.²³ First, there is always amazement: being "surprised by joy," captivated by beauty and goodness and grace and love, whether in the fragrance of a summer blossom or the attraction of the unseen God. Then there are times of failure, loss and darkness and wrestling with unbelief; dyings, great and small, to encounter the fierceness of love that is beyond knowing. Finally, gentleness emerges in our hearts—an expansive compassion for *all* that exists. Even so, it must stand prophetically against whatever is not loving and resist all that is not yet aligned with justice and mercy, no matter how impossible be the odds.

Through such transformations, God leads all of us, saints and sinners alike. As persons of Mercy, we have the privilege not only of witnessing to the marvel-

ous tenderness of God in facing our human frailty, but also of welcoming God in "distressing disguise."²⁴ Our vowed commitment and varied ministries are, quite simply, the ways we donate our hearts to strangers—and in the encounter find that God has already run ahead to welcome us there.



Notes

- 1 John 10:10.
- 2 Jim Wallis, "Hearts & Minds," *Sojourners* (Feb., 2004).
- 3 Luke 12:48
- 4 Acts 10:38
- 5 Cf. Luke 14:12–14; Matt 9:10; Matt 25:31–41; and many other passages.
- 6 Ezek 34:11–16; Matt 18:10–14; John 10.
- 7 Deut 24:14–15, 17–18; Jer 7:5–7; Amos 2:6–7; etc.
- 8 Deut 25:13–16
- 9 Matt 6:2
- 10 Matt 23; Luke 11:37ff.
- 11 Luke 4:1–13.
- 12 Matt 9:13 and 12:7.
- 13 Luke 10:38–42.
- 14 Matt 25, 31–41.
- 15 Ps 56:9.
- 16 From "God's Grandeur," *Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, 1918, edited by Robert Bridges.
- 17 Isa 9:5; Isa 5:1; Song 5:16; Exod 3:13–14.
- 18 Ps 71:1–3; Matt 23:37.
- 19 Hos 2:8–9; Ezek 34:11–16; Mic 7:18–19. Zeph 3:17–18.
- 20 Luke 14:18–24; Rev 3:16.
- 21 Hos 11:4.
- 22 *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 76.
- 23 *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 88ff.
- 24 Mother Teresa of Calcutta's description of God hidden in the poor.

Jesus Heals

A Model for Re-Imaging Religious Life

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.

An Ecuadorian Experience

Last summer, two Chicago Mercies and I traveled to Ecuador. We visited one of the most prestigious schools in Quayaquil, Nuevo Mundo, a clinic and leprosarium, Damian House. Our time with the lepers was both an educational and spiritual experience.

Leprosy is a disease of the nervous system that causes a person to lose sense of touch and pain. Lepers often lose their fingers, toes, and feet. In more advanced cases, their faces become distorted and they may lose their sight.¹ I witnessed all of these characteristics in the residents of Damian House.

In 1991, the World Assembly met to discuss the growing crisis of leprosy in China, India, and Ecuador. They resolved to eliminate leprosy by 2000. Leprosy decreased in China and India, but increased in Ecuador. The government reports sixty new cases each year.²

Each leper has to face the debilitating disease and the possibility of family and social isolation. Damian House was established to respond to the growing needs of the lepers (1994). The health center provides medication, physical therapy, meals, and a place to live for the homeless.³

Leprosy is a disease of the nervous system that causes a person to lose sense of touch and pain. Lepers often lose their fingers, toes, and feet. In more advanced cases, their faces become distorted and they may lose their sight.

In talking with the staff, I learned that leprosy was not contagious as long as the person continued to take his/her medication.⁴ However, I must admit I was initially a little hesitant about touching a leper. My reaction evoked within me the image of Jesus' healing of a leper in Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:40-45). Upon returning home, I reread Mark's story and gleaned some new insights. In this essay, I will share my insights and suggest a way this pericope might serve as a model for re-imaging religious life.

Jesus Heals A Leper: Mark 1:40-45

The Greco-Roman Culture

Christianity developed within the cultural context of the Greco-Roman world. The Mediterranean world was plagued with infirmities, which made the people unproductive. Consequently, healing was a major focus for state and religious leaders.⁵

In the first century, any disease that affected the skin and exposed raw flesh was defined as leprosy. The disease was considered to be one of the most repulsive and dangerous afflictions.⁶ The people believed leprosy was contagious. Herodotus validated this assumption. He said lepers were not allowed to enter towns or villages,⁷ and the Hebrew Scriptures denied their participation in temple worship. The disease destroyed all that made one human.

Leprosy could be found throughout the Roman Empire, but especially in rural Galilee.⁸ The Romans permitted lepers to seek healing from the hot spring of Hammat-Gader near the Sea of Galilee.⁹ On the site, the Romans built a bathhouse. Pagans, Jews, and Christians visited the spa with hope of a cure.

Antoninus of Placentia traveled to the site in the sixth century and verified the existence of a leper's pool.¹⁰ The pool was known as Thermae Heliae, Bath of Elijah. The Thermae Heliae was

located within the larger bath complex, but had a separate entrance and water system.

Antoninus also discovered some lamps in the pool area. He suggested the lamps may have been used during a ritual associated with the healer god, Asclepius.¹¹ Antoninus of Placentia concluded that Hammat-Gader was a health center dedicated to Asclepius. In the Greco-Roman world, curative baths and temple worship were connected.¹² If a leper was healed, he or she could return to the community.¹³ Mark's story of Jesus' healing of the leper was written against the culture of Galilee.

The Marcan Story

Mark probably wrote his gospel from Rome for a gentile audience with limited knowledge of Jewish law. Stories about Jesus' healing spread throughout Galilee.¹⁴ Being desperate for a cure, one leper was willing to transcend the law by approaching Jesus.¹⁵ Then, doing the unthinkable, he knelt before Jesus and asked to be made clean (Mark 1:40).

