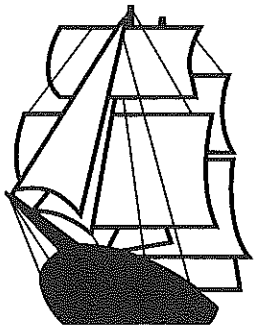

The MAST Journal

The Identity of Mercy Women Religious

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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions, and Friends of Mercy,

The reflection in this issue of *The MAST Journal* about the identity of vowed members is not a new theme. It cycles around every few years. One of those historical moments should be recalled. The Institute office issued a very good packet, "Materials for a Theological Reflection on Our Identity as Apostolic Women Religious" in 1997. The themes, report summaries, and bibliography still seem relevant.

The first part presented "Assertions About Contemporary Religious Life," which began by referring to the principle of Spirituality and quoted from an essay by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

> At the heart of every religious congregation people must be able to find a spiritual center...that keeps alive for people the mind of God. The social service and public advocacy that we take to the center of this culture is not meant to be a product, it is meant to be a witness to another vision of life. Congregations that have no demonstrable prayer life have no coherent spiritual vision to leave behind to those to whom life has given little when our projects do not succeed and the system does not change.

After an Institute-wide process of theological reflection, the Theological Reflection/Education Task Force offered some "General and Regional Implications," which are worth retrieving. For example, some of the issues and questions surfaced by membership ten years ago were these:

Do incorporation programs reflect our identity as women? How are women employees treated in Mercy-sponsored institutions? What images are being developed or perpetuated through Mercy liturgical practices? What models of governance currently in place are based on a conscious identification with women? How can Institute members influence the education of bishops, priests, and corporate executives? How can we address the needs and desires of members who feel called to the fullness of ministerial priesthood? How shall we analyze the ways power plays into the question of identity, and how will Mercies use power? How shall we use our finances and other resources for the advancement of women?

The 1997 summary and reflection by Mary Aquin O'Neil continued. She described several implications for the Institute, among them, calls to do a number of things:

- Address issues of inequality in the Church by developing a position paper on forms of violence against women and exploitation of women and children.
- Examine patriarchal entrapments in the systems and structures created by Mercies.
- Create opportunities for dialogue with bishops and with secular feminist leaders.
- Work toward a common understanding of feminism.
- Continue educational experiences yearly to insure discussion of the topic.

A decade later, we recognize that our identity as vowed women is inseparable from our solidarity with women, and these 1997 directions still open doors for our thinking and action.

It is thus appropriate to begin this issue with an article by Mary Aquin O'Neill herself, for whom these themes remain fresh and evocative in "The Mystery of Mercy Identity in a Changing World." Her essay, originally an address to MILD, retains its appeal to ear and heart through appeals to poetry and everyday experience, as well as theology and scripture. Elizabeth Julian of New Zealand had occasion to address bishops and congregational leaders in "Creating a Song and Dance." Speaking from her own geographical perspective at "the edge," she called on the audience to take a prophetic stance and promote the full participation of women in the life of the Church. The talk, edited from a longer presentation, includes a compendium of citations of Vatican documents on the theme of "prophecy."

Marcie McCann has a sprightly essay that treats the problem of how laity view religious women in "Emerging Identity in a Changing Community." She describes the poles: We lie somewhere in the public perception between the Flying Nun and Mother Theresa. She asks what are the perduring values of identity that provide us a sense of constancy in uncertain times.

Kathleen McAlpin explains the meaning of the word "ignorance" in the phrase "the poor, the sick, and the ignorant." In "The Fourth Vow," she reviews the theology and spirituality of the "principle of mercy," the *rahamim* of God, which underlies our commitment to service. The essay is a foundational reflection on what Mercy means as a charism, not only for vowed members, but for associates, companions and coworkers.

In "Carrying the Sweet Yoke of Jesus Christ," Mary Daly emphasizes the impulse of Mercy Sisters as a charim to take action, i.e., what one priest called a "damn it, do it" charism. She offers a description of Catherine McAuley's spirituality according to four theological categories: visionary, sacramental, relational and transformational. Her article closes with reflections questions on contemplation and ministry.

Sheila Carney, vice postulator for the canonization of our foundress, provides a historical narrative about two difficult moments in Catherine's relations with clergy: the chaplaincy crisis at Baggot Street and the judgment against her for full payment of a construction project, for which a contribution promised by clergy did not materialize. She suggests that the identity of Mercy women is linked with "joys and sorrows mingled" of opposition from clergy as well as support by them.

Mary Jeremy Daigler provides a "Hollywood moment," and treats the issue of how identity according to the church's theology and our Mercy Constitutions is a self-definition that does not correspond to the image vowed women have in the media. The overall effect of nuns in film might have been inspiring at one time, and in some cases demeaning, but the portrayal has resulted in confusing the public about the commitment and reality of women religious today. The article includes a list of films from 1915 to 2003—for your Netflix queue.

Victoria Vondenberger and this writer collaborate in an exchange about the identity of vowed women in Vatican documents and canon law. The issue closes with Helen Marie Burns's review of Sister Patricia Wittberg's latest sociological study, *From Piety to Professionalism*. Discourse about religious life tends to be focused on ecclesial, spiritual, theological, and biblical categories. Wittberg's work broadens our analytic categories and places Catholic religious orders, as faith-oriented communities, in context with other women of faith—Protestant deaconesses and women's missionary societies.

Identity is an ongoing human and spiritual quest for meaning and relationship. I am grateful especially to Mary Jeremy Daigler for her imagination about the theme, and her assistance in gathering contributors for this fine issue. Appreciation to Kathleen McAlpin for reviewing galleys. And the assistance of the entire MAST editorial board has been most sisterly and supportive.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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

The Mystery of Mercy Identity in a Changing World[1]

Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M.

Introduction

I am delighted to be with you for this day of conversation about one of the most significant actions of the last Institute Chapter. Having thought long and hard about Mercy identity before, during, and after the Chapter, I am painfully aware of how limited my experience is and how wide the scope of the task. I feel like the Breton fisherman who prayed, "Be good to me, Lord. My boat is so small and the sea is so vast."

Let me be clear at the outset. I make no pretension to have answers for this ongoing question of what our communal identity is or should be in the twenty-first century. But I think I can do the following: (1) put the question in context; (2) give some philosophical and theological ideas about what identity means on the level of the individual; (3) identify the peculiar challenges of ascertaining a communal identity; and (4) glean from some of the daily readings for Mondays, when we were directed to pray about the question of identity, clues from revelation that might guide us in our continuing work.

I. The Context

I want to introduce this section with a poignant poem by Adrienne Rich, written in 1997:

Who Am I ?
In the dark windowglass
a blurred face
—is it still mine?

Who out there hoped to change me—
What out there has tried?

What sways and presses against the pane
What can't I see beyond or through—

Charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language
is that still you?[2]

This poem is incredibly rich in clues to the question of identity. It suggests that we see ourselves only by looking at something else. One of my favorite philosophers, Paul Ricoeur, entitled his book on identity, *Oneself as Another,* because of this truth.[3] We do not see ourselves directly; our self-knowledge is mediated by many things—symbolized here by the windowpane. There comes a time in life when that reflected image is blurred to the extent that one can ask herself: "Is it still mine?" The next lines are very powerful ones for us. "Who out there hoped to change me—What out there has tried?" I am old enough to remember a time before Vatican II when any layman (and they were mostly lay men) who could pick up a pen wrote something on how out of touch nuns were, how much we needed to update. In my juniorate, we used to read these essays out loud at table and ponder them in silence afterwards. A whole culture of jokes, movies, photographs, and the like reflected us back to ourselves as a-sexual, childlike, angelic, and not very savvy.

Meanwhile, the poet asks a contemporary question: What presses against the pane? What can she not see beyond or through? The pressures to change and adapt never let up and, yet, they never remain the same. One must always ask, "What can't I see beyond or through?" because the tendency to rest, to want to stop the process, is ever with us. The poem ends with the haunting question, "Is that still you?" I suppose we could translate it, "Are we still Sisters of Mercy?" And if so, what does that mean?

Let's plunge in, then, to the question of why identity has become a problem for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. I will speak about three outside forces and three inside forces. Here's hoping that the discussions to follow will amplify the answer. In fact, that holds true for all I say.

In a relatively short time, the messages that we receive from the primary community to which the Sisters of Mercy belong—namely, the Catholic

Church—have substantially changed. Once seen as the darlings of the Church, held up as models of obedience and discipline, we are now perceived—in large measure—as dissident daughters. And where we were, for many, the embodiment of the Eternal Woman in the Church, feminism has had a profound impact and affects the way we are viewed

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by the members of the hierarchy and of the faithful. There are surely many reasons for the negative reactions to our changes. Lodged in my memory is one suggestion (whose author, unfortunately, is not therein lodged). It runs as follows: Catholics thought that the Church had about as much chance to change as "nuns" did. When the Sisters changed, it represented something seismic and occasioned great resentment on the part of those who did not want their church to change—even though they, themselves, were inevitably changing.

Whatever the reasons for the shifts in perception outside ourselves, the move from darlings to dissidents has affected our communal self-perception. And the backlash to our feminism, as to all attempts on the part of women to grow up, has caused self-doubt that threatens the progress we have made.

In addition, we have gone from a body with power to attract and hold new members to an aging body with few new members, many of whom are older themselves. This reduction in new members has had an irreversible impact on our work force. We can no longer keep many of the promises made in a former generation, so that we have had to close institutions, withdraw our Sisters from works that we once staffed, or just watch as lay persons replace Sisters who age, become ill, die, or leave the community. This, too, shapes our communal self-perception. Many of us speak more of dying than of living and are in danger of becoming preoccupied with security in that process. Some think that only radical changes in identity will ensure a future.

Our own struggles need to be set within the struggle that is going on among women of faith in this century. We certainly cannot and do not ignore the worldwide evidence of women's second-class citizenship: economic and social marginalization, the rape of women in war and in peace, trafficking in women, wife-beating, bride burning, genital mutilation, infanticide of girl babies, sex selective abortions.[4] Yet I do not think we realize the effect that this continuing devaluation of women and of the feminine has on our souls.

On this note, I commend to you a column by Bob Herbert in the *New York Times*. There Herbert says:

> In the recent shootings at an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania and a large public high school in Colorado, the killers went out of their way to separate the girls from the boys, and then deliberately attacked only the girls . . . In the widespread coverage that followed these crimes, very little was made of the fact that only girls were targeted. Imagine if a gunman had gone into a school and separated the students up on the basis of race or religion, and then shot only the black children. Or only the white children. Or only the Jews.[5]

His point is stunning. Violence against women is so ordinary that even women do not cry out when little girls are targeted. It has come to be expected.

In addition to what goes on in the civic realm, any thinking woman has to admit that no religion in recorded history has treated women in a manner equal to men. As for Catholic women, how could any of us watch the funeral liturgy for Pope John Paul II or the first mass of Pope Benedict XVI without some attention to the nagging question, "What am I doing in this Church?" At times like that, the male face of the Church is overwhelming. And yet we know that the reality "on the ground," as they say, is quite the opposite. The latest statistics on the American Church indicate that 26 percent of Catholic men attend church weekly compared to 49 percent of Catholic women.[6] They also report that women comprise some 80 percent of the Catholic workforce in the United States. Women religious far outnumber priests or priests and brothers combined in this Church. Yet when great events happen and the world watches, women are invisible or given token representation.

But that is not the only or even the primary source of hurt and confusion for women religious. Those of us who, in obedience to the call of the Holy Father, underwent the painful processes of renewal throughout the decades of the 1970s and into the 1980s now find ourselves with diminishing support from Rome, from our bishops, and even from the Catholic faithful.

Kenneth Briggs documents this in *Double Crossed.*[7] To make matters worse, we watch while communities that did not undergo the reform or who have been newly established along reactionary lines draw new members in numbers that are astounding, while we attract many fewer women, many of them more mature and divorced, widowed or returning to religious life after previously leaving it.

Still, this is not the most agonizing experience. That, in my opinion, is the realization that we can no longer draw sustenance from what Constance FitzGerald calls our "broken symbols."[8] As the patriarchal religion of our past meets the feminist consciousness of our present, the devotional resources on which we once counted are no longer adequate. Yet we have not dared to develop new ones in our own voice, and so we inhabit a religious landscape of symbols that are in terrible disrepair. I think it very important for us to understand how pervasive is the soul wound we are carrying and how vast the territory we must explore in order to heal from it.

Beverly J. Lanzetta has written powerfully of it in *Radical Wisdom, A Feminist Mystical Theology.*[9] There she argues that many women have reached the limit of their respective religious tradition because we can no longer find meaning in dominating, exclusive, or triumphal images of God. Those for whom this is true then realize that we cannot keep going without compromising our own truth. If we are not willing to live a lie, or if we are exhausted from making excuses for the failings of our religion, we begin to look for new ways to interpret, understand, and reconstruct it. This, by the way, is what makes our work at Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women so important, for that is exactly what we are doing: finding new ways to interpret, understand, and reconstruct the Christian religion.

Lanzetta says that here the intensity of impasse makes itself felt. "Trapped between patriarchal images of God that offend and unknown futures not yet born, women struggle through a lived and embodied paradox—an inscrutable feminist koan—in order to be finally free and whole."[10] A koan is a kind of parable or puzzle that Zen masters often give to disciples. We are probably most familiar with the one that goes, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Our own might sound something like this: "How can women believe we are made in the image and likeness of God if all the images we are given of God are male? " How can we be women of the Church in a Church that denies women equality?

If boundaries are necessary to identity, why do the Sisters of Mercy, in our search for identity, deny boundaries? For example, the determination, on the part of some, to include associates in the exploration that the Chapter called for of vowed Mercy identity.

It is not just from images of God that we must recover. We have also internalized images of ourselves as women that carry within them the misogyny of the ages. We have images of ourselves as "nuns" or "Sisters" that are equally demeaning, even if they have been enshrined in the Catholic psyche. Think of recent plays, movies, television programs; of the pictures that editors choose to use in the Catholic press of your area. If we have left them behind, we know that we are not rewarded for doing so. If we have not, the fate of those who have is not encouraging.