According to the Jewish tradition, kneeling was a sign of supplication before a man of God and a mark of humility before God.¹⁶ The leper knelt before Jesus and begged to be cleansed.¹⁷ Only God could make one clean because cleansing implied a physical and spiritual healing. The leper's actions acknowledged Jesus' power to make him whole as well as the man's readiness to begin a new way of life.¹⁸

Jesus responded to the man's request out of pity.¹⁹ He stretched out his arms, touched the leper and immediately he was made clean (Mark 1:41).²⁰ Healing by touching a person was a common blessing within the Greco-Roman world. It was an expression of compassion.

After the healing, Jesus instructed the man to tell no one about the miracle (Mark 1:42). Instead, the leper was to go to a priest and perform the sacrifices prescribed by Moses (Mark 1:43). There are two instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where God healed a leper (Num 12:1–16; 2 Kgs 5:1–44). Miriam was healed of her leprosy at the request of Moses, while Naaman was cleansed through Elisha (Num 12:13; 2 Kgs 5:10).

Both Miriam and Naaman were ordered to participate in a ritual cleansing. Moses required Miriam to live outside the camp for seven days. When she re-

turned, she was healed (Num 12:14). Naaman was instructed to wash seven times in the Jordan (2 Kgs 5:10). At first Naaman refused to comply, but his servants convinced him to follow the prophet's directives. Naaman immersed himself seven times in the river and was cured (2 Kgs 5:14).

Mark seems to integrate aspects of both myths into his story. Like Miriam and Naaman, the leper needed forgiveness (Num 12:1; 2 Kgs 5:1–18). Unlike Naaman and Miriam, the leper was cleansed without partaking in a cleansing rite. The Mosaic law required a leper to be examined by a priest and participate in a purification ceremony. The ritual included sacrificing a bird and bathing in water.²¹ This rite symbolized death to the person's former identity and the beginning of a new one.

Jesus sent the leper to the priest. The man, however, disregarded Jesus' directive. The leper's actions affirmed Jesus as the new lawgiver, and he announced the good news to the community (Mark 1:44).

In the Greco-Roman world,
leprosy was a symbol of evil
because the disease was
associated with incest. Lepers
were social and religious
outcasts.

The Marcan Message

Mark's Gospel describes the life of Jesus and his disciples within the context of the piety and social customs of Israel. Official Temple cultic practices varied from initiatives taken by Jesus toward the sick in his new community of faith and forgiveness.²² In the Greco-Roman world, leprosy was a symbol of evil because the disease was associated with incest.²³ Lepers were social and religious outcasts.

In Mark's story, Jesus' treatment of the leper departed from societal norms. The leper went to Jesus because he believed he could grant him healing. Jesus, on the other hand, was moved by the man's faith.

He touched him and made him whole. The cleansing of the leper announced the coming of the Messiah and the beginning of a new relationship with outcasts like lepers. His disciples would be faithful (Mark 1:40; 11:22), forgiving (Mark 1:40; 11:24) and prayerful (Mark 1:40; 11:24). The leper was the first disciple to proclaim the new age to the world.²⁴

Like the leper, religious women
are being called to a new
identity. Prior to Vatican II,
congregations had a clear
identification. They possessed a
unique charism and knew the
role they played in the Church.
The Council Fathers diminished
the uniqueness of religious
congregations when they
redefined the Church's
hierarchy.

Re-Imaging Religious Life: A New Identity

In Jesus' lifetime, a leper possessed a distinct identity. He was to live in isolation from others. In Mark's Gospel, the leper rejected societal norms because they prevented him from living a productive life. His status changed when he placed his faith in Jesus. Once healed, the leper became so filled with the spirit of Jesus that he proclaimed him to be the Messiah.

Like the leper, religious women are being called to a new identity. Prior to Vatican II, congregations had a clear identification. They possessed a unique charism and knew the role they played in the Church.

The Council Fathers diminished the uniqueness of religious congregations when they redefined the Church's hierarchy. The three-tiered hierarchy of clergy, religious, and laity was collapsed into a two-tiered model of clergy and laity.²⁵ The Council affirmed the call of all Christians to promote Jesus' mission to the world. Consequently, the charism and mission of congregations became ambiguous.

In *Religious Life in America*, Sean Sammon insists that religious communities must develop a new identity if they are to flourish.²⁶ Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy to meet the needs of nineteenth-century Ireland. She established facilities that fostered the corporal and spiritual works of Mercy. The Sisters nurtured that tradition primarily through institutions. However, with fewer sisters serving in the institutions, we have become less visible to post-Vatican II generations.

While not denying the possibility of new ministries emerging, Sean Sammon encourages the reestablishment of a corporate ministry. He asserts that there is "a greater potential for carrying out the mission of the group when people work together. A corporate commitment makes a statement about a group that an individual cannot do."²⁷ Sean Sammon is urging religious congregations to reclaim their heritage in a new way that meets the needs of a twenty-first-century world.

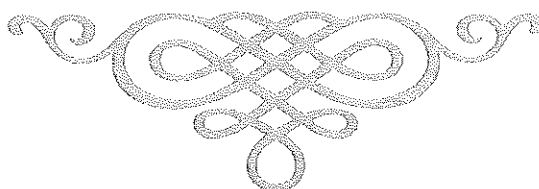
Conclusion

Like the leper, we too are faced with a dilemma of whether or not to confront systems that prevent us from living a meaningful life. The formation of new areas may provide us with opportunities to re-image who we might become as religious women in the Church. Unlike the leper, the questions we must pursue are whether or not we are willing to relinquish our past securities for an unknown future and are we ready to seek a new identity within the Church and society? If the answer is yes, then we, too, will be able to proclaim the Messiah to a new generation of Christians.



Notes

- 1 Coty Pinchney, "A Sermon on Mark 1:40-45," paper presented at Community Bible Church, Williamstown, Maine, 10 May 1999.
- 2 Ann Credidio, Director of Damian House, interviewed by author, 2 June 2004, Quayaquil, conversation, Damian House, Quayaquil.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Sharon Kerrigan, "The Impact of the Asclepius Cult on the Christian Healing Tradition" (PhD. diss., Graduate Theological Foundation, 1997), 1.
- 6 Ezra Gould, *St. Mark*, International Critical Commentary Series (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1969 reprint), 30.
- 7 Herodotus 1, 138; *Celsus De Medicina* 6.1; Carl Kazmierski, "Evangelist and the Leper: A Socio-Cultural Study of Mark 1:40-45," *NTS* 38 (January 1992), 41-43; Cyril Cave, "The Leper: Mark 1:40-45," *NTS* 25 (January 1979), 248.
- 8 Ched Myers states disease was part of the poverty cycle, and a healing ministry was necessary for liberating the marginalized of Galilee. See *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis, 1990), 144.
- 9 Estee Dvorjetski, "The Social World of Hot Springs in Roman Palestine," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July/August 2004), 16.
- 10 Antoninus, *Itinerarium* 7; See Dvorjetski, "Social World," 20, 60.
- 11 Dvorjetski, "Social World," 20.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.2.
- 14 Joseph Hanlon, *Mark My Words* (Kildare, Ireland: Guernsey, 1994), 33.
- 15 J. B. Phillips, *Peter's Portrait of Jesus* (New York: Collins and World Co., 1976); 33; Susy Farren, "Jesus' Healing the Leper Is a Message For Our Ministry," *Health Progress* (May/June 2002), 70-72.
- 16 Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 87.
- 17 Kneeling was viewed as a confession of faith. See Michael Wojciechowski, "The Touching of the Leper," *BZ* 33 (1989), 114.
- 18 Mark Rose says the ancient world probably did not distinguish between syphilis and leprosy. See "Origin of Syphilis," *Archaeology Newsbrief* (January/February 1997), 1.
- 19 Several commentaries made a reference to an alternative reading of Mark 1:41. An ancient text, *Papyrus Egerton 2*, translated piety as anger. See Franz Neirynck, "Papyrus Egerton 2 and the Healing of the Leper," *Ephemerides Theologice Lovanienses* 61 (April 1985), 160; George Telford, "Mark 1:40-45," *Interpretation* 36 (January 1982), 55.
- 20 Vernon Robbins states Jesus healed the leper immediately to distinguish him from other preacher-teachers. See *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 110.
- 21 Lev 14:1-10; Boris Ostrer, "Birds of Leper: Statistical Assessment of Two Commentaries," *ZNW* 115 (2003), 348-61.
- 22 Edwin Broadhead, "Mark 1:44: The Witness of the Leper," *ZNW* 83 (1992), 264.
- 23 Ray Stedman, "The Healer of Hurts," sermon preached at Community Bible Church, Williamstown, Maine, 9 May 1999; Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 185.
- 24 Broadhead, "Witness," 263.
- 25 Sean Sammon, *Religious Life in America* (New York: Alba House, 2002), 9.
- 26 Ibid., 174.
- 27 Ibid., 87.



From Pharaoh to Caesar

Imperial Dominion and the Bible

Mary Criscione, R.S.M.

Oil is king." "Coal is king." "Microsoft is king." "Corporate profit is king." In various contexts throughout the world, to be "king" in this sense means to be *the* ruling interest, getting one's way by virtue of incontestable power, operating with impunity and brooking no opposition. Might—military, political, economic—makes right. *"Whatever the king wants, the king gets."* Why? Because (now at least) there is no one to stop him. What to do? Appease? Or resist?¹

Powerful Overlord as Access to God

All of the biblical writings we term "sacred Scripture" arose and took shape in the context of such imperium, at the hands of both foreign empires and local royalties. From Egypt's Pharaoh to Rome's Caesar, the image of a powerful overlord casts its shadow over the composition of the traditions and texts we now call Scripture. Between Egypt

and Rome, successive empires—Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek—lay claim to the Levant. Within such power plays, local kings are either vassals or potential prey to foreign powers; and local peoples are caught in the grip of various pressures to serve the elite (taxation, conscription, debt, slavery). In the plural voices raised and suggested in the biblical texts, both notes of appeasement and counter-notes of resistance can be found in response to royal patriarchy.

Such texts as the coronation psalms supported and blessed the royal ideology (e.g., Psalms 72, 132), stories such as 1 Kgs 3:3–28 presented a laudable image of a pious ruler; Second Isaiah called the Persian ruler Cyrus, God's "Messiah" (Isa 45:1), and Prov 8:15 asserts that it is by authority of divine wisdom that kings reign. These are just a few examples of the pro-royalty tendencies found in Scripture, to attach the sovereignty of God to the sovereignty of

the ruler "anointed" by God to lead. Such a royal theology legitimates the exercise of elite dominion and celebrates the ordering of such control as ordained by God. As Walter Brueggemann points out, an "economics of affluence" and a "politics of oppression" go hand in hand with a royal state religion, where God is the king's patron and sanctions the king's interests.² Access to this God is by way of the royal cult, which means that for those who are oppressed, access is denied. Royal prophets give God's blessing, as wealth and power are wrested under control by royal leaders. Satiation instead of passion, indifference instead of compassion, divine favor for the few in the name of "order"; this is the imperial ideology.

Social Order and Submission of the Poor

Brueggemann goes on to note the parallels between this kind of dominant royal consciousness and our situation today within an American imperium where we can see:

ourselves in an economics of affluence in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed and we can eat our way around it; ourselves in a politics of oppression in which the cries of the marginal are not heard or are dismissed as the noises of kooks and traitors; ourselves in a

From Egypt's Pharaoh to Rome's Caesar, the image of a powerful overlord casts its shadow over the composition of the traditions and texts we now call Scripture.

religion of immanence and accessibility in which God is so present to us that [God's] abrasiveness, [God's] absence, [God's] banishment are not noticed.³

Within such royal consciousness, exploitation is routine and oppression is tolerated by God-fearers who fear no God of the poor. Acquiescence to such imperial power is promoted as the only way to peaceful order. Rewards are promised to those who submit, collaborate, pray to the king's God and play by the king's rules.