Let me give two concrete examples. Remember what happened when Sister Teresa Kane addressed the pope in 1979? She got threats on her life for daring to speak for women. A milder, but no less instructive incident occurred when the Sisters of Mercy celebrated 150 years of service to the city of Baltimore in June, 2005. In his address to the public assembled for this marvelous milestone, our cardinal chose to speak about Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

What I am at pains to say is that this is a spiritual suffering that we are undergoing—as women religious. If we face it together, it will require, as Lanzetta says, "a spiritual practice and mystical process that moves through a continual process of deconstructing and un-saying all that falsely defines 'woman' and 'feminine.'"[11] It will require, in my estimation, no less than the discovery of the radical connection between God and women. Dare I say, the discovery of a woman in whose being we meet God?

We can see, now, how the outside forces collude with the inside to weaken our sense of identity. We who pride ourselves on the rapid, if not miraculous, spread of our order in the English speaking world after the foundation by Mother McAuley now must interiorize a new reality. Our present and future looks to be full of diminishment. For instance, the Mercy grade school and the Mercy college I attended have closed, as has the Mercy high school in which I began my teaching career, along with our Baltimore motherhouse, Mount Saint Agnes. I'm sure each of us can match this experience. For all too many, this process of aging and letting go has been accompanied by what sociologists call "anomie," a loss of meaning in our lives. Anomie results, according to Ronald Rolheiser, in a loss of spirituality. Listen to what he says in *The Holy Longing*:

> . . . [S]pirituality is about what we do with our spirits, our souls. And can we see too . . . that a healthy spirit or a healthy soul must do dual jobs: It has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living. Thus, the opposite of a spiritual person is not a person who rejects the idea of God and lives as a pagan. The opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, is to have lost all zest for living—lying on a couch, watching football or sit-coms, taking beer intravenously! Its other task, and a very vital one it is, is to keep us glued together, integrated, so that we do not fall apart and die. Under this aspect, the opposite of a spiritual person would be someone who has lost his or her identity, namely, the person who at a certain point does not know who he or she is anymore. A healthy soul keeps us both energized and glued together.[12]

To my mind, there are two main reasons for this loss of meaning. One is our failure to rethink the vows of religion in light of our new consciousness as women and of our retrieval of the Mercy charism. The second is our reluctance to evaluate the experiments on which we embarked thirty-five or so years ago.[13] In my opinion, some things that have come to be expected in this new way of living religious life are sapping energy and depriving us of a zeal for mission. But we have not been able to name together what they are and what, if anything, we can do about it.

Meanwhile, a certain excessive idealism at the beginning of the renewal has led to a certain level of depression now, because we find that some Sisters are living lives of domestication that do not fit the rhetoric used in our Constitutions. And our stated ideals are so vague that it is hard to call them to an accounting.

II. Individual Identity

All of this brings us to the question of identity. The word can really have two distinct meanings. In the first case, one is looking to see if one is the same. So identity means identical. We ask of a suggested generic drug, for example, "Is it the same as what the doctor prescribed?" Our concern is that we not be given something whose properties differ from what we have been given for our good.

If we think about what marked the identity of active, apostolic women religious before the council, we will see to what extent that identity was bound up with externals: a common habitation; a common dress or habit; a common horarium or schedule of prayers, meals, and recreation; a common work or apostolate; a common spirituality—almost identical with whatever order of priests gave retreats and heard confessions—though often combined with certain female developments like dressing the Infant of Prague or saving scraps of paper for reuse in a myriad of ways.

Having let go of so many of the externals that once defined our lives, we left ourselves open to criticisms based on sameness. A Sister who teaches in a Catholic school told me recently that the priest of the parish where she works was raving about a Sister who had given a talk there. "It was so good to see a Sister," he said. When the teaching Sister, a Sister of Mercy, said, "You've had a Sister in your school for fifteen years," the priest replied, "But she is a real Sister." Need I tell you that the other wore a habit?

Of course we are not the same. Living organisms grow and change, unlike formulas for drugs. But if we, too, are filled with nostalgia for a lost past, we will not be able to defend ourselves against the nagging doubt that such criticisms bring about. Or if we know that something is wrong with the way we are living and can't choose to do something about it, the result will be the same. I am not saying that this is true for all of us. I believe that many contemporary Sisters, Sisters of Mercy among them, have matured in religious life and know that it cannot be defined

by unchanging external behavior patterns. Here I am only analyzing why this expectation of sameness can occasion profound doubts about identity in those who have not come to terms with decisions that the community itself has legitimately made.

The second meaning of identity is connected with selfhood, in the individual, or corporate personality in the community. It derives from an interpretation of self or group that makes sense of change. For the individual, it means that she has constructed a story of her life that is meaningful to her, that helps her negotiate the challenges of a changing world. Sometimes a person gets blocked in the process. One of the aims of psychotherapy is to help her integrate into her story and herself things that have happened to her that seem to disrupt, destroy or resist integration.

There are two important dimensions to selfhood: character and promise-keeping. Character refers to that set of "lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized."[14] Character enables us to recognize, in very different times and place, that someone is still the same person; in this way, it overlaps with the first meaning of identity. Character is related to virtues, or good habits, and to the set of acquired identifications such as values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes in which the person recognizes herself.[15] Promise-keeping, on the other hand, is quite different from character. As Ricoeur says, "The perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again."[16] Promise keeping creates a permanence in time that sets up expectations on the part of another or others and, when one is faithful to the promise, engenders trust in the person promising.

Perhaps an example will help with the distinction between character and promise-keeping. Punctuality is a habit formed by the discipline of watching the time, being prepared and leaving enough time to accomplish the goal. One could say, then, that all these things are characteristic of a person who is punctual. But even the most punctual of persons can fail to keep a promise to be on time if all the circumstances required to fulfill that promise are not under her control. The taxi can be late, the car can break down, or the traffic can be heavy. If a person who has always been punctual finds herself more and more frequently late because she is no longer independent and is increasingly subject to circumstances beyond her control, she will have a new reality to factor into her own self-understanding.

III. Communal Identity

Let us consider the special challenges of developing and maintaining a communal identity. Clearly, it is not enough that one have an aggregate of individuals, each with her own characteristics and promises to keep. There must be corporate characteristics, both in the sense that some things are characteristic of all members and in the sense that some things characterize the members in a body. In addition, identity requires boundaries. There will be some things that are seen as "out of character" and, therefore, unfitting for a Sister of Mercy.

When the topic of identity came to the floor of the Chapter, I was one of the Sisters invited to work on the proposal. I believe I suggested the language of "come to some common understanding of our identity." This was later changed to "come to a deeper common understanding of our identity." The proponent of that amendment and I had different things in mind. She was worried that it would sound as though we had no common understanding, and I was concerned that we not think that all aspects of identity had to be communally defined. My own model for this is a council of the Church. When a Church council defines a dogma, it defines by ruling out. That is the purpose of anathemas. In other words, in a dispute over possible interpretations of the faith, some ways of interpreting are ruled erroneous, but that does not mean that there is only one way to think about that mystery. But there must be some things held in common. I would like to think that the same holds true of the mystery of Mercy identity.

One challenge, then, is to decide what aspects of Mercy life and mission are so essential that they must be held in common. A second challenge is to use a process of decision making about these issues that will command the assent of a majority of the members. And a third challenge is to figure out how to handle those members whose personal identity is either severely tested by or is rendered incompatible by these decisions. If, for fear of this last, we make no decisions at all, we will make the current crisis over identity even more severe and, I think, insure our demise.

Essential Aspects of Mercy Life and Mission

Let me address each challenge by taking up some neuralgic points. First, the notion that we are a Eucharistic community. I infer that characteristic from the fact that our Constitutions say that we attend mass "daily, if possible." In my youth, I knew Sisters for whom it was a point of pride that they had never missed a mass since entering the community. I was struck by some lines in Katherine Doyle's book on Mary Baptist Russell, *Like a Tree by Running Water*. Katherine recounts that, in the great Sacramento flood of 1862—when the Sisters had retreated to the upper floors of their convent because of the incredibly high water—the Sisters were never without mass. "A Chinese priest rowed in a skiff to the upper chamber every morning and celebrated the Holy Sacrifice for them."[17] Now, when it is an open secret that few of us attend daily mass and some Sisters absent themselves even from Sunday mass, it is legitimate to ask if we are members of the same community as these Sisters who went before us.

Of course, circumstances have changed. And our mindsets have changed. But the Eucharist is still at the heart of the Church. Since the official Church leaders will not ordain us, and since there is a dearth of ordained priests—such that even Carmelites have difficulty having daily liturgy and many parishes are without it, there are few options open to us. It seems to me that we must redefine what it means for us to be a Eucharistic community, or risk losing this dimension of our Catholic faith and life. I have some strong opinions about what we should do, and I will be happy to share them with you. But the point here is that this is an aspect of our identity that links us to Christ, to the universal Church and to the communion of saints. I think it essential to our corporate identity to have some common understanding of what our practice should be with regard to Eucharist.

Processes Being Used

The second neuralgic point has to do with the processes that we are using. One of the effects of feminism on our community has been the much repeated but mistaken notion that debate and argument are somehow masculine and, therefore, to be avoided by Sisters of Mercy. Point and counterpoint are absolutely necessary in human decision making, because we all approach issues with biases and no one of us is able to see every side of an issue. I love the exchange that Katherine Doyle gives in her book between Mary Baptist Russell and Francis Warde—both formidable Sisters of Mercy. Mary Baptist was adamant that the schools established by the Sisters of Mercy in California be only for the poor and that they be without tuition. She was dead set against what were called "pension" schools, established for those who could pay a tuition.

Mary Baptist wrote to Francis in 1859:

> I have always been taught to consider Boarding School as entirely contrary to the Spirit of our Holy Rule every line of which breathes devotedness to the Poor and which even expressly forbids our receiving Boarders. Even day Academies for the children of wealthier classes seems to me not in accordance with its Spirit (Doyle, 141).

Katherine Doyle comments as follows:

> Mother Warde lost no time in responding to Mary Baptist's concerns. While her response has not been preserved, a third letter from Mary Baptist indicates that Mother Warde shared with her that Catherine McAuley herself had been in favor of boarding schools. As Mary Baptist points out, "Many things you say are rather startling to me. I was quite unprepared to find our holy foundress quoted in support of Boarding Schools which I was always led to consider a sort of innovation."[18]

This is an argument about Mercy identity, being carried on by two women formed in the Mercy community and totally dedicated to its ideals. It teaches us that women of good will can differ and that argument and an examination of the founding charism and the realities of the day can bring about a persuasion that respects freedom and truth at the same time. If we are to face the difficult issues that now trouble us, if not divide us, we must learn how to do this together.

Communal Decisions

Finally, there is the difficult challenge of determining what to do when decisions made by the community place some members outside the boundaries. I hear a lot of fear about this at the moment because of reconfiguring. Sisters often say, if the community decides to do x, I don't think I can remain. This is a serious problem. For community decision makers, it should occasion an examination of conscience on whether or not the decisions being contemplated are

really about essentials of religious life, of Mercy life—since they may mean the loss of long-standing members. For the members, it should occasion an examination of conscience on whether or not the good or goods being placed in a non-negotiable position are essential to the well being of the individual.

To some extent, to be a member of a community is to align oneself with the hierarchy of values determined by that community. One cannot be a hawk and a Quaker. One cannot think the Promised Land unimportant and be a Jew. One cannot deny the importance of the sacraments and be a Roman Catholic. In working on the question of Mercy identity, we have to figure out what things are so contrary to this identity that one cannot engage in them or commit to them and—at the same time—be a Sister of Mercy. Otherwise, anything goes and we have no identity. One of the pressing issues for us, I think, is where, in our communal hierarchy of values, being women of the Church comes and what it means in our time.

The temptation will be to resort to the old structure of command and obedience. Insofar as this involves coercion, I do not think it appropriate for adult women who have been through the life experiences that we have been through. Rather, I think that we must adopt that non-violence spoken of in our most recent Chapter and apply it to ourselves. What we need for the future is a non-violent appeal to the imagination. Leaders of the Institute must be able to help us envision of way of being together that will enhance our individuation while inspiring our sacrifice. This is a tall order, I know. But I am convinced it is the witness the world needs in our time.

I have identified three challenges arising from the effort to delineate a communal identity: deciding what is of the essence of Mercy life and mission; adopting processes that will elicit consent from a majority of the members; and facing the possibility that such decision making may well mean that some will walk away.

IV. Light From the Gospel

Let me now consider some of the readings for the Mondays that passed shortly after we received the letter from the Institute Leadership Team inviting us to a contemplative dialogue with the daily liturgy of the Word.

The gospel for Monday, November 14, recounted the Lukan story of a blind man. The line that has stayed with me is this one: "Jesus asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?" He replied, 'Lord, please let me see.'" I find this a perfect introduction to our work on Mercy identity. First, we must beg to see. To make this prayer with authenticity, we must be ready to do battle with the bad habits of denial, of prejudice, of self-centeredness, and of despair. We must be ready to open our eyes to possibility as well as reality. Above all, we must be prepared to "see with." No one of us can see it all. It will take the insights of all to "reclaim our identity as apostolic women religious." For that reason, we need to pray in both tongues: "Lord, please let ME see" and "Lord, please let US see."

The gospel for the following Monday operates on two levels. Again, it is Luke, giving us the story of the poor widow. She is the one "who put in more than all the rest; for those others . . . all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood." How can we not be moved that this story landed on the very day when we are to be praying about Mercy identity? Given our median age, we can certainly relate to the widow and her situation. Yet, at a time when others are thinking only of security—social and otherwise—this widow gave all she had to the temple offering. Of all the things going on at the time, this is what Jesus noticed, called attention to and praised. But it is also striking that this reading landed on the Feast of the Presentation of Mary. That coincidence gives it another layer of meaning. The feast celebrates Mary's offering, not of her livelihood, but of her whole life to the temple—that is to the service of God. It should remind us, too, of the deepest meaning of our vows. In one of Patricia Hampl's books, a Sister describes what she has done as "giving her life away in one great free throw." What an image. This great feast and this precious reading bring that home to us. At the heart of Mercy identity is an extravagant gift.

On another Monday, we heard the glorious invitation of Isaiah: "Come, let us climb the mountain of God . . . that God may instruct us in divine ways and we may walk in divine paths . . ." If the God quest is essential to Mercy identity, and I think

it is, this reading teaches us that it takes effort to be in touch with God; it is an arduous climb. The promise is that this climb to the mountain will make it possible for God to instruct us in divine ways and for us to walk in divine paths. The promise, translated, is nothing less than that we will be made like God. This is the meaning of holiness. It is still the goal of Mercy life. The only reason to take on a Mercy identity is to learn to be a saint.

Finally, on a Monday in December is the reading, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said, 'As for you, your sins are forgiven.'" I love this story. The roof comes off and they lower a cripple down and Jesus sees their faith! While it may teach us that a desperate situation requires desperate measures, it assures us that Our Lord sees what motivates the action. In another surprising twist, however, he responds with an amazing statement: Your sins are forgiven. We can imagine our Mercy identity on that mat, in need of healing so that it can walk again. Those trying to help, use imagination and ingenuity to overcome obstacles. They go over the top, literally! But they are in for a surprise. Jesus gives a gift that is, in his hierarchy of values, far more important than physical healing. He forgives their sins.

Surely in these years of experimentation we have made mistakes. Surely we have sinned against each other. The reading brings to consciousness realities that we need to work into our communal prayers: repentance and reconciliation. Then, perhaps, the fruit of all our labors will be to forget ourselves. On this note, let me end with a marvelous quote about identity from Bernanos's work, *The Diary of A Country Priest*:

> It is easier than one thinks to hate oneself. Grace means forgetting oneself. But if all pride were dead in us, the grace of graces would be to love oneself humbly, as one would any of the suffering members of Jesus Christ.[19]

If we can think of ourselves and of our Mercy community in this light—as suffering members of Jesus Christ—surely we will extend to each other, to the Institute as a whole and to our individual selves that mercy we have received from God. There may be no better way to rediscover our Mercy identity.

Notes

1 This paper was originally presented October 28, 2006, for a meeting of MILD.
2 From "A Long Conversation" in *Midnight Salvage* (1999).
3 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
4 On the rape of women in war and peace, I commend Carol Rittner, R.S.M.s excellent article "Rape, Religion, and Genocide: Racially-Motivated Violence Against Women" in the *The MAST Journal* (2006, Vol. 16, No. 1): 18–24.
5 Bob Herbert in the *New York Times* of Oct. 16, 2006. http://select.nytimes.com/2006/10/16/ipinion/16herbert.html?ex=1161144000&en=e5b5. Accessed 10/17/2006.
6 "Who Goes to Church? Older Southern Women Do; Many Catholic Men Don't" http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/church_poll020301.htm, accessed 9/14/05.
7 Kenneth A. Briggs, *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns.* New York: Doubleday, 2006. See also Patricia McCann's review, "Double-Crossed or Not?" in *America* (October 16, 2006):14–16.
8 Constance FitzGerald, O.C.D., "Impasse and Dark Night," cited in Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005): 76.
9 Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
10 Ibid., p. 76.
11 Ibid., p. 24.
12 Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Searching for a Christian Spirituality.*(New York: Doubleday, 1999): 11–12.
13 I do grant, however, the important point that Doris Gottemoeller makes in her article, "Sisters Today," *America* (October 16, 2006): 10–12. It is that, because the participants were changed by the experiment, it is impossible to achieve anything like the objectivity implied in "evaluation." Yet, on the other hand, Patricia McCann challenges us to ascertain the ways in which we brought on our own difficulties with the Church, so that we do not see ourselves as pure victims of a "double cross."
14 Ricoeur, p. 121.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 123.
17 Mary Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., *Like a Tree by Running Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California's First Sister of Mercy* (Nevada City: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 2004): 146.
18 Ibid., p. 142.
19 Cited by Ricoeur, in *Oneself,* p. 23 n.31.

Creating a Song and Dance—Kiwimagining: The Prophetic Role of Women Religious in the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand Today[1]

Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M.

Introduction

> New Zealand is a funny place, a distant Pacific outpost where the Anglo-Saxon work ethic has fused with a laid-back island ethos, producing a culture of hard-working people who nevertheless come off as remarkably unflappable and unpretentious. In a nation of a little over four million, where the barriers that insulate leaders from their people are not nearly as thick as elsewhere, it's remarkably difficult to put on airs.

So wrote John Allen, the Vatican correspondent in Rome for the *National Catholic Reporter.*[2] Here I stand, then, as one of those four million inhabitants, before you our Catholic leaders—bishops and religious—because the barriers between us are so thin and because our experience has taught us what Allen has observed, i.e., that it is indeed "remarkably difficult to put on airs." From this funny, distant, thin place, I begin.

I believe that women religious have a prophetic role. In the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand today, it is the prophetic role of women religious to persist, no matter the consequences, in calling for ecclesial reform so that women may participate fully in the Church. As I see it, this ultimately means changing the imagination of those in the Church who, at this point in our history, have the power to stop the abuse of half of its members. By abuse, I mean the continuing exclusion and oppression of women caused by what I see as sinful, discriminatory structures and practices.

While there are many ways to explore this prophetic role, my approach for you as bishops and congregational leaders will be as follows. First, I will briefly name my social location. Next, I will use resources from the tradition to claim my authority for seeking reform. Third, I will look at Church documents calling religious to be prophetic. Fourth, I will explain what I understand by the term "prophetic." Fifth, I will describe the institutional problem as I see it. Finally, I will suggest a resource for bringing about this shift in the institutional imagination—the coastal landscape as edge, since we are gathered here on the Kapiti Coast.[3]

Let me make it clear at the outset that what I offer comes from my perspective as a Pakeha woman religious in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2006. I do not claim to speak on behalf of all women everywhere nor on behalf of all the women religious at this conference, let alone the rest of the world. I am not speaking on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy, nor am I speaking on behalf of Wellington Catholic Education Centre. I am quite certain, however, that many Catholic women wherever they may be will identify with my position. I do not pretend to understand the male mind on this issue other than to express my continuing amazement and profound despair at what I read and hear. Let me also make it clear that I am not arguing for women's ordination in the current understanding of priesthood. I am arguing for our baptism to be taken seriously.

Social Location

I have been a Sister of Mercy for nearly thirty years and involved throughout that time in the ministry of teaching. Apart from study periods at Boston

It is the prophetic role of women religious to persist, no matter the consequences, in calling for ecclesial reform so that women may participate fully in the Church.

College and at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago I have lived my religious life in Wellington. It is from here that I view the world through a feminist Catholic lens. I live in a country where women feature prominently in many leadership roles (prime minister, governor general, chief justice, Speaker of the House, CEO of the largest company, mayor of Wellington). I work in a building in Wellington that houses many Catholic diocesan offices as well as several national offices. It is located across the street from Parliament, next door to the Catholic cathedral and the archbishop's residence, two doors from the Anglican cathedral and archbishop's residence and a two minute walk from the Reserve Bank, the prime minister's residence, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and many other government ministries. My office looks out at Parliament buildings.

At this point in our history, the institutional imagination is unable to conceive of women as images of Christ when it comes to presiding at Eucharist.

Thus I am in the middle of an area in which important social, economic, political, and religious decisions are made every day. Women are able to make decisions at the highest level in all places except the Catholic Church. Why? In a nutshell, because decision making in the Church is linked to ordination, and, at this point in our history, the institutional imagination is unable to conceive of women as images of Christ when it comes to presiding at Eucharist.

The Role of the Spirit in Scripture

Genesis assures us that God's creative Spirit was at work from the very beginning bringing newness (1:1–2). It was this same powerful Spirit who came upon the judges of Israel (cf. Judg 3:10), upon the kings of Israel (cf. 1 Sam16:13), upon obscure individuals and made them into prophets of God (cf. Isa 61:1). All the time she was bringing newness.

Her work of bringing about a new creation continues in the New Testament in Luke's account of the Annunciation (1:35). And we can be sure that this Spirit is poured out on all of us, not just some, for we have that wonderful passage from Acts (2:14–21) where Peter quotes from the prophet Joel (2:28):

> Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, "You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
>
> "It will come to pass in the last days," God says, "that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids. I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy."

We know that we cannot control the energy and dynamism of the Spirit for as the Gospel of John tells us: The Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8).

And this Spirit is with us always:

> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you (John 14:16–17).

We certainly cannot hide from her:

> Where can I go from your Spirit?
> From your presence where can I flee? (Ps 139:7).

Faced with this certainty, then, we need to be alert to her signs, to be open to her working today, bringing newness, bringing a new vision here among us at Waikanae.

Such is her generosity she comes with gifts galore. Paul reminds us of their great diversity:

> To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes (1 Cor12:8–11).

And yesterday, the first Sunday of Lent, we were led by this same Spirit into the desert with Jesus (Mark 1:12–15). Just as the desert (and we will find Miriam here later) was a testing time for the Israelites (Num 10:11 – 21:34), so too was it a testing time for Jesus and so too it is a testing time for us. The desert is where the Israelites, where Jesus and where we are thrown on the providence of God.

We only need to look around this room to see the result of the Spirit. Those women and men who founded our congregations were acting under her guidance. That we are here today is proof that they listened to her desire for newness. Theologically, the only way the Spirit can act to bring about newness is through human agency, and that means through you and me today.

Finally Paul tells us:

> Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances (1 Thess 5: 19–24).

She can effect more that we can ever hope or imagine—here at Waikanae, where she blows, as James K. Baxter claims:

> Like the wind in a thousand paddocks,
> Inside and outside the fences
> You blow where you wish to blow.[4]

Church Documents

As well as Scripture, another source from the tradition that I believe gives us a mandate to seek reform is found in various Church documents, especially from Vatican II. A key piece here is the prophetic statement from *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), which continues to this day to give hope to many women who remain in the Church.

> Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on *sex*, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as *contrary to God's intent* (§ 29, italics added).

As theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us, the theological term today for "contrary to God's intent" is sin.[5] What the council taught is that discrimination against women on account of their sex is sinful.

Another important statement in which we can locate a mandate for seeking reform comes from the Synod document *Justice in the World* (1971):

> While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself (§ 40).

But prior to this we find a very strong reminder about the need for reform in *Unitatis Redintegratio,* the Decree on Ecumenism (1964):

> Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment (§ 6).

The safety net here, of course, for those wishing to maintain business as usual, is the "deposit of faith," commonly understood as the "teaching of Jesus Christ as found in Scripture and in the apostolic tradition," according to theologian Nancy Dallavalle.[6] It must be remembered however, that whatever we understand by this term, it is not an un-interpreted, objective body of knowledge that fell from on high. It came originally through the minds and pens of men out of their experience upon which they had reflected. The process of inspiration, however we understand it, did not neutralize the human tendency to impose a particular view. Since then, this "deposit of faith" has been and continues to be officially interpreted solely by men, some of whom, to their lights at the time, sanctioned slavery, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the death penalty, among other atrocities, and wrote and preached and taught the most horrendous lies about women.[7] These men sincerely believed that they were being faithful to the tradition. We now know, of course, that they lacked the institutional imagination to see that other truths were indeed possible.

Promulgated in the same year as *Unitatis Redintegratio, Lumen Gentium* states:

> The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the

> assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and *sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church* (§ 37, italics added).

Canon Law

From Church documents, I turn now to Canon Law:

> The Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires (Can. 212.2).
>
> According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons (Can. 212.3).

What we have then in the above statements from Scripture and Church documents, as well as Canon Law is, I believe, an invitation, to raise questions and to imagine that there may be "more than one right answer" to the question concerning the full participation of women in the Church today in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It seems to me that we must be allowed to talk about the issue and that the talk cannot be an institutional monologue. We need to have a genuine conversation. By conversation, I mean one in which the *question* is in control, not the conversation partners, neither of whom can predetermine the outcome. We cannot tell at the outset what we may learn because the process itself is uncontrollable. Both partners need to keep the gospel in view, to listen with humility, not with the conviction of the rightness of their positions. Both partners really need to ask how the structures and processes of the institutional Church can best serve the truth of the gospel. Both partners need to theologize creatively in their actual ecclesial and cultural context to discern the truth in love, no matter how shocking that truth may be to some. As theologian Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., said in *The Tablet*:

> The Greek word for truth—*aletheia*—implies the activity of uncovering what is hidden. We must study the Word of God, attend to the teaching of the Church, reflect upon the experience of Christians through the centuries and today; we must pray for enlightenment and test our ideas in debate with one another.[8]

And as theologian Michael Himes points out, we have in our tradition good models of the Church learning from the world rather than teaching the world, first, in terms of slavery and second in the adoption of the language of human rights in Catholic social teaching.[9] In both of these cases, the Church did not teach the world, rather it had to learn from the world. These examples, I believe, should encourage us to hope that the Church will eventually learn something from the "world" regarding the rights of women.

So what is the role of women religious here? I turn now to the prophetic dimension of religious life first by tracing its appearance in Church documents and then by examining what we mean by prophetic.

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Religious Life as Prophetic in Church Documents

In the preparation of this address, I was very surprised to discover that the prophetic dimension specific to religious life does not really appear in Church documents until the 1978 document *Religious and Human Promotion*. However, in so far as religious are included in the "holy people of God" and the "laity," then we share in Christ's prophetic role as outlined in *Lumen Gentium*:

> The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name (§12).
>
> Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of His Father both by the testimony of His life and the power of His words, continually fulfils His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity (§ 35).

Similarly the *Directives for the Mutual Relations Between Bishops and Religious in the Church* (1978) speaks of religious sharing in the prophetic role of Christ common to all the People of God:

> Considering then the fact that the *prophetic, priestly and royal* condition is common to all the People of God (cf. *LG* §§ 9, 10, 34, 35, 36), it seems useful to outline the competency of religious authority, paralleling it by analogy to the three-fold function of pastoral ministry, namely, of teaching, sanctifying and governing without, however, confusing one authority with the other or equating them (§13).

As far as I can tell, the specific call to religious to be prophetic first appears in *Religious and Human Promotion* (1978):

> Evangelization, for the Church, means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity and through it transforming humanity itself from within: its criteria of discernment, its determinant values, its sources of inspiration, its designs for living, opening them up to a total vision of humanity. To accomplish this mission, the Church must search out the *signs of the times* and interpret them in the light of the gospel, thus responding to persistent human questions. *Religious are called to give singular witness to this prophetic dimension.*[10]

One of the signs of the times that John XXIII, in 1963, identified concerned women. In *Pacem in Terris* we read:

> [I]t is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations with a Christian tradition, and more slowly, but broadly, among people who have inherited other traditions or cultures. Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim both in domestic and public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person (§ 41).