Anti-Imperial Resistance in Scripture

A counter-note to such imperial ideology, however, is sounded in Scripture in the Exodus story and in prophetic critique. Claiming divine sanction as well, the anti-imperial resistance points to the "dangerous memory" at the heart of Israel: *the God of Exodus hears the cries of the poor and takes the side of the slave, not the king*. In speaking for this kind of God, Nathan rebukes David (2 Samuel 12) and Elijah castigates Ahab (1 Kings 21) for their acts of royal exploitation. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah denounce the practices of debt and slavery used by the elite to disenfranchise the poor and to expropriate their land: "Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you" (Isa 5:8, see also Isa 10:1-2, Amos 2:6, 8:4-6, Jer 22:13-14). Psalmists cry for justice to a God who is just and merciful. Such voices of resistance counter the claims of the "high and mighty" with an "Al-

mighty" who sides with the lowly, and who demands mercy for their conditions and justice on their behalf. Divine sovereignty here is linked with divine advocacy for the poor. Employing the royal metaphor for the divine as do the imperialists, the anti-imperial theology uses it to subvert rather than to support the royal claims of human rulers. God who is *the* king trumps all human sovereignty, and stands *over against* rather than in service of human rulers.

dom talk." Had Jesus been merely an apolitical holy man, he would never have been executed. Had he not somehow aroused the suspicions of imperial authority, he would not have been crucified by Rome.⁵ Jesus' use of the symbol "reign of God" must retain its social/political/economic bite, or else we miss its radical character.

By spiritualizing "reign of God" into next world's "heaven," we miss the this-worldly aim of Jesus' renewal movement. In parable and praxis, Jesus showed

Had Jesus been merely an apolitical holy man, he would never have been executed.

Had he not somehow aroused the suspicions of imperial authority, he would not have been crucified by Rome.

Kingdom of Jesus Resists Patriarchy

Jesus' claims for the "reign of God" must be set precisely within this context of competing royal ideologies. By preaching and enacting the reign of *God*, Jesus is critical of the current "reigns" (imperial Rome and its Herodian client kings). The hearers of Jesus' message would have understood the claim he was advancing against Caesar and Caesar's puppet kings.⁴ As with John the Baptist (who also preached the reign of God), so with Jesus: the authorities recognized the implied threat to royal power in such alternative "king-

dom concern for the concrete needs of impoverished villagers: for healing, food, relief from debt and from all the other suffering imposed by imperial practices. Love of neighbor in this setting is not sentiment, but action to alleviate suffering. "In the context of covenant renewal, 'love' refers not to a feeling or an attitude, but to concrete economic practices in village community, such as canceling debts and generous mutual sharing of resources."⁶ The "reign of God" in this setting is a powerfully evocative symbol, alluding to an alternative rule of mutuality, forgiveness, compassion, enacted in concrete prac-

tices. The reign of God turned upside down the rule of status, so that the “least” and the “last” are first in God’s eyes.

American Empire v. Merciful Love

Such “kingdom talk,” of course, relies on a theology of royal patriarchy, which we cannot use uncritically today. However, the issue of a *counter-viewpoint*, an alternative to the worldview of the “powers that be,” is still basic to the aims of such “reign” symbols and still necessary for prophetic resistance today. Particularly in our situation now where talk of “American empire” is so prevalent, it is important to reclaim the power of alternative approaches to human and ecological relationships. Rather than promoting a deity who sits over and above us as a judging, distant monarch, divine reign talk today might suggest the “rule” of mercy and justice, which springs up

within and mobilizes people to say No to oppression and Yes to life-giving community. In resistance to the corporate-business imperium, which celebrates domination and exploitation of the vulnerable, the rule of merciful love insists on the dignity of every being and advocates on behalf of the silenced, the bought out, the run over. The “kingdom of God within and among us” can suggest the dynamism of the Spirit at work in the world, a Spirit inciting hopeful women and men to insist on caring for the vulnerable, working for liberation, and speaking truth to power—regardless.⁷

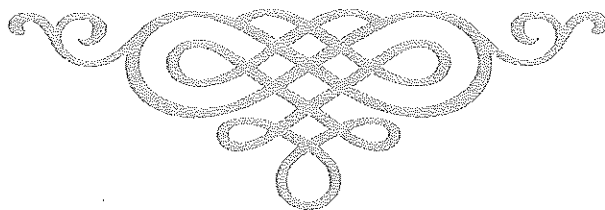


Notes

- 1 See David Daube, *Appeasement or Resistance, and Other Essays on New Testament Judaism*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

- 2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 30.
- 3 Ibid., 36.
- 4 See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
- 5 This is not to suggest that the Romans saw Jesus as anything more than a threatening nuisance. Rather, like other Jewish prophets and messiahs of the first century, Jesus was probably seen as a small potential spark to be wiped out *before* a conflagration could grow and spread. Thirty-some years after Jesus’ execution, of course, such a conflagration of Jewish resistance would grow and spread into the failed war against Rome.
- 6 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 127.
- 7 A portion of Alice Walker’s definition of “womanist” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* reads: “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*”



Never Again versus Ever Again

Carol Rittner, R.S.M.

It was Easter week 1994. If you were watching the evening news, you saw horrifying images of a river filled with bodies cascading over a small waterfall, crashing into each other, then bashing against rocks, snagging in low-hanging tree branches, and, occasionally, washing up on the river bank. This happened between April and July 1994, in Rwanda, a tiny, God-forsaken country in the heart of Africa that was very much in the news. What people saw on television that April evening—and for nearly a hundred days after—was not old Nazi film footage of the Holocaust, but live, or nearly live, film footage of a horrendous slaughter taking place.

I hadn't missed the vicious break-up of Yugoslavia, the "ethnic cleansing" of towns and villages, or the other atrocities committed in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina. But as I watched Tom Brokaw read the news that April evening, I couldn't help thinking about the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, located just thirty miles away in Washington, D.C. and dedicated the previous April.