It is interesting to note, however, that it is *women* who are identified as becoming more aware of their own human dignity. It's not that *men* are becoming more aware of women's dignity, let alone institutions!

We can all "search out the signs of the times" and we can all read them. To my way of thinking, many of them are writ large and clear, but the question is, whose interpretation counts? At this point in our history, my interpretation and the interpretation of numerous women like me throughout the world counts for very little. If it did, I wouldn't be standing here demanding that my baptism be fully acknowledged:

> For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

We would have a Church operating, not just in theory but in practice, as "women and men equally created in God's image, equally redeemed by Christ, equally called to be disciples, equally entrusted with Christ's mission, and equally endowed with Spirit."[11]

I find the encouragement expressed in the following paragraph from *Religious and Human Promotion* particularly reassuring:

> Nor should religious fear any obstacle to the generosity and creativity of their projects from the hierarchical nature of this ecclesial communion, because every sacred authority is given for the purpose of harmoniously promoting charisms and ministries. Indeed, on the contrary, religious are encouraged to be "enterprising in their undertakings and initiatives;" this is in keeping with the charismatic and prophetic nature of religious life itself (RHP § 27).

To be encouraged to be enterprising in our undertakings and initiatives is indeed heartening.

In *Redemptionis Donum* (1983), a few years later, we were again reminded by Pope John Paul that like all the baptized we share in Christ's prophetic role:

> The universal mission of the People of God is rooted in the messianic mission of Christ Himself—Prophet, Priest and King—a mission in which all share in different ways. The form of sharing proper to "consecrated" persons corresponds to your manner of being rooted in Christ. The depth and power of this being rooted in Christ is decided precisely by religious profession (§ 7).

However, the document that refers specifically to women religious and the prophetic nature of reli-

gious life is *Vita Consecrata,* the 1996 Synod document. It is the sections below that give me the authority I believe to claim what I am claiming, i.e., that we need a change in the institutional imagination:

The dignity and role of consecrated women is described in the document:

> Certainly, the validity of many assertions relating to the position of women in different sectors of society and of the Church cannot be denied. It is equally important to point out that women's new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves, where they place themselves in history and how they interpret it, and the way they organize social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life (§ 57).

As we saw in *Pacem in Terris*, here once again it is "women's new self-awareness" that is bringing about changes in how *men* understand *themselves*, *their* place in history, *their* interpretation of it, and the way *they* organize social, political, economic, religious, and ecclesial life. The male is still the norm. There is no hint here of the God-given equality of women and men. At the same time, however, the document does urge women religious to use their experience as women in the Church to proclaim prophetically the gospel message of equality:

> Having received from Christ a message of liberation, the Church has the mission to proclaim this message prophetically, promoting ways of thinking and acting which correspond to the mind of the Lord. In this context the consecrated woman, on the basis of her experience of the Church and as a woman in the Church, can help eliminate certain one-sided perspectives which do not fully recognize her dignity and her specific contribution to the Church's life and pastoral and missionary activity. Consecrated women therefore rightly aspire to have their identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly recognized, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life (§ 57).

Of course, what the following paragraph recommends can never be totally achieved until our baptism is fully recognized:

> It is therefore urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves (§ 58).

The prophetic theme is described further as applicable to vowed persons:

> The prophetic character of the consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life. The sign value, which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life, is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the gospel have in the Christian life. Because of this pre-eminence nothing can come before personal love of Christ and of the poor in whom he lives . . . In the history of the Church, alongside other Christians, there have been men and women consecrated to God who, through a special gift of the Holy Spirit, have carried out a genuinely prophetic ministry, speaking in the name of God to all, even to the Pastors of the Church (§ 84).

The document continues, emphasizing the fact that prophetic witness is an especially focused witness to a clearly defined relationship with God:

> True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom (§ 84).[12]

The most recent document, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (2002), adds nothing new to the prophetic dimension but essentially repeats *Vita Consecrata*:

> In a particular way we recognize the preciousness of apostolic work carried out with generosity and the particular richness of the "feminine genius" of consecrated women. This merits the greatest recognition on the part of all, of pastors and of the faithful. But the path embarked upon must be deepened and extended. "It is therefore urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels including decision making processes" (§ 9).

Finally, although not a Vatican document, the 1989 Joint CMSM/LCWR Statement, *Transformative Elements for Religious Life in the Future,* begins with the prophetic dimension. The assembly in Louisville, Kentucky developed ten transformative elements during several days of visioning the future of the world, society, Church and religious life. The first element proposes that religious will offer prophetic witness:

> Being converted by the example of Jesus and the values of the gospel, religious in the year 2010 will serve a prophetic role in Church and society. Living this prophetic witness will include critiquing societal and ecclesial values and structures, calling for systemic change and being converted by the marginalized with whom we serve.

So there is much important material that identifies prophecy as an integral part of the nature of religious life and calls us to be prophetic. What exactly does this mean?

The Meaning of Prophecy

The clearest articulation of the prophetic dimension of religious life for me comes from Sandra Schneiders. For her, prophecy is essentially about hope for the reign of God as well as action to bring it about.[13] Prophecy is not about telling the future. Rather "it is about telling what time it is, what it is time for, in the present."[14] Using the work of Rabbi Abraham Heschel[15] and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann,[16] Schneiders says there are three requirements for the prophet:

1. The ability to see and hear the human experience from God's point of view.
2. The ability to lament publicly, i.e., to declare to both the oppressor and the oppressed that all is not right with the present situation. To the former, it will be a message of criticism and a call for conversion. To the latter, it will be a message of hope and will offer a vision of a different future and the ability to recall God's promises and thereby give hope for an alternative future. Schneiders notes that engendering hope can be extremely difficult because:

   > Those who control the system do so by paralyzing the imagination of the oppressed through the control of language, because what cannot be said cannot be thought or sought. The prophet is one who has a fund of language that does not come from the system. It comes from the Word of God. With this new Word of promise the prophet can seed the imagination of the oppressed with images that subvert the conviction of inevitability and the divine legitimation of the system and engender hope for a better world.[17]

   However, our contemplative immersion in God results in an ability to say the things we are not supposed to think.[18] It is important to remember that our personal relationship with God, that is, our access to God through contemplation, is not, and can never be, under institutional control.
3. The willingness to suffer and even die for the sake of the newness one is called to proclaim. Prophets live on the edges, on the margins of the system they are called, not to survive, but to change. As Jesus pointed out, prophets are never welcome in their own country (Matt 13:57).

Schneiders argues that prophecy's two defining characteristics are its religious motivation and its ecclesial location. She notes that is much easier for religious to criticize secular society than to criticize the Church, which has often tried to focus our prophetic activity outside the Church itself.[19]

As religious, we are not called to prophesy primarily to the *world* but to the *Church*.

As religious, we are not secular humanists. We have a driving and motivating force that takes precedence over everything else and that is our quest, our search, our thirst for God. We only have one loyalty, to God, and one agenda, the reign of God.[20] As religious, we are not called to prophesy primarily to the *world* but to the *Church*.

The Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel experienced their prophetic call within their own socioreligious situation in Israel. They were not called to prophesy to Assyria, Babylon, or Egypt. We are not called to prophesy to the world. Our primary addressee is the Church itself. That's

The problem that the Church has with women who demand justice and expect their baptism to be taken seriously, will never go away.

why I'm standing here to today. We are not agents of the institutional Church. We are not members of the hierarchy. It is not our task to represent, protect, or guard doctrinal purity.[21] Rather, our prophetic vocation is to be about the reign of God for the sake of the world, with the Church as our primary context. It is here that we cannot be anonymous. It is here, with our commitment to a gospel vision, that we can help the Church to be herald, instrument, and servant of the reign of God for the sake of the world. Just as the prophets of old suffered rejection by the religious authorities, so too will we.[22]

With this understanding of prophetic as background, and in the light of various Church documents calling religious women to be prophetic, what does it mean for us to be prophetic here and now in Aotearoa New Zealand? As I said at the beginning, for me, this ultimately means changing the imagination of those in the Church who, at this point in our history, have the power to stop the abuse of half of its members. By abuse, I mean the exclusion and oppression of women caused by what I see as sinful, discriminatory structures and practices. So what are some of these structures and practices? I turn now to the institutional problem as I see it.

The Institutional Problem

I believe that the situation of Catholic women in Aotearoa New Zealand has a particular urgency about it. This urgency is caused by the stark contrast between our social reality and our ecclesial experience. Here the difference is great and so painful. Here, women like me require courage to remain within the Church. I remain, however, because through my baptism I have been called into the Church, not out of it. My prophetic vocation as a religious locates me firmly within the Church—this Church in which at my baptism I was anointed to be priest, prophet, and king in the same way as everyone else in this room, female and male. I became a new creation, baptized into Christ. It is from this Church that I will one day be buried in a liturgy that like the baptismal one will affirm that I am as equally *in Christ* as Benedict XVI.

I believe that, as women religious in this country, we are in a unique situation. We have had the right to vote longer than women religious anywhere else in the world. We therefore have a serious responsibility to help transform our experience of political equality into an experience of ecclesial equality. Our historical and passionate conviction that as women we *can* have a voice, that we *can* make a difference and that we *can* bring about radical change should give us the courage to call for structural change within the Church. Our foremothers paved the way politically; we can do no less than walk in their footsteps ecclesially. For the sake of the reign of God, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the Church we love but which is becoming increasingly irrelevant, we must and we can bring about a shift in the institutional imagination. The problem that the Church has with women who demand justice and expect their baptism to be taken seriously, will never go away. It won't be "gone by lunchtime"!

I think it is highly significant that the bishops here today are the ones with the most experience, among all the bishops of the world, of living in a political, social, and economic environment where women feature so prominently. You as bishops regularly experience what would be extremely rare for the majority of your brother bishops. You have opportunities to relate to women in ways you never have in regard to women in the Church, who are always second-class citizens, who are always out of the loop, who can never sit in equal partnership at the table. Because you have this rich lived experience of what the equality of women means in practice, and moreover, because you have been able to survive in this environment, I suggest that you have an enormously valuable contribution to make to the dismantling of the sinful, discriminatory structures and practices that prevent women's full participation in the Church. You demonstrated at last year's Synod that you are prepared to take uncomfortable positions in support of the oppressed, i.e., the divorced and remarried. I am urging you to do so again in support of the full recognition of women's baptism.

As I understand it, the Church teaches today what it hasn't always taught, namely that women are fully and equally made in the image of God. It still has problems with whether or not women can image Christ.[23] As I see it, this is where the shift in the institutional imagination has to come. When it does, I will no longer have cause to be scandalized. At the moment, however, I am deeply scandalized. These are the reasons why:[24]

The Church teaches today what it hasn't always taught, namely that women are fully and equally made in the image of God. It still has problems with whether or not women can image Christ.

1. While the Church has addressed and continues to address the first two areas of division named by Paul (Gal 3:28), i.e., that between slave and free person and between Jew and Gentile, it still refuses to address the issue of sexism in the Church.
2. While the Church is called to preach a gospel of divinely-willed equality, liberation, and justice in society, it maintains structures that guarantee women's inequality.
3. While the Church is unable to find any mandate in Scripture for its claim that God willed that women be denied full access to the sacraments, it claims it has not yet received from God any power to change this man-made teaching!
4. While the Church rightly insists that because women are human, women have full and equal human rights and responsibilities—politically, economically, socially, culturally, and ecclesially—it always insists upon "a proper or special nature" that prevents women from realizing these rights.
5. While women's rights are always circumscribed by their "special nature," men's rights are never circumscribed by their nature.
6. While our local bishops do ensure that their own documents are inclusive, they continue to allow into the country Vatican documents in exclusive language.
7. While the Church can be loud in its call to other institutions to treat women as full human beings, it refuses to do this internally.
8. While the Church teaches authoritatively that baptism is more fundamental than holy orders, and that the mission of the Church belongs to all of us, years of clericalism marginalize and exclude women.
9. While God is neither male nor female, we are forced to pray in public to a God imaged overwhelmingly and almost idolatrously as male.
10. While women have access to six sacraments in an essentially sacramental Church they are necessary for only one—marriage!
11. While God's merciful forgiveness is freely available sacramentally, it can be mediated only through a male cleric.
12. While the Eucharist is *the* sacrament of unity, many women experience it as sacramental exclusion.
13. While Jesus' table fellowship was essentially inclusive, institutional policy sees access to the Eucharist as a reward for "good" behavior rather than as food for the hungry.
14. While women, precisely as women and not in spite of being women, are able to do what Christ did: bleed, feed, and give life to others, male clerics have to institutionalize ways to do this.
15. While God freely chose to take up a home in the body of a woman and Jesus put his earthly existence into women's hands and allowed a woman to anoint him, the body of the resurrected Christ has somehow ended up exclusively in the hands of men.
16. While Mary is the only human being who could really say of Jesus, "This is my body, this is my blood," the Church decrees that only males can do this.
17. While women and men can equally image Christ through martyrdom, and women and men can re-present Christ's own love in Chris-

tian marriage, half of humanity is deemed incapable of imaging Christ in the Eucharist.

18. While the Church can affirm that a humble piece of bread represents Christ and actually becomes the Body of Christ, it cannot imagine how a woman priest could be a valid re-presentation of Christ. The Church continues to be fixated on sexual similarity to the human male Jesus when it comes to imaging Christ as presider at Eucharist

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson expresses this paradox particularly well:

> The ambiguity of recent vintage regarding women's capacity to be images of Christ is truly unfortunate, for it has no basis in doctrine and in fact contradicts the central teaching of the Church. Created women, baptized women, martyred women, sinful and redeemed women, holy women of all varieties: all are genuinely *imago Dei, imago Christi*. Anything less distorts God's good creation and shortchanges the theological truth of women's identity in Christ.[25]

So, having named some of the abusive structures and practices, what can we do about them? What resources do we have to help us as women religious in our prophetic role of changing the institutional imagination? I will look to the landscape for inspiration.

I believe that if change regarding the place of women in the Church is to come, that it will come from the margins, from the edge.

A Landscape at the Edge

We are here at Waikanae on the Kapiti Coast, on the edge.

Our landscape of river, sea, bush, mountain, and sky is God's imagination writ large—canvas after canvas from Cape Reinga to the Bluff. In addition, it's the geography of our own imagination. Nourished by it, the way we name God in our personal prayer life and in the prayer life of our congregations can be so much more expansive, so much more evocative than the images by which we are forced to address God in public prayer. And clerical power, no matter how controlling, can never dull our finely tuned imaginations.

As inhabitants of Aotearoa New Zealand, geographically we are on the edge of the world. Living here shapes us all somewhat as "edge people." The place where we stand literally and figuratively shapes the way we see the world. Wellington, in particular, is a city on the edge, but it's also the center, the capital city. The edge shapes the way we experience God and it shapes the way we name God within it.

As New Zealanders, we have the edge on time, the edge on the new day. We're often at the cutting edge of inventiveness and creativity. As women in the Church, we are officially marginalized, officially on the edge. We didn't put ourselves here. In our prophetic role as women religious, we are called to be on the edge, called to have an edge perspective. Today's gospel challenges us to recognize Jesus in those on the edge—the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt 25:31–46).

The edge is a great place to play. It's a great place to imagine. It's a great place to dream. It's a great place from where to see more than one right answer. It's a great place to create a song and dance. We have huge uncluttered skies here on the edge at Waikanae—the imaginative possibilities are limitless.

However, there are risks to being on the edge. First, we can easily lose sight of the center. But, in our long, narrow land, the center is never far away. Second, like the rest of our earthquake-prone land, our edges are shaky places. But that's as it should be; for, as Johnson claims regarding the changes necessary for the full inclusion of women in the Church, "The transformation involved is nothing more than seismic."[26]

It's to the edge in this country that all roads lead, not to Rome. Our geographic reality dictates that we have to stand on the edge before we get to Rome. Islands are edge places. And to live far from the edge in Aotearoa New Zealand is virtually impossible because of the shape of our country. So we have lots of edge, 15,000 kilometers of it, no shortage whatsoever, plenty of room for everyone to take a stand. I challenge you, our bishops, to take a stand together regarding the place of women in the Church. Stand on the edge for the sake of the reign of God, for the sake of the gospel. I believe that if change regarding the place of women in the Church

is to come, that it will come from the margins, from the edge and that there is no reason why it cannot come from Aotearoa New Zealand first. There are many reasons why it can and should!

So let's go down the down to the beach, to the edge where the prophetess Miriam stood at the Exodus, and imagine the waters parting. Let's put aside our instinctive reactions, our normal thinking patterns and try to imagine the previously unimaginable, to see more than one right answer. It's on the edge, I believe, that we can read the signs of the times most clearly. It's on the edge that we will respond to the Lukan Jesus:

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain—and so it does; and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot—and so it is. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:55–56).

Let's take risks for the reign of God! Let's look for rainbows. Let's continue to create a song and dance.

Notes

1 Address to the Catholic Bishops and Congregational Leaders of Aotearoa New Zealand, Waikanae, Kapiti Coast, 6 March 2006.
2 John Allen, in his column "The Word From Rome" (Feb. 24, 2006) at the beginning of an article reporting an interview with Cardinal Thomas Williams.
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4 J. K. Baxter, "Song to the Holy Spirit" in A *New Zealand Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997): 157–159.
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7 Ibid.
8 T. Radcliffe, "How to Discover What We Believe," *The Tablet* (28 January, 2006):12–13.
9 M. Himes, "The World and Church in Conversation," *New Theology Review* Vol., 18: 1 (2005): 29.
10 Introduction, italics added.
11 B. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996): 10.
12 See also § 85, which says, "Consecrated persons are being asked to bear witness everywhere with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life. Prophecy derives a particularly persuasive power from consistency between proclamation and life."
13 S. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000): 316.
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15 A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962).
16 W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).
17 Ibid., p. 142.
18 Ibid.
19 Schneiders, p. 253.
20 Ibid., p. 332.
21 Ibid., p. 338.
22 Ibid., pp. 318–19.
23 Elizabeth Johnson, ed., *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2002): 57.
24 Lisa Sowle Cahill) has a fuller development. See "Feminist theology and a Participatory Church," in S. J. Pope, ed., *Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004):127–149.
25 Elizabeth Johnson, *The Church Women Want*, p. 57.
26 Ibid., p. 58.

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Emerging Identity in a Changing Community

Mercedes J. McCann, R.S.M.

If you have had the good fortune to travel to Florence, Italy, you have no doubt visited the Galleria dell' Academia where the statue of David stands. Though David is the centerpiece of the Galleria, there is more to ponder than that magnificent work of art. As one enters the Galleria, one traverses down the short end of an L-shaped corridor. Turning at the right angle, one is confronted with David at the longer end of the L. However, as one begins walking toward David, one becomes aware of several huge blocks of marble to the right and to the left. At first glance, their subjects are indiscernible, but, as one looks more closely, one sees figures in various stages of emergence from each block. One may see the outline of a hand or the side of a face or the muscle of a thigh. Not one of the blocks of marble has a complete figure and, indeed, one needs to stretch the imagination to discern what might have been intended. These blocks of marble were pieces that Michelangelo was chiseling but had never finished. The identity of each prospective piece is unknown because the sculptor was not finished chipping away.

These are fascinating pieces upon which to gaze and to imagine what the sculptor was intending. In many ways, they are a metaphor for the emergence of a personal or communal identity over the lifetime of its existence. Oftentimes, we speak of our identity as if it were set in marble, so to speak. In reality, pieces of it morph into different shapes over the course of a personal or communal lifetime. The true identity of a person or a community can not be known fully until that person or community has reached its completion. Over the course of a person's or community's lifetime, a constant "chipping away" needs to take place for the full identity to emerge.

If we look at Michelangelo's blocks of marble, we may say that two identities are present. One, that of the marble itself, is the perduring identity. The emerging figure is the more transient identity, the one that is being "chipped away." Michelangelo had to follow the perduring identity of the marble in order for the figure to emerge without cracking or splitting the marble. So it is with us as individuals and as a religious community. We have a more perduring identity that is basic to who we are. We also have many more transient identities that are altered or even chiseled away over a lifetime. I would like to use Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures as the template for exploring our emerging community identities within the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. When I speak of personal identity, I am also speaking of communal identity since an organization forms an identity much the same as a person does.

Identity Defined

> Identity is the relatively enduring, but not necessarily stable experience of oneself (community) as a unique, coherent entity over time. It is a subjective experience beginning with the awareness that the individual (community) exists in a world with similar other persons (communities) but that they posses their own wishes, thoughts, histories and appearances that are distinct from others. It connotes a sameness within oneself as well as a sharing of essential characteristics with others.[1]

Identity begins with an evolution of the self, that is, an awareness of ourselves as separate from others, and then progresses as we define ourselves with a variety of social contexts. So, we may say, identity comes from within and without. We identify with what we experience of ourselves as person and with how society identifies us.

Stages of identity development are epigenetic, meaning that one stage builds on the stage immediately preceding it. However, each stage is not fixed once it is attained and we double back on

ourselves going from one stage back to another and then forward many times over in our lives and in the life of a community.

We know that identity is formed in a particular history and culture. We also know that culture and cultural differences mold the development of the individual. If we do not change with the history and culture, we become extinct over time. Our personal identities, as well as the identity of religious life and the Sisters of Mercy in particular, have been shaped by history and culture as well. Let us look at how these identities have brought us to this particular moment in history as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Identity As Women

Our consciously available identity is derived from the *current* self-concept we have like the unfinished figure in Michelangelo's blocks of marble, while a *perduring* sense of identity, the marble in Michelangelo's figures if you will, is derived from underlying self concepts that have been integrated into our personalities. Who we know ourselves to be as women is the more stable self concept. We have learned that from feminine role models, from our own mothers, grandmothers, and significant women in our lives, including Catherine McAuley. Who we are as women in the world today has been shaped from a more transient history and culture and forms our current self-concept, which is continually being chiseled by our culture and by ourselves.

The more transient identity of women changed dramatically with WW II. The image of women moved very quickly from Whistler's Mother to Rosie the Riveter. As women needed to enter the work force to replace men who were overseas, they became the breadwinners for families. Because of those circumstances, women became more independent, better educated and therefore more willing and able to take their places on the world stage than were their mothers, grandmothers, or great-grandmothers. We are the beneficiaries of that history. The identity of women today is far different from what it was sixty years ago.

However, because organizations change more slowly than individuals, we still see women bumping up against a glass ceiling. The culture at large, although it has changed exponentially, is not necessarily on the same page as the individual woman is in terms of her personal identity and her desire to take her rightful place in society. Witness the current debates over the possibility of a woman president. While some of the more transient identity of women has changed over the past sixty years, the culture at large has not kept the same pace.

Identity as Women in the Church

If we once again study the perduring identity of women in the Church, it is a particularly rich one. The women of the Acts of the Apostles—Lydia, Prisca, Tabitha, and Phoebe—to name a few, held prominent roles not only in the secular world, for many were quite wealthy and had businesses, but also in the early Church. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that Acts supports the fact that women were an integral part of the missionary movement of the early Church.[2] A reading of Acts indicates that these women had a sense of the perduring identity of their gender in that they were the carriers of hospitality and providers of nurturance of every sort to the early Christians. At the same time, they were developing a more current sense of their personal identities as astute business women with a voice at the table within the Church. This happened in the face of a culture that held women very much at bay.

Tthe identity of women in the Church as a whole is not consonant with the identity many of us carry as women in the Church.

While the identity of women waxed and waned in the secular domain over the centuries, that of women in the Church receded more and more into the background as men became more dominant. Vatican II was the watershed moment when women reclaimed their rightful place at the table even though the place has not yet been set. A different shape began to emerge from the marble. However, as we have seen, identity emerges more slowly organizationally than personally. Therefore, the identity

of women in the Church as a whole is not consonant with the identity many of us carry as women in the Church. We can say that the chiseling of the marble of the Church's identity proceeds at a slower pace than the chiseling of each woman's personal identity as a woman of the Church. However, at a subliminal level, we have those women of Acts as role models and encouragers to keep chiseling away at our personal identities as well as that of the Church.

Identity as Women Religious

I would like to frame our identity as women religious primarily within the context of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Our perduring identity, our marble so to speak, is that of Sisters of Mercy carrying on the charism of mercy as handed down to us from Catherine McAuley. We are quite secure in that identity knowing ourselves as rooted in Christ from whom we move forward or stay back. Each of us identifies herself as one who serves the poor, sick, and uneducated and to that end has dedicated her life.

Added to that underlying Mercy identity is the identity of women religious in general. O'Murchu reiterates what many other writers have posited, that is, that religious life has existed in every major culture of humanity.[3] However, throughout its long history, it has adapted to a variety of norms and customs at the same time preserving a similar value system across ethnic and religious boundaries. He maintains that religious life is a liminal structure, one that is separated from the normal structures of society. He goes on to state that society needs our liminal structure to be a beacon of the possible and we need society to challenge our assumptions lest we become egocentrically fascinated with ourselves.[4] Over its history, the community of Mercy has adapted to the norms and structures of the times and has stood as a liminal sign to the world.

Sandra Schneiders gives O'Murchu's insights a slightly different interpretation in that she proposes that as religious we create an alternate world within our society. We do not just try to live differently in the world, but we attempt to create a different world. In so doing, we can be a prophetic witness. Our vows, according to Schneiders, are the foundation upon which this world is built.[5] Both O'Murchu and Schneiders are referring to the very marble out of which we are chiseling present day religious life.

For us, as Sisters of Mercy, I consider our present re-imagining and reconfiguring an opportunity to redefine the transient identity of who we are as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. As we examine the identities of each of our regional communities, we see that they were each chiseled a little differently from the other. We may gaze at the marble from a longer perspective and chisel away some of our individual regional community identities that are not necessary to the integrity of the marble or to what the emerging figure may be. We may carve something new and quite different from what we originally planned. This transient identity will look quite different from that of Catherine's original community, quite different from our foundational communities here in America and even quite different from the community many of us entered and may have experienced over the last century.

The Public's Perception

Our current self-concept as women religious is an identity that is available to us at the present moment. But it can often be murky. It is relatively stable in that we know what it is to be religious. We understand the principal components of vowed life, community, prayer, and service. These are the foundations on which our lives are built, our marble so to speak. Our "public," however, never understood these or may have never really known about them. They are even less understood today because fewer people meet with us and we are not as visible as we once were.

Our public understood the principle components of our lives to be a habit, living together in a parish house, being subordinate to a pastor and superior, and never relating to the opposite sex, among other specifics. Probably, if asked, they would say we were clergy. We recognized these were not our principal components, but they did not.

Then came Vatican II and the tectonic plates of the Church shifted dramatically and we shifted with them. Our public saw the external changes of habit and living conditions, and thought the principal components had changed. We, too, recog-

nized the external changes as significant, but knew the internal changes were more significant and were happening at a slower rate. These included changes in the Rule, changes in the interpretation of the vows, and changes in prayer style. We still had the perduring components but in a different form. We understood that, but our public did not.

If, as Erikson contended, our identity is formed from within and without, some of our identity has been shaken because our public no longer knows what it is.[6] We are somewhere between the Flying Nun and Mother Teresa for most Catholics. Furthermore, our identity within the Church is clouded. We are deemed laity because we are not ordained clergy, yet we are very different from laity and expected to act so.

Boundaries

We are also culpable for mitigating our identity in some ways. In an effort to be inclusive, we have widened our tents to the degree that many do not understand the difference between members of the community who profess poverty, chastity, and obedience together with the service of the poor, sick, and uneducated—and those women among us who are associates and companions in Mercy. We need to ponder whether we have made the boundaries of vowed religious life so permeable and flexible that we are no longer identifiable.

Claiming our identity as members of our reimagined and reconfigured communities means recreating those boundaries. Boundaries are a good and necessary thing, for they set the organism as distinct from other organisms. Healthy lives have good boundaries. We need not be apologetic about ours. They need to be semipermeable, open to the signs and vision of the times, but defining who we are as vowed religious, or associates or companions in Mercy. These boundaries will allow our public, and especially prospective members seeking to be vowed religious, to know who we are and what we profess to be. Those boundaries allow the marble to take shape.