Easier Said than Done

I could not help remembering what all those world leaders, including our own President William Jefferson Clinton, had ceremonially said in April 1993: "Never again!" *That's* what they all said—Never again!—but I don't think *that's* what they all meant. What they meant was "*Never again—if it involves us, or ours, but if it involves you, or yours? Well, that's a different matter.*"

There was only one exception to all that pious "Never again-ing" in April 1993, and that was Elie Wiesel—at least, he was the exception when it came to Europe. In the midst of his speech at the museum's dedication, Elie Wiesel departed from his prepared speech, looked directly at President Bill Clinton, then challenged him and the other world leaders present, plus the Holocaust survivors, scholars, journalists, and others, including people watching the ceremonies on television at home, in

America and Europe: "Mr. President," he said, "I cannot *not* tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia. I cannot sleep for what I have seen. As a Jew, I am saying that we must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country."

Beyond Wiesel's remarks was not only a call for action but an equally far-reaching assertion: even though there are probably more Holocaust Centers in the United States than in any other country in the world, and even though the newest museum on the Washington mall was being dedicated with all the pomp and circumstance and ceremony the American government, the Holocaust survivors, war veterans, concentration camp liberators, academics, politicians, and civic communities could muster, almost fifty years after the liberation of the last Nazi death camp, we Americans were not applying the lessons of the Holocaust to the mass killing going on in Europe at that time, close to where those death camps had been, and where their remnants still are.

Today, thirteen years after Elie Wiesel confronted the president of the most powerful country in the world and told him that something had to be done "to stop the bloodshed" in former Yugoslavia, that part of the world still needs the world's attention, even if the Serb-run concentration camps have been dismantled, the rape camps shut down, and the siege of Sarajevo has ended. As for Rwanda, where one year later the blood-letting was so swift and lethal that an estimated 800,000 people were slaughtered in 100 days, it remains an open wound, even though bodies are no longer floating down rivers, cascading over waterfalls, or washing up on river banks in that tiny country, the most "Christian" in all of Africa.

A Century of Genocide

Bosnia and Rwanda happened at the end of the twentieth century, but that century opened with an event that has been considered the template for the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews: the deportation and murder

of as many as 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during World War I. "Beneath the political complexities accompanying the end of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of modern Turkey, the Armenian genocide anticipated issues and questions that reemerged in the context of the Holocaust and continue to weigh heavily in the present."¹ While the Armenian genocide should be considered on its own terms, studied in and of itself, parallels between that genocide and the Nazi genocide of the Jews are unmistakable: Radical nationalism, the manipulation of religious prejudice, the use of deportations and concentration camps, and the cover of an international war (World War I) are some of the factors common to both events. According to Mark Levene, a British genocide scholar, the twentieth century saw "More killing than at any other time in history. And . . . its relentlessness, as it passes across the television screens of those of us seemingly blessed with immunity from its catastrophic reality and consequences, continues to daze and bewilder."²

What is Genocide?

Genocide is a relatively new word. Coined by Raphael Lemkin "in late 1942 or early 1943", it is a combination of the Greek word *genos* (nation or tribe) with the Latin suffix *cide* (killing)—thus, genocide.³ If you want to know more about Lemkin's life and his obsession with atrocity, I urge you to read the first five chapters of Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*.⁴ Lemkin's crusade to rouse the international community to ban the practice of mass slaughter of innocent people eventually resulting in the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide, but for years, Lemkin's work seemed to be in vain, and he almost gave up. Statesmen, he said, were "messing up the world." He couldn't get them to take him or his proposal seriously. But, thankfully, Raphael Lemkin did not give up.

In 1944, he coined a word to describe assaults on all aspects of nationhood—physical, biological, political, social, cultural, economic, and religious, a term that would connote not only full-scale extermination but also the other means of destruction he witnessed Hitler and the Nazis using against the Jews of Europe—and against other victims as well: mass deportation, the lowering of the birthrate by

separating men from women, economic exploitation, progressive starvation, and the suppression of the intelligentsia who served as national leaders: genocide. The 1948 UN Convention on Genocide remains Lemkin's greatest legacy to humankind.

Today, references to genocide have become commonplace, and the use of the term, while much wider than either Lemkin's original definition—"a coordinated plan of *different* actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves"⁵—or, even the UN Convention's definition:

. . . genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁶

Even with a definition, however, sometimes use of the term is frivolous, careless, or misguided. In some instances, it is simply ambiguous. And questions about just whether or not something is genocide still abound. For example, did the near-total decimation of the original population of the Western Hemisphere, largely through disease but also through brutal wars of conquest, constitute genocide? To what extent could the word also be applied to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which caused the death of millions over several centuries? What term does one use to describe the murder of millions, without reference to ethnicity, in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, in China under Mao Zedong, or in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge? And how appropriate is it to refer to the recent "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia as genocide?

No Answers, Just More Questions

To these questions there are rarely straightforward answers. Sometimes the questions themselves are even misplaced. Still, mass atrocities, whatever their designation, should be resisted and, when possible, prevented. Their victims should be remembered, their survivors assisted, and their long-term consequences addressed.

The fundamental “lessons”—if one can put it that way—of mass slaughter, of genocide, as understood according to international law—and there now are international laws regarding genocide—concern the value of all human life, the prejudices that endanger it, and the processes by which such prejudices become murderous. Of course, there are differences between what happened during the Holocaust and what happened in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, between the Holocaust and what happened in former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995, and between the Holocaust and what happened in Rwanda between April and July 1994, but there are also similarities. So I agree with Yehuda Bauer when he says, “No gradation of human suffering is possible . . . Extreme forms of human suffering are not comparable, and one should never say that one form of mass murder is ‘less terrible’ or even ‘better’ than another.”⁷

Teaching about the Holocaust and Other Genocides

We must teach about the Holocaust, but we must not *only* teach about the Holocaust. To ignore other genocides and genocidal events that have occurred since 1945 seems short-sighted to me and leaves students with the idea, even if it is unintentional on our part, that the Holocaust was terrible and horrific, but was an isolated event in history. They need to learn:

- ▶ what can happen when a culture is in crisis,
- ▶ what can happen when a victim group is defined as “alien” (that is, outside the universe of moral concern),
- ▶ what can happen when a society is reduced by defeat in war or decline of empire,
- ▶ about the dangers associated with the rise of extreme nationalism,
- ▶ about the power of propaganda to form attitudes and influence decision-making,
- ▶ about how the extermination of the victim group can be “pitched and sold” as a rational decision that benefits the nation,
- ▶ about perpetrators and resisters, about bystanders and upstanders, and
- ▶ about early warning and genocide prevention.