Reshaping New Communities

We further need to look at and perhaps chisel away some of what we thought were perduring identities in each of our regional communities and form communities built on the real perduring identity of the Sisters of Mercy. This means chiseling away some of what we have come to know and love and some of what sets us apart from other Mercy communities. How we celebrate significant passages in our lives like jubilees, funerals and professions, how we choose ministries and housing and, (God help us all!), how we handle finances are more transient than perduring. Reclaiming our real Mercy identity means jettisoning some of what was good but not necessary in order to get to what really unites us as Sisters of Mercy. Is this painful? Absolutely! Each stroke of that chisel strikes to the core. But as long as we are following the vein of the marble, our perduring identity as Sisters of Mercy, we can rest assured that a complete, beautiful figure will emerge.

The sculptor need ever stay open to what the marble dictates. Occasionally, the artist must step back and take the long view to make adjustments and maybe even corrections. Our present re-imagining and reconfiguring give us that opportunity. Together with God we can continue to form and reform our lives always intent on the marble out of which we are formed. And in the chiseling we may be surprised to find that the real essence that lies at the heart of each Sister of Mercy and each regional community is not so very different. In the words of Eliot:

And the end of all our exploration
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Notes

1 B. Moore, and B. Fine, eds. *Psychoanalytic Terms & Concepts* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1990): 92.
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3 D. O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991): 33.
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The Fourth Vow
Living the Principle of Mercy

Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

Stories of Catherine McAuley and the early Sisters of Mercy witness to a vitality in their dedication to the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy. How do we currently understand the significance of the fourth vow in our lives of ministry and service and what connection does it have with the works of Mercy? Before addressing this question, I suggest we reflect on the 'works of Mercy' as a source of our fourth vow: "to serve the poor, sick, and ignorant."[1]

The Works of Mercy

In early Christianity, the works of mercy were central to the life of the community. The fourteen works of mercy, handed down through the gospel tradition, are the fruit of Christian love, which graces us to express God's love for others—as Jesus did. The corporal works of mercy are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick and imprisoned, and to bury the dead. The spiritual works of Mercy are: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant (in the faith), to comfort the afflicted, to counsel the doubtful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injures, and to pray for the living and the dead.

The fourteen works of mercy, handed down through the gospel tradition, are the fruit of Christian love, which graces us to express God's love for others—as Jesus did.

With regard to the works of Mercy, I have a memory from the 1980s, of Johanna Regan, R.S.M., speaking about the original use of the word "ignorant" in the fourth vow. She explained to woman in initial formation, gathered around her sickbed, that in Catherine's day, "ignorant" was used as it was in the spiritual work of Mercy: to instruct the ignorant (in the faith). In this context, the word "ignorant" referred to those who were uninformed or uneducated about the faith. This understanding of the term "ignorant" sheds light on the value that Catherine placed on that aspect of the ministry with the early Sisters of Mercy, stressing the importance of tending to the faith of each person they encountered, whether they were poor, sick or imprisoned. In this way, the Sisters witnessed to the spiritual work of Mercy: "to instruct the ignorant." This understanding distinguishes the current pejorative meaning of "ignorant" from the deeper spiritual meaning that it had in Catherine's age.

However, the spiritual meaning of "ignorant" only adds to the commitment Catherine McAuley had to new and creative methods of education for children, especially for young women at risk. The ministry of education, as well as instructing the faith of the ignorant, have always been highly regarded and a significant practices of the fourth vow of the Sisters of Mercy.

Current Witness to the Works of Mercy

As we return to the deeper question of the fourth vow, we recognize that it is generally believed that the fourth vow was included in the Profession Ritual from the early days of the Sisters of Mercy. It is also important to acknowledge that associates of Mercy, companions in Mercy, Mercy Corps members and so many collaborators in Mercy currently

contribute to a multiplicity of Mercy ministries. Each one witnesses to the works of Mercy in a variety of settings.

Today, partners in ministry and Sisters of Mercy, endeavor to integrate our expression of the fourth vow of service with the challenge of the gospel and the Mission Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy.

> Sisters of Mercy are women who commit their lives to serving God's people, especially those who are sick, poor and uneducated. In the spirit of the gospel, our mission is to help people to overcome the obstacles that keep them from living full and dignified lives. A life of prayer and community animates and supports us in our mission.

How does this Mission Statement challenge us to prayer, community and prophetic awareness of the obstacles to living full and dignified lives as we live out the fourth vow?

Mercy:
Overcoming Obstacles to Life and Dignity

As I reflect on the Institute Mission Statement, I see a challenging commitment to live the fourth vow by supporting people, through prayer and community, "to overcome obstacles that keep them from living full and dignified lives." My reflection deepens as I ponder the prophetic thoughts of Jon Sobrino, S. J. He describes the liberating dimension of engaging in the works of Mercy but speaks strongly about the danger of failing to analyze the causes of suffering these works address. He cautions against a possible sentimentality connected with the word "mercy." Sobrino highly recommends that those committed to the works of Mercy examine the root of the suffering while taking into account the risk required to respond in mercy from the heart of God.[2]

In reflecting on the spirituality of the fourth vow, I believe Sobrino captures the depth of the Institute Mission Statement, which calls us to prayer and community as we help overcome the obstacles that keep the suffering from living full and dignified lives. I sense the truth of his words as collaborators and Sisters work with the homeless, with refugees and with the uneducated. I witness this as I ponder the Mercy publications and websites, finding myself inspired by the animated stories of so many serving the poor, the sick, and the needy throughout the world.

For Sobrino, the spirituality of Mercy is being moved by compassion for the suffering of others and a decision to respond with the prophetic actions required of the works of Mercy. He calls this movement of compassion and decision-making, the "principle of mercy."[3] In the praxis of the works of Mercy the word "principle" is significant for Sobrino.[4] The dictionary defines "principle" as "a standard of moral or ethical decision-making. Mercy is the vibrant movement from heartfelt compassion to an ethical decision to respond to the sufferings of others.

Sobrino describes the "principle of mercy" as the enfleshment of a compassionate response to remove crucified people from the cross.[5] As I realize the reality of Mercy ministries, with individuals and groups who are victims of violence, I believe I witness Sobrino's "principle of mercy" in the services of our Institute membership.

Sobrino highly recommends that those committed to the works of Mercy examine the root of the suffering while taking into account the risk required to respond in mercy from the heart of God.

This reflection has helped me to see a dynamic relationship between Sobrino's principle of mercy and the fourth vow of the Sisters of Mercy. I see compassion as the praxis of the works of Mercy and the ethical decision to take the one who suffers from the cross. The image of the cross, so prominent in the life and writings of Catherine McAuley, is a stark but honest reflection on the realities that our Mission Statement names as obstacles—often unjust crosses—that keep persons crucified by life circumstances and deny them the possibility of full and dignified lives.

It is encouraging to believe that as Sisters of Mercy we are called to live our fourth vow—as a principle—the Principle of Mercy. In this under-

standing, the fourth vow is practiced in every ethical decision we make as we serve among the poor, the sick, and the ignorant. I realize that those committed to the "principle of mercy" serve in both simple and complex settings where the cross of the crucified Christ is experienced by the poor, sick, and uneducated in our society and in our Church. This understanding of the "principle of mercy" and the fourth vow is deeply rooted in Scripture, in the life of Jesus the Christ, and in the founding vision of Catherine McAuley.

Mercy:
God's Compassion

As a community of faith, we are called to remember that our compassion is the continuation of God's compassion for the human community and all creation. Early in our salvation history we encounter the mercy of God extended through the daughter of the pharaoh of Egypt. This occurred when she noticed a basket in the river as she was bathing in the Nile. "When she opened it she saw the child and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity (mercy) on him and said. 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.'" Moved with compassion, she decided to save him and through the nursing of his own mother, he was kept alive. Here God's Mercy was extended to a foreign child, an enemy of the pharaoh, who became the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. She named him Moses—because she "drew him out of the water" (Exod 2:1–11). This is the "principle of mercy" alive in our sacred history.

Later in this history, the merciful compassion of God is revealed as Moses encounters God on the mountain. With deep empathy for the groaning and suffering of the Hebrews, God took pity (mercy) on them and desired to free them from their slavery in Egypt. God called on Moses to lead and liberate the people. Moses responded to this divine imperative and through God's mercy, with both trepidation and trust, led the Hebrews from exile (Exod 3: 1–12).

These two stories reveal the "principle of mercy" at work in the Hebrew Scriptures and the richness of the meaning of mercy in the Hebrew language. As we ponder the question of how are we called to live the ongoing compassion of God and liberate the suffering of our day, one of the Hebrew meanings of mercy may assist us.

Sobrino's principle of mercy is rooted in the profound movement of God to have pity (mercy) expressed in the ancient word, *rahamim*. This Hebrew word brings life and heart to the familiar word in the phrase, the "mercy of God." Here *rahamim* implies the nurturing womb-love of God, with a physical response experienced in the center of the body, for the suffering of another. This compassionate love ultimately moves one to action. *Rahamim* is often spoken of in the Scriptures as the quality of God's love in response to the tears and prayers of an anguished people. In the Hebrew, *rahamim* is characteristic of a parent moved to saving action for a suffering child. From this understanding, it was often used in Scripture to express the mother-love of God.[6]

It is this womb-love of God that Jesus witnessed in his gospel life. How does our belief in the Risen Jesus grace us with the compassion required to live the fourth vow as a "principle of mercy"? How does the compassion of Jesus challenge us to be faithful to the Institute Statement in today's context? We turn to reflect on the gospel life of Jesus for continued inspiration on the "principle of mercy."

Jesus, Compassion of the Living God

In his public life, Jesus was often moved by compassion and from there decided to act in justice and love for others. We see such compassion as he encounters a gentile woman, a Canaanite who cried out to him for pity (mercy). She was pleading for healing for her tormented daughter and for her own suffering on behalf of her child. At first, Jesus remained silent as he understood his mission to be only to the Israelite community. He did not even engage the woman in her petition. Persistently, she appealed to him for help and compassion. As Jesus listened to her ongoing plea, he was moved. This stirring within him was the mercy-love of God, the experience of *rahamim*. Jesus was moved by the compassion of God.

However, Jesus seems to question how to deal with his conflict of compassion and conscience. He replies with a parable from his religious tradition as he opposes her plea. He tells her it is not right for him to give her the bread intended for the daughters and sons of Israel. Picking up on the image of bread,

the woman continues to plead, even for crumbs, the leavings of the bread from the master's table intended for the dogs. Jesus is profoundly moved by her faith and decides that his ethical call is to respond to her cry for mercy. At that very moment, Matthew tells us, the daughter of the Canaanite woman was liberated from the demon that was terribly troubling her (Matt 15:16–28).

From this gospel narrative, we know that a child was taken from the cross of her suffering through the compassion of Jesus. We also know that Jesus was converted in mercy and mission by the power of a mother's deep faith and womb-love for her suffering child. The decision of Jesus to respond to a woman's desperate cry on behalf of her child is a clear example of Jesus living the "principle of mercy."

I believe we are called to ponder Jesus' challenge to compassionate living as such ongoing decisions contributed to his own crucifixion. His risk for others led him to the reality of his own journey. In his crucifixion, Jesus struggled and depended on the Mercy of God. It was in his resurrection that he was liberated to be the Living Compassion of God.

How are we called to discern the dilemmas of conscience and compassion as we respond to the summons of the fourth vow in the context of today's pluralistic society? Let us move from the life of Jesus to the life of Catherine McAuley and ponder her witness to the "principle of mercy" in nineteenth-century Dublin.

Catherine McAuley and the Principle of Mercy

I believe the House of Mercy, the Convent of Mercy at Baggot St., was built on the "principle of mercy." My conviction goes back to a story of Catherine when she was living with the Callaghans at Coolock House. This episode is a familiar one, but it reflects her compassion and ethical response to the needs of her times. As Catherine visited with servants whom she met in Coolock, she found out that one young woman was prevented from the protection she needed because of a prescribed delay in the system that was intended to safeguard her. A house of refuge kept this young woman at risk, crucified in her defenseless circumstances. Because of this incident,

The decision of Jesus to respond to a woman's desperate cry on behalf of her child is a clear example of Jesus living the "principle of mercy."

Catherine made an ethical decision and vowed to someday build a house that did not depend on the decisions of a non-resident committee, and so would not delay the admission of women into a social system to protect them from harm or abuse. She shared this dream with the Callaghans, who ultimately gave her the means to fulfill her dream. Catherine's vision continues in the ongoing ministries of Mercy that liberate the vulnerable, especially women, from the crosses of daily life.

Another story of the early days of Catherine's life at Baggot St. reveals the "principle of mercy" as she was deeply moved by the suffering of a small child she found weeping on the city street. The child's parents died of fever and the landlord evicted the orphan and placed her on the "cross" of a public pavement. Catherine lifted the child from the sidewalk, carried her home to Baggot Street, washed and feed her—and thus began the first Mercy orphanage.[7]

What impresses me about this story is that it was about this time that Catherine McAuley was experiencing suffering and anxiety and an ongoing call to trust in the providence of God. Her dear friend, Revd. Joseph Nugent had died in 1825, "after fifteen days of severe suffering, during which Catherine attended him, day and night." Soon after this loss "she began to suffer greatly from an apprehension that her charitable projects could never be realized on account of the expenses they would necessarily entail." In the midst of these significant trials, Catherine "put her trust in God, whose aid she continually implored by fervent prayer [and] resolved to continue what she had begun . . ." It is inspiring to note that "it was about this time that she took charge of the little orphan that she saw cast into the street . . ." Catherine was able to transcend her heartache and anxiety, empathize with the suffering of the child, and extend herself in the "principle of mercy." It is also noted that "as there were

doubts as to the fact of [the child] being baptized Miss McAuley procured conditional baptism to be administered." This story continues to highlight the value Catherine had for the faith-life of all those she served.[8]

The context of today holds similar realities of pain and suffering. Presently, the plight of homeless children, families, tribes, and nations grows daily in the most mobile movement of peoples the world has ever known. A recent United Nations report on migration "estimates that at this point in history one out of every thirty-five persons on the planet is a migrant."[9] What is the call of the fourth vow to the Sisters of Mercy and our collaborators in light of this massive movement of people? Contemporary forms of crucifixion call us to be attentive to the current summons of the "principle of mercy."

I turn now to my own experience and witness to how this principle might be operative in an educational ministerial setting.

It is important to admit that the practice of the "principle of mercy" is sometimes impossible and ultimately in the hands of God.