Will Genocide Ever End?

Will genocide ever end? That is the question John Roth, James Smith and I asked in a book we published in 2002. It is difficult to know. What I do know is that we now have the concept of genocide. We have a UN Convention on Genocide. We know what the early warning signs of genocide are.⁸ And we have the means, legal, military, and humanitarian, to thwart genocide, but the question is, do we have the will—personal and political—to prevent genocide? The beast of genocide lurks in the dark, but the dark is not only the darkness of murderous ignorance, lethal discrimination, and bloodthirsty arrogance. Genocide also lurks in the darkness of irresponsibility and non-accountability, which presents too little and intervenes too late. As Samantha Power said in her book, *“A Problem from Hell”*, the absence of public support for intervention is the grounds for governmental inaction.⁹

If we want action to prevent genocide, we cannot be content with government officials, from the president on down, simply mouthing “pieties” on public occasions like the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The disconnect between the intellectual and the experiential has to be bridged; otherwise, we shall continue to see mutilated bodies tumbling over waterfalls and washing up on river banks. What we must do is engage the political by questioning the pieties in the classroom, in the media, and through the ballot box.



Notes

- 1 Helmut Walser Smith, ed., *The Holocaust and Other Genocides* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), p. 147.
- 2 Mark Levene, “Why is the Twentieth Century the Century of Genocide?” 305.
- 3 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 9.
- 4 Samantha Power, *“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
- 5 Smith, *The Holocaust and Other Genocides*, p. 147.
- 6 See further, Carol Rittner, John K. Roth and James M. Smith, eds., *Will Genocide Ever End?* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2002), pp. 209-10.
- 7 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, p. 13.
- 8 See further, Jennifer Leaning, “Identifying Precursors” in Rittner, Roth and Smith, *Will Genocide Ever End?* pp. 117-122.
- 9 Power, *“A Problem From Hell”*, p. 509.

A Reflection on Belden Lane's *Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*

(Oxford University Press, 1998)

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

This book is a brilliant example of contextual theology, integrating apophatic spirituality and personal life events into a wholeness that compels the serious reader to deeper reflection on her/his own experiences. The author is a Presbyterian minister teaching theology in a Catholic university, a contemplative, a nature lover, and a storyteller.

On one level, his book is a first-class scholarly presentation of apophatic spirituality, drawing extensively and in depth from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the desert mothers and fathers, and mystics through the centuries. Forty pages of notes and bibliography attest to the author's serious research, and could be daunting if this were all.

But the "fierce landscapes" of desert and mountain furnish concrete symbols of the teaching of this spirituality. The Negev and Sinai, Arizona-New Mexico and the Ozarks are real wildernesses where the human spirit knows itself as small and vulnerable, longing for a God beyond words and images. In exquisitely crafted prose, the author guides his reader deeply into these particular landscapes; and feeling with him, one is captivated. He says, "The physical experience of desert-mountain territory and the personal experience of

spiritual dryness are mutually illuminative horizons of meaning. Each interprets the other." (p. 7) "God is a desert, ultimately beyond human comprehension, to be entered and loved, never an object to be grasped or understood." (p. 12)

But the balance is always present. "The way to glory is unavoidably the way of the cross, the path toward emptiness. In this fashion, the two poles of apophatic and kataphatic sensitivity continually challenge and renew each other. The one destroys, but only in order to bear new life. The other exults in majesty, but only in order to recall once again its limits. This is how Sinai and Tabor interact as mythic symbols. (p. 138)

A third interwoven thread of this fabric is Belden Lane's personal experience. Given a sabbatical to complete his research for writing this book, he spent time in Israel and Egypt,

Arizona and New Mexico, and the Ozark mountains closer to home. Meanwhile, his mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. As an only child, he had to become "mother" to his mother, who then lived three more years with Alzheimer's. This very painful situation is the personal context of a passionate seeker for a God beyond symbols. "Anchored in deep longing for the truth that the desert teaches . . . a crisis like this (my mother's prolonged dying) offers an opportunity for rethinking all of the dyings in one's life" (p. 3). "In the beginning you weep. The starting point for many things is grief, at the place where endings seem so absolute. One would think it should be otherwise, but the pain of closing is antecedent to every new opening in our lives" (p. 25). And ". . . in the final loss of everything that once was sure, there is also the birth of something new.

The starting point for many things is grief, at the place where endings seem so absolute. One would think it should be otherwise, but the pain of closing is antecedent to every new opening in our lives.

Lane the storyteller treats the reader to an exquisitely beautiful account of the meaning of death.

Where relationships had seemed irrevocably broken, an unexpected love appears. In God's utter absence, when all seems lost, there is movement perceived from the cleft of the rock, and a burst of light beyond all seeing" (p. 140).