Coming Off the Cross

It was a revelation for me to witness the "principle of mercy" at work in the life of a student I once taught. At Regis College, my primary ministry setting, we have a final requirement of the program in ministry formation, an Integration Interview. In one such interview, I was awed by the experience of a woman, whom I will call Hope. As Hope spoke of the integration of her studies in theology, her renewed spirituality, and her practice of ministry, she was alive with delightful energy. However, her voice lowered as she referred to the transformative process she experienced as the program unfolded for her. Hope revealed that, through the integration of study, prayer, and ministry, she found herself coming down from a cross she was pinned to, by an act of violence and abuse from a number of years ago. Knowing Hope's background, her pain, her prayer, and her on-going therapy, I was deeply grateful for the spiritual healing and liberation she experienced through our program.

When Hope recounted her experience, immediately Sobrino's reflection on the works of Mercy as a principle of taking another off the cross came to mind. Beneath my deep gratitude for Hope was a confirmation that as I serve in this program of formation for ministry, I am truly living our fourth vow. The ethical decisions to assist students "to integrate their spirituality with justice, to provide academic excellence and to foster critical dialogue with the world," contribute to their personal and communal liberation.[10] I am more aware that participating in a compassionate learning community and challenging students to the standards of our programs assist them to overcome obstacles to particular crosses and free them to live hope-full and dignified lives.

Hope's story is a confirmation that the traditional ministry of education engages in the works of Mercy as a principle, an ethic of liberation. It was a gift to hear the grace of the "principle of mercy" so vital in Hope's Integration Interview. I believe that Hope was greatly assisted from her cross of violence through the compassionate justice and authentic care of the Regis College community. Ultimately, I believe the compassion of God was extended to Hope through the healing power of the risen Christ living among us. As I pray in thanksgiving for Hope, my heart goes out to other woman and men who have not had the gift of such liberation.

It is important to admit that the practice of the "principle of mercy" is sometimes impossible and ultimately in the hands of God. As Christians, we believe that the crucifixion and death of Jesus continues in the life of the community of faith. I have known the limits of human effort in past experiences of ministry. Presently, in this post- 9/11 world, as I relate with staff and members of Romero House, a Center and Home for Refugees in Toronto, I witness the cross—as many refugees suffer great anxiety and critical personal and family stress during migration.

Prophetic Christian Love

In times of social and political impasse, I believe it is the principle of Christian love that holds the community together and keeps hope alive. When there is an impasse in liberating the crucified from the cross, the call of love is to remain in faith with those who suffer. The image that comes to mind is the women staying with the crucified Jesus at the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

In our global reality, I believe that the fourth vow and the Direction Statement require willingness to risk staying with the vulnerable of society and Church, with those who are refugees, or homeless, or abused, or sick or infected. In these settings, as we continue to pray, we are moved again to engage in the works of Mercy: to ransom the captive, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick. However, when the process of immigration keeps people captive, when the housing market keeps homes unaffordable, or when the cost of insurance prohibits medication for the poor, the principle of mercy is compromised. We experience impasse, and justice is denied. It is at this point that the prayer for courage to remain in relationship, in community, with the vulnerable is required.

As relationships deepen, the desire for justice deepens and a new energy to work for justice is born. However, even with this new energy, the principle of mercy can be impossible as just solutions do not emerge. Can we remain in faithful relationship, in loving mercy in the midst of a critical impasse, a social and spiritual dark night? How does the call of the Direction Statement to a life of prayer and community challenge us when we meet an impasse to the "principle of mercy"?

In some desperate circumstances, the cry for justice is passionate, but the justice systems are flawed. Many of us have witnessed the suffering of these realities among members of the Mercy Community working with the homeless, refugees, and the sick poor. The on-going suffering of the people calls forth the mercy of God and our compassionate response. In this prophetic stance, it is God's womb-love that brings us to creative and mature relationships, relying neither on solutions nor successes, but on Christian love, on mercy-love. As the crucified suffer, the challenge for us is to live the fourth vow and the Direction Statement of the Institute of Mercy within the limits of reality.

The new summons is to practice the principle of mercy in the form of prophetic love. When our efforts in the works of Mercy fail and we experience the vulnerability of impasse, we are called to prayer, to community, to stay with the crucified other, and to believe that we are all sisters and brothers born of the same womb of God. In this stance we are living the hope promised through the loving compassion of God.

Notes

1 Constitution: Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, § 40, p. 14. It may be well to note here that the fourth vow of service was not made by Catherine McAuley at her profession in 1831. However, in a recent conversation I had with Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., I was reminded that, in 1837, Bishop John Murphy of Cork, after presiding at a profession ceremony at Baggot St., suggested that a reference to the works of Mercy to which the Sister was committing herself ought to be made in the vow formula. These words were then added to the Rule that was approved in Rome in 1841. The words were also in the Acts of Profession used at Baggot Street on August 19, 1841."

2 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis, 1994) 1–20.

3 Ibid., p. 17.

4 Praxis here indicates the integration of an analysis of the context and causes of suffering, theological reflection on the presence of God in the experience, and discernment of a decision for action as a response to the reality.

5 Ibid., p. 10.

6 *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Mercy" by Irene Nowel, 650.

7 Mary Carmel Bourke, *A Woman Sings of Mercy: Reflections on the Life and Spirit of Mother Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1987), p. 42–43.

8 Mary C. Sullivan, Mary C., R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1995):46.

9 Robert Schreiter, "A New Modernity: Living and Believing in an Unstable World," The 2005 Anthony Jordan Lectures, Newman Theological College, Edmonton, Alberta, March 18–19, 2005, pp. 1 - 3.

10 Mission Statement of Regis College: Jesuit Graduate School of Theology and Founding Member of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto: www.regiscollege.ca.

Carrying the Sweet Yoke of Jesus Christ
Mercy Prayer and Spirituality

Mary Daly, R.S.M.

Years ago, on my first directed retreat, John Futrell, S.J., made the remark that the Sisters of Mercy had a "damn it, do it" charism. Where the charism of others might be described under words such as contemplation, proclaiming truth, hospitality, Sisters of Mercy, he felt, were characterized by the propensity to take action. I had the impression that Fr. Futrell had come to his conclusion through observation rather than through any study of Mercy documents. I think that he found an image for the particular expression of union and charity that is characteristic of Sisters of Mercy.

"A damn it, do it" charism! What spirituality could ground such a charism? From such a charism how does one avoid the pitfalls of pragmatism, of getting caught in a work ethic, in social activism? From what prayer does this charism spring and how is it nourished?

Perhaps a more basic question concerns the notion of spirituality itself. What makes the life and work of a Sister of Mercy, or of anyone, "spiritual"? What indeed is a spiritual life? How does one identify and nourish it?

According to Richard McBrien, "Spirituality has to do with one's style of life, with one's way of experiencing God and/or shaping one's life on the basis of that experience. It is our way of being religious. Christian spirituality, he says,

> is the cultivation of a style of life consistent with the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ within us and with our status as members of the Body of Christ. It is *visionary*, (is a way of interpreting reality in "spiritual terms"), *sacramental* (sees God in all things), *relational* (is open to the presence and call of God in other people), and *transformational* (is always in touch with and open to the Spirit of reconciliation, renewal, healing)."[1]

How does this find expression in Catherine McAuley?

Visionary and Sacramental

When Catherine McAuley sat down to write the Rule for the fledgling Institute of Mercy, she relied mainly on the Rule of the Presentation Sisters with whom she had made her novitiate. There she found these words describing obedience:

> They shall, without hesitation, comply with all the directions of the Mother Superior, whether in matters of great or little moment, agreeable or disagreeable. They shall never murmur, but with humility and spiritual joy, carry the sweet yoke of obedience which they assumed when they devoted themselves to Christ. . .

Catherine wrote something slightly different for the Sisters of Mercy.

> They shall, without hesitation, comply with all the directions of the Mother Superior, whether in matters of great or little moment, agreeable or disagreeable. They shall never murmur, but with humility and spiritual joy, carry the sweet yoke of Jesus Christ.[2]

It is a small difference in wording—to carry the yoke of obedience or the yoke of Jesus Christ. For Catherine McAuley, it was significant enough to make the change. Her relationship with Jesus Christ was the principal and foundation of her life. Her obedience and indeed all that she was, rested upon that relationship. Her vision of the world was filtered by her sense of Christ present and permeating it. This vision of Christ is central to her spirituality and the source of her mission.

When she begins that portion of the Rule that had no precedent in the Presentation Rule, Catherine expressed her own vision of what the new Institute was about.

> Mercy! The principle path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the

> person of our Divine Master, who has said, "Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me."[3]

As Mary Sullivan comments, "The gospel text on the reign of God in Matthew 25 to which she refers twice in her Rule, was not a distant, unattainable ideal, but Jesus' daily, hourly beckoning, to her and to us."[4] Catherine's Jesus is the Merciful One whom she finds in those about her especially in "the sick and dying poor." Christ is, above all, the suffering dying Christ who supported her in her own experiences of death and suffering with the certain promise of resurrected life. The circumstances of her life were seen through this filter, enabling her to meet them with courage and hope.

Sacramental, Sees God in All Things

This sacramental aspect of her spirituality is the second characteristic mentioned by McBrien. When Catherine looked beneath the surface of things, she found God in Christ at work. The Sisters, she perceived, bore Christ to those to whom they ministered as well as served Christ in serving them. Ministry to others would send the Sisters to prayer and their life of prayer would in turn send them into ministry to others.

For her this daily "following of Jesus is not an abstract fantasy, but an animating relationship with Jesus whose energy moves us toward mission, emboldens our speech, and fills us with the compassion we embody."[5]

The circumstances of her life challenged Catherine in many ways. Her ability to meet the challenges was supported by her conviction that God guided the affairs of life and could be found in responding to them with courage and love. The many references in her letters to God's guiding hand witness to this.

Catherine especially finds God present in the sufferings of her life, whether these derive from the deaths that seemed to always surround her or to the difficulties associated with new foundations, with clergy and bill collectors, with carriages or canal boats. The Passion of Jesus held special meaning for her. It gave her the assurance that God would guide her and ultimately bless her and her undertakings no matter how things turned out.

Relational, Open to the Presence of God in Other People

The third characteristic of Christian spirituality that McBrien cites is that it is relational, open to the presence and call of God in other people. Certainly Catherine's life from her earliest years bears witness to her sense of God's call to her in and through those whom she met, especially those who are most needy. She has a sense of Christ in those about her and so Catherine admonishes her Sisters to go through the streets as if they are to meet Christ. Her relationship with God in Christ opens her to the presence and call of God in the people whom she meets and with whom she lives. It is Jesus "daily hourly beckoning to her."[6]

Catherine has a sense of Christ in those about her and so she admonishes her Sisters to go through the streets as if they are to meet Christ.

Catherine's spirituality and founding vision is also grounded in her relationship with the Trinity. As the relationships of persons in Trinity are mutual and equal being neither dominant nor dependent, so Catherine through the experiences of her life learned the value of such relationships. In the early community of Mercy, relationships among the Sisters were characterized by this mutual appreciation of the gifts brought by each one, by Catherine's sense of all entering in a collaboration to serve God's poor.

From her reliance on the One whom Jesus called Father, comes Catherine's sense of Divine Providence and her gift for nonpossessiveness, her detachment both in her relationships with Sisters, relatives, friends and in her service of the poor.

The deaths of those close to her gave her a sense of letting go in relationships even while her friendships were warm and affectionate. Neither did she have a possessiveness about the ministry to others. Those she served were always basically God's poor, and she had confidence that, when the Sisters could not meet their needs, God would care for them.[7]

In the early days of the Institute, Catherine was especially attached to her niece Mary Teresa, who died in 1833. It was perhaps out of that experience that she counseled the superior in one of the foundations to relate to each of the Sisters with a certain equanimity.

I'd wish to shield you next from love—
Except what takes its flight above.
A Sister, whose last tie is broken,
On this subject thus has spoken.
Oh! never, never shall my heart,
With any creature share a part.
. . . .
These things, my dear do not forget.
Let none again e'er see your Pet.
And lest an angry dart should strike,
In future love them all alike.[8]

Once more, prayerful reflection on her experience gives rise to wisdom for others.

Transformation, A Spirit of Reconciliation, Renewal, Healing

Union and charity were not simply pious words for Catherine. They were hard won prizes for which one must be willing to be open and transformed. In her trials over the chaplaincy controversy and the Kingstown financial judgment against her, Catherine experienced much bitterness. In a letter to Francis Warde, she speaks of this bitterness and asks Francis to pray that it may be taken from her.[9]

Catherine had a special concern for those who were estranged from the Catholic faith. She worked diligently, carefully, gently, yet firmly, with relatives, gentry, the poor who had fallen away from the Catholic faith. She sent her Sisters to minister to those in Birr who followed Fr. Crotty away from the Church and expressed joy upon the reconciliation of any of the parishioners. The writer of the treatise *Cottage Controversy*, attributed to Catherine McAuley, is recommended to others and illustrates the particularly gentle, yet firm, manner that she approves for engagement with those who differed with her in the matter of religion.[10]

Contemplating God in Christ in Her Everyday World

Catherine's spiritual life and prayer was set in the midst of the affairs of a busy life, among a suffering oppressed people. Her gift is her perception that all human beings are children of the one God, brothers and Sisters to each other, sharing in the one life of Christ that makes them members of his body. This sense makes her aware that she and her Sisters are not benefactors to those they serve, but rather one in Christ with them. Undoubtedly, Catherine arrived at this insight into God through the particular situation of praying and contemplating God present in the poor who surrounded her and whose plight at times in her life she shared and which she worked to alleviate.

The spirituality that developed from her prayer in the midst of her everyday circumstances has been described by others who have studied, prayed and followed in her footsteps. Joanna Regan, R.S.M., identifies three themes often appearing on Catherine's lips:

> . . . trust in the Father's Providence; identification with Jesus in His mission; and everlasting gratitude for the Mercy of God.[11]

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., in a talk given to the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium, described the charism given early on to the Sisters of Mercy thus:

- an instinct for the supreme blessing of *unity*, upon and among ourselves and all men and women;
- a conviction that charity and love are where God is, and a desire not to let the sun go down on the absence of it;
- a special *tenderness* to the sick and dying and a vivid attachment to *Jesus Christ Crucified* that spill over into wider *compassion* and *sympathy* for all those in need;
- a strong, deep conviction of *God's Mercy* to us that urges us daily to truer, fuller mercifulness toward others; and
- a certain *joyfulness* that can only come from God, whether through our inadequacies or our small virtues.[12]

What John Futrell perceived was perhaps a particular characteristic in the expression of this charism, that is, its very practical and urgent carrying out. As

Catherine McAuley noted, "The poor need help today, not tomorrow."

Catherine's Spirituality Challenges Us Today

In recent years, with the impulse of Vatican II and the changing culture of Church and society, Mercy life has changed radically. Our documents beautifully and challengingly express Catherine's concern for the poor and unfortunate people of our time. Our Constitutions in its wording and in its very order express this same priority of mercy and compassion even while they call us to a deep interior life of prayer that would support this ministry. The *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy* is a welcome aid in this regard.

But none of these are automatically fruitful. None guarantee a "spiritual life." What are the challenges to the deepening of our spirituality that we face today as individuals and as communities?[13] Indeed, what difference does a prayer life or a spiritual life make for anyone, for a Sister of Mercy?

The goal of life is to become who we are, to be the being that each of us is. As human beings, we are called to live authentic fully human lives within the human community, within the cosmic community. This is our reality. To live less than this is to live an illusion. To become such a human being is indeed to live a life that is visionary, sacramental, relational, and transformational.

As Christians, we hold that the fully human being is found and exemplified in Jesus Christ. Christ is the revelation of all that God is. We believe with the prologue to John's Gospel and the Letter to the Colossians that Christ is the shape of all that is. What is this shape of Christ? What or who is Christ among us today? The Scriptures and the tradition of the Christian community show us a Christ who is

- the one who found the deepest living of life in a fidelity to loving others even through death;
- the one who accepted his humanity with its limits and possibilities as the gift of the One whom he called Father;
- the one who choose to live out of unconditional love as defining who he is,
- the one who faithfully lived his life as the loving Offspring of the One who is Source of Life and Love to him.

This indeed, I believe, was Catherine's Christ, expressed in the ideals, images, and words of her own time, in the life she lived and exhorted others to live. This is the Christ we find so aptly described in the petitions in the *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*. This is the Christ of the *Direction Statement,* of the *Critical Concerns*, of the *Constitutions*. These documents could not have so expressed the Living Christ unless Christ was already found in the hearts of those who produced these documents.

The challenge for us is that these words continuously become flesh in the lived reality of our lives. This can only happen when we touch the urgency of the love of Christ within us. For it is through our prayer that we meet the Christ of the universe and of the poor in an intimate relationship that impels us to recognize and meet this Christ wherever Christ is to be found.

Intimate relationships have their rhythms. They are not, as Christ shows us in his own life, "warm fuzzies." They bear the pangs of presence and absence, of challenge and support, of friendship and betrayal. So too, the experience of prayer and the spiritual life bears at times the sense of God's presence, often the sense of God's absence. To be authentically human is to live not out of what we find comforting, but out of fidelity to what is real. For a people called to poke healing fingers into the present day wounds of the risen Christ, the sense of God may be precisely one of absence, precisely the experience of Jesus in the garden wrestling with the reality of evil that faced him.

If this is to be a living faith animating all that we do, it does indeed require the discipline of a spiritual life for each of us and for all of us together. Prior to Vatican II, Sisters of Mercy were steeped in the forms and rhythms of a monastic prayer life with structures that supported the developing of an interiority that supported the activity of our ministries. Catherine herself recognized that the fit of monasticism to an apostolic life had its difficulties. She ameliorated the fasting and penances and saying of long prayers But still that basic structure remained. How do we express the values embedded in the structure in the within our non-monastic apostolic life?

In the document we call "The Spirit of the Institute," Catherine McAuley, relying on the work of Alonso Rodriguez, expressed the dynamic of the interaction that will deepen our lives and service. "Though the spirit of prayer and retreat should be most dear to us, yet such a spirit as would never withdraw us from these works of Mercy. These works of Mercy both spiritual and corporal "constitute the business of our lives." For Catherine, prayer sends us to the works of Mercy and the works of Mercy send us to prayer. These two works are so linked together by our rule and observances, that they reciprocally help each other."[14]

But this very dynamic is not one that is easy to live out. For as a "damn it, do it" people, we can be exhausted by the doing that engages us. Balance is not easy to achieve in a culture that fosters busyness. The questions that arise for us are not easily answered either as individuals or as an Institute. For a vastly changing society and culture has brought us vastly changing attitudes toward God, Christ, and Church and we seem reluctant to wrestle together around them.

Yet, looking around the Institute, I am struck by our many gatherings and the prayer that supports them, the calls for reflection on who we are and how we wish to shape a future together.

As we move into this future, are our deepest concerns, doubts, attitudes shaped by our prayer as individuals and as community? Can we listen to one another's faith struggles and believe in the actuality of the union and charity that gifts us?

How do we foster for each other a spirit of contemplation that can give us the awareness and conviction of God at work in the heart of all that we encounter and the energy to run to meet God there?

What rhythm and discipline of prayer helps us to know God more deeply, love and follow God more closely?

How does our ministry and our prayer transform us into more authentic human beings even as it serves the transformation of the universe?

How does our life of prayer as an individual and with others support and nourish the growth of the spirituality that is characteristic of this Institute?

Conclusion

Catherine exhorted us to carry the sweet yoke of Jesus Christ. The image of a yoke reminds us that we are not alone in our efforts, for a yoke binds two together in strengthening them for a task. It calls forth moving out of self to the other, sensing that union and charity is at the heart of the cosmos. So let our spiritual lives grow with Christ, with one another, with the poor, with all, in a collaboration to work effectively in bringing about the reign of God. Then impelled by the love of God we will "damn it, do it."

Notes

1 R. McBrien, "Christian Spirituality" Chapter 28, *Catholicism*, Vol. II, MN: Winston Press, 1970. p. 1093.
2 *Rule and Constitutions—Religious Sisters of Mercy* c. 18 sec. 2 in Mary C. Sullivan *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. p. 314. Compare *Rules and Constitutions of the Institute of the Religious Sisterhood of the Presentation of the Ever Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1881. c. 5 Sec 2.
3 *Rule and Constitutions*, Ch. 3, #1 as in Sullivan, op. cit. p. 297.
4 Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., "The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion," *The Mast Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2 p. 10.
5 Janet Ruffing, R.S.M., "The Burning Heart on Account of Creation," *The MAST Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2 p. 26.
6 Sullivan, ibid.
7 "The Spirit of the Institute" in Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818 -1841* . Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 2004. pp.163, 461.
8 Mary C. Sullivan RSM, *Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818 -1841*. Letter to M. Cecilia Marmion, March 11,1841. p. 370.
9 Sullivan, ibid, p. 144.
10 Ibid., p. 123, note 20.
11 Joanna Regan, RSM, *Tender Courage*. Gwynedd-Mercy College: Gwynedd Valley, PA. 1987. p. 14.
12 Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., "To Relieve Misery and Address Its Causes: The Mission of Sisters of Mercy in Higher Education." Mercy Higher Education Colloquium. 1987.
13 It is interesting to reflect on what spiritual values we are expressing in our desire to call our regions "communities" rather than use a word like "provinces."
14 "Spirit of the Institute." Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818–1841*, p. 461ff.

Catherine McAuley and the Clergy—Joys and Sorrows Mingled

Sheila Carney, R.S.M.

In the booklet, *Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley*—a compilation of passages from the *Familiar Instructions* and the *Retreat Instructions*—Catherine exhorts, "Priests are the most special representatives of Our Lord; and if *we* do not treat them as such—*we* who have been so well instructed as to their exalted office—who will?"[1] In this statement, we find evidence of her own deep respect for the clergy and, perhaps also, the conviction that sustained her through some of the most painful and disturbing experiences she endured in her life as founder. The fact that these experiences grew out of misunderstandings and struggles with members of the clergy may have tested, but failed to diminish, the reverence and gratitude she felt toward the priests and bishops with whom she interacted. The two incidents that most clearly depict the struggle are the chaplaincy controversy and the situation that arose in relationship to the creation of the school at Kingston.

The Chaplaincy Crisis

From the dedication of the chapel at Baggot Street on June 4, 1829 until his assignment to the African missions in 1837, Father Daniel Burke, O.F.M., served as chaplain to the Sisters and the residents at the House of Mercy. In addition to presiding at daily liturgy, Fr. Burke was regularly called upon to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to offer spiritual advise to the resident of the House of Mercy as they prepared to go into situations in Dublin. The requests for his presence and ministry were consistent and time consuming.

Nevertheless, upon Father Burke's departure, Dean Walter Meyler, pastor of Saint Andrew's Parish, Westland Row, declined the request of Archbishop Murray to assign from among his curates a regular chaplain for the ministry. He thought instead to have the curates respond as they were available to requests for their service. Dean Meyler also objected to the stipend offered for their services and demanded higher remuneration.

Catherine, on the other hand, was steadfast in her conviction that the ministries at Baggot Street, and especially the women in the House of Mercy, required a regular and consistent chaplain. She also thought the offered stipend more than fair, comparing it with the recompense offered to the Carmelite Father O'Hanlon who often assisted in preparing Sisters for profession.[2]

Months of meetings and letters ensued during which the Baggot Street residents daily went out for mass and Catherine observed and rued what she described, to Archbishop Murray's secretary, Fr. John Hamilton, as a serious decline in the deportment of the young women going out from the House of Mercy. "They leave us now, as they came, and there is noise and quarrelling amongst them,

The fact that some of the most painful and disturbing experiences Catherine endured in her life grew out of misunderstandings and struggles with members of the clergy may have tested, but failed to diminish, the reverence and gratitude she felt toward the priests and bishops with whom she interacted.

which the participation of the Sacraments with due instruction, used to cure."[3]

Eventually, this situation was resolved, with significant concessions on Catherine's part. She acceded to the demands for a higher stipend for the permanent chaplain whom Dean Meyler now agreed to appoint, and requested of the archdiocese a charitable allowance in order to help defray this cost. And she acquiesced to the demand that the chapel at Baggot Street be closed to all except the residents. Arriving at resolution in this long protracted dispute took its toll on Catherine. She carried it with her even when absent from Dublin. In October 1837, she wrote to Sister dePazzi Delaney, "Will you relieve me from the distressing business about the chaplain? It is constantly before me and makes me dread going home. I know it is not possible for me to have any more argument with Dr. Meyler without extreme agitation."[4]

The depth of pain that Catherine experiences from these two situations is evident from the fact that, private as she was about her personal feelings, she revealed the extent of her suffering in several letters during this period.

The Kensington Debt

This same experience of agitation exerted itself in the Kingston situation. Saint Patrick's Convent, founded in 1835, was situated close to the seaside and was intended to be a place of convalescence for Sisters recovering from illness. Visitation of the sick was to be the only ministry. Soon, however, Catherine proposed the establishment of a school for the many unoccupied young girls she found on her visitations. In suggesting this ministry to Father Bartholomew Sheridan, pastor, she made it clear that the Sisters could offer space in the garden and carriage house for the school, but had little by way of financial resources to contribute. She did, however, offer the proceeds of a bazaar to get the work started. Father Sheridan supported the project and promised to apply to the Board of Education for a grant to finance it.[5]

James Nugent was hired to complete the necessary renovations and, when the work was completed, a bill was sent to Catherine for 450 pounds. It seems that, having paid the first fifty pounds, proceeds from the bazaar that she had committed, she made herself answerable for the entire debt. Father Sheridan's promise to apply to the Board of Education went unfulfilled. James Nugent sued Catherine for payment of the debt and the courts upheld his claim.

In an effort to speak lightly of this situation in a letter to Archbishop Murray, she suggested, "Perhaps, my Lord, I cannot be said to have given it since the builder took it from the table—a heavy parcel of silver."[6] Unaccountably, this letter was forwarded to Fr. Sheridan. He then passed it on to Mr. Nugent whose interpretation was that it charged him with taking the money by force. To the Sisters and to Charles Cavanaugh, Catherine's solicitor, Nugent called her "a cheat and a liar" while Father Sheridan described her as "cunning and clever."[7]

Catherine's Supporters

The depth of pain that Catherine experiences from these two situations is evident from the fact that, private as she was about her personal feelings, she revealed the extent of her suffering in several letters during this period. Her plea to Sister dePazzi Delaney to try to settle the chaplaincy dispute in her absence was quoted above. At the end of a lengthy letter to Father John Sheridan in which she described the protracted negotiations with Dean Meyler, she wrote, "The only apology I can offer for all this writing is that it comforted and relieves my mind to declare the truth where I trust I am not suspected of insincerity."[8] Most poignant, perhaps, was her request to Frances Warde, "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence."[9]

In the face of these painful and negative experiences, it is perhaps difficult to understand Catherine's exhortation to respect for the clergy. Here, however, we witness the balance that she sought and also enjoined on the early Sisters. Our lives are a repeating rhythm of joys and sorrows, she believed, and descriptions of this rhythm occur frequently in her writings. The sequence of cross and crown is drawn out in letters to Elizabeth Moore and Frances Warde. "Bless and Love the Fatherly hand which has hurt you. He will soon come, with both hands filled with favors and blessings."[10] And ". . . the comfort comes soon after a well received trial."[11]

For every Walter Meyler and Bartholomew Sheridan—sources of bitterness and anxiety—there were others who advised and supported and sustained her and the community. Andrew Lube, Miles Gaffney, and Joseph Nugent were friends and spiritual advisors from her Coolock days. The assistance offered by Edward Armstrong and Michael Blake during the planning of the house at Baggot Street is detailed in a letter to Elizabeth Moore.

> Doctor Blake & Revd. Mr. Armstrong were chiefly concerned—received all the ideas I had formed—and consulted for 2 years at least before the House was built. I am sure Doctor Blake had it constantly before him in all his communications with Heaven—for I can never forget his fervent prayers—when it was in progress.[12]

She expressed similar sentiments of gratitude to Father Andrew Fitzgerald, president of Carlow College, in a letter of July 3, 1838. "I can never forget all the animating, lively hope that you created in my mind when we were rising out of nothing."[13]

The Carmelite Fathers at Clarendon Street, especially Francis L'Estrange and Redmond O'Hanlon, offered friendship, provisions for the chapel at Baggot Street and a resting place for the first Sisters who died. Daniel Burke, O.F.M. not only provided chaplaincy services at Baggot