Lane the storyteller treats the reader to an exquisitely beautiful account of the meaning of death. One evening camping in the Ozarks, he built his fire, and noticed a little pine tree opposite, seeming to be very attentive to him. So he said hello, and started to tell it a story from the native tribal lore of the

region. He put another log on the fire, which blazed up, and he noticed a few other two- or three- year-old pines, intent on listening to him. He then realized that while they had experienced floods from the canyon stream where they grew from the rotting logs of much older trees, they had never before seen flames leaping in the air like fireflies in liquid motion. They had never witnessed a forest fire. "They were listening to a story of death," he writes, "with both fascination and terror, as they watched wood burn. They had never imagined the stuff-of-

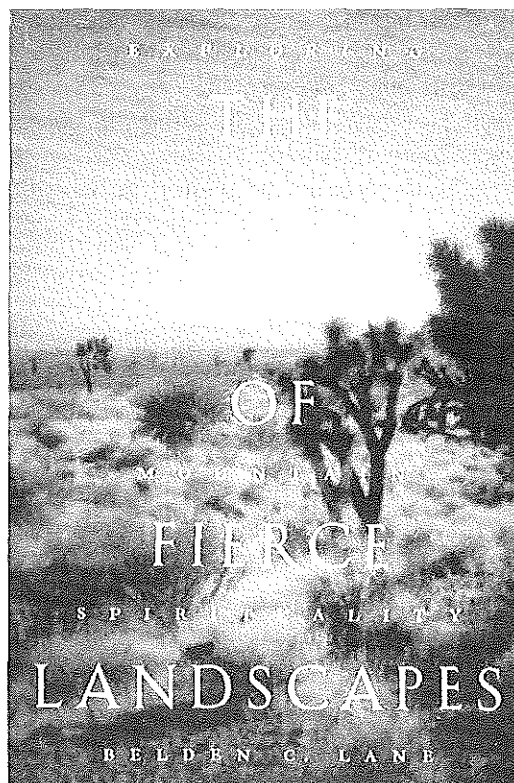
their-own-being turned into the light and beauty they saw before them, never dreamed of wood disappearing so quickly into light gray ash. Hearing the story as they heard it, I found a whole new way of looking at my mother's dying, as well as my own way of living. The common fear of death that I'd shared with these trees in the back country of Missouri was absorbed into their own wonder at the mystery of transformation. I knew then why I'd been brought there . . . A storyteller is one who watches the stuff-of-his-own-being transformed into wonder through a shared process of listening and dying." (p. 157-158)

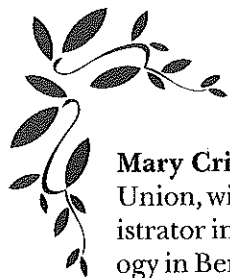
Belden Lane has presented in this book a compelling model of contextual theology: scholarly research, the use of mythic symbols, deep reflection, and the integration of personal experience.



The Solace of Fierce Landscapes
Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality
Belden C. Lane

Oxford University Press
ISBN 0-19511-682-8
hardback, 296 pages
Apr 1998
Price: \$29.95





Contributors

Mary Criscione, R.S.M. (Burlingame) holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from the Graduate Theological Union, with a dissertation on the gospel of Mark. She has been a religious education instructor and administrator in secondary schools and taught graduate courses in New Testament at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley. She has taught scripture in the theology departments of Notre Dame College in Belmont, CA, the University of San Francisco, and presently at Santa Clara University. During this past year, she has also conducted a series of theological education sessions for Sisters of Mercy in northern and southern California. E-mail: criscionejc@yahoo.com.

Margaret Farley, R.S.M. (Detroit) holds the chair in Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School. A faculty chair in her name, The Margaret A. Farley Chair in Social Ethics and scholarship fund is being established to honor her contribution to YDS. She has received many honorary degrees and has served as president of the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society of America. She is the author or editor of five books, including *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (Harper and Row, 1986) and *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (Paulist, 2002) as well as 75 articles and book chapters on medical and sexual ethics, theology, spirituality and feminist ethics. She has served on the Bioethics Committee of Yale-New Haven Hospital and on the Ethics Committee of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine. She has fostered collaboration of the YDS Coordinating Committee for the Women's Initiative with CORE/USAID to work with women in Africa who both live with AIDS and serve as primary care-givers. This cooperation has resulted in the organization of a number of conferences in Africa that promote education, theological reflection, partnership and funding for women-led programs involving women theologians, church workers, and AIDS caregivers. The initiatives have also resulted in the creation of an interdisciplinary post-doctoral program sponsored by YDS and Yale Medical School, bringing African women theologians to the U.S. to integrate their study of theology, faith community initiatives and empirical research on HIV/AIDS aimed at prevention and care of the afflicted in Africa. E-Mail: Margaret.Farley@yale.edu

Dolores Liptak, R.S.M. (Connecticut) holds a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Connecticut and has taught Catholic Church History at many institutions including Holy Apostles Seminary, St. Joseph College, and Washington Theological Union. She was archivist and research associate at Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in Washington, D.C., and president of the Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious. She organized congregational archives for the Baltimore Carmelites, and Georgetown Visitations. Her five books include the award-winning *Immigrants and Their Church* (Macmillan, 1989) and *Hartford's Catholic Legacy* (Leadership, 1999); she has edited or coedited four books, among them *Pioneer Healers: The History of Women Religious in American Health Care* (Crossroad, 1987). One current project is primary research and construction of a chronology of events in the Detroit Province, which lead to the creation of a new congregation, popularly known as the Alma Mercies. E-mail: sdliptak@aol.com.

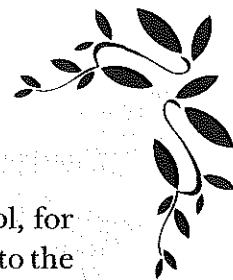
Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M. (Chicago) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Foundation, a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary, and an M.A. from Loyola University. She has been a professor of social science and religious studies as well as an administrator in college and university settings. She is currently an adjunct professor at St. Xavier University and system director of Mission and Spirituality for Provena Health and Provena Senior Services. E-mail: SharonKerrigan@ProvenaHealth.com.

Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M. (Burlingame) directs the Refugee Services at Catholic Charities in the diocese of San Jose, California, where she has developed many innovative programs for refugees, asylees and immigrants. She holds an M.A. in social work from U.C. Berkeley and has worked in refugee camps in Africa and Asia. She has appeared on the MacNeil-Lehrer news hour, authored a study of Amerasian refugees (*In Our Father's Land*), published a chapter in *People in Upheaval*, and been instrumental in the resettlement of the Lost Boys of Sudan. She is a frequent speaker on refugee issues. E-Mail: smlacey2@sbcglobal.net

(continued on page 38)



Discussion Questions



(Liptak) "[H]istorical research should be the hermeneutic, the key theological tool, for fleshing out what has been and what can provide the leitmotif to guide Mercy life into the twenty-first century." What key events in your regional community history most clearly function as a guide for direction setting for the Institute? What events in your personal history have been the most fruitful in inspiring the best energy and ministry in you?

(Scott) "The benefit of analyzing one's own culture is that the effort can cast a spotlight on the questions and issues that will most likely impact your own life for the foreseeable future. Reflection and study of Scripture with these questions in mind will help build theological foundations that can help us to weather the storms that we will inevitably encounter." Divide your life into three or four periods. If you had to choose a scriptural passage that characterized each one, what would that passage be?

(Farley) "Given the . . . final sufferings of Jesus, we cannot fail to see that it is suffering that is the consequence of injustice that is somehow central in the cup. This is suffering that does not have to be, suffering that results from exploitation and poverty, violence and abuse, human indifference and false judgment, cruelty and abandonment. Here is the suffering that cries out for an end not in death but in change." What form of suffering do you feel most compelled to bring to an end through change? Why? What compels you? What do you do when others don't share the conviction as strongly as you do?

(Lacey) Tracing your own spiritual development through the last decades, what moved you from "me-and-God" to "God-and-me-serving-a-few-others" to "compassion is better than perfection" to "I am meeting God in you" theology? Has your calling to ministry come through a dream, through the accident of a ministry change you didn't elect, or through a change you consciously made? How has your ministry changed because of who you served? How have you changed because of the kind of ministry you were doing?

(Kerrigan) "Sean Sammon encourages the reestablishment of a corporate ministry. He asserts there is 'a greater potential for carrying out the mission of the group when people work together.' A corporate commitment makes a statement about a group that an individual cannot do." What possibilities of corporate ministry could open up for you as your region merges with others in re-configuring? What forms of ministry, like the leper in Mark's gospel, might have been formerly "untouchable," that now could be approached with less fear or reservation?

(Criscione) "Rather than promoting a deity who sits over and above us as a judging, distant monarch, divine reign talk today might suggest the 'rule' of mercy and justice that springs up within and mobilizes people to say No to oppression and Yes to life-giving community." Is your theology of God's closeness to the earth, to the economically poor and the socially ostracized the same or different from the preaching of televangelists? In

(continued on page 38)





Contributors (continued from page 36)

Carol Rittner, R.S.M. (Dallas) is distinguished professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (USA), where she has taught since 1994. She is the editor of *The Aegis Review on Genocide*, published by AEGIS Trust (UK), and the editor of *Perspectives*, published by Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre (UK). Carol's latest book is *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2004) Her current research involves the genocides in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda in the 1990s, with an emphasis on "rape, religion, and genocide." E-mail: CarolRittnerRSM@aol.com

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

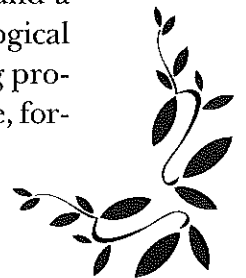
William R. Scott, Ph.D. (Texas) is a retired naval flight officer. He earned an M.Div. from the American Baptist Seminary of the West, an M.A. in religion from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from The Johns Hopkins University. He has taught at ABSW, Johns Hopkins and Chapman College and has served as associate pastor at two churches in California. He is an elder of the Disciples of Christ and is currently the vice president of D. & F. Scott Publishing. E-Mail: scott@dfscott.com

Discussion Questions (continued from page 37)

the present political climate of the "American empire" where the federal government promotes faith-based services, do you see Mercy ministries allied with this governmental thrust, or necessarily separate and distinct?

(**Rittner**) "The fundamental 'lessons' . . . of mass slaughter, of genocide . . . concern the value of all human life, the prejudices that endanger it, and the processes by which such prejudices become murderous." Is there analysis or discussion in Mercy-sponsored settings that could account for the contribution Catholic religion has made to genocide? For example, in the 1990s, Catholics massacred Muslims in Croatia and Serbia. In Rwanda, Hutu Catholics slaughtered other Catholics who were Tutsi.

(**Rouleau**) Lane imagines that young trees, watching his campfire, begin to understand the mystery of death as he tells them the story. "They had never imagined the stuff-of-their-own-being turned into the light and beauty they saw before them, never dreamed of wood disappearing so quickly into light gray ash. Hearing the story as they heard it, I found a whole new way of looking at my mother's dying as well as my own way of living." Ecological awareness is an especially attractive context for spirituality today. What natural setting provides you with a meaningful series of images for reflection—desert, mountain, sea, lake, forest, field, sky? What would serve your region as a life-giving symbol? The Institute?



Information for New Subscribers and Current Readers

New Subscription: *The MAST Journal* is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. To subscribe, please fill out the coupon below or a copy of it. Make your check payable to *The MAST Journal* and send to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

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

Address Change: If your address is incorrect or if you have changed your mailing address, please send that information to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

Issue Didn't Arrive: If your subscription is up to date and your issue of the journal did not arrive (and you know the issue has been published, the grapevine says!), then write to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

Want to Write: If you have an idea for an article, or you have a talk or article you would like published in *The MAST Journal*, please send the article or inquiry to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., MAST Office, 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129. Please include a complete return mailing address on all correspondence or contact her by e-mail at erosen1121@cs.com.

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

One year _____
(\$15.00 U.S.; \$18.00 outside U.S.)

Two years _____
(\$25.00 U.S.; \$30.00 outside U.S.)

Name _____

Address _____

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



MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

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

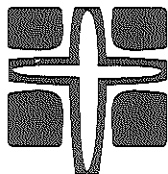
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. 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.



Marian Retreat Center
535 Sacramento Street
Auburn, CA 95603

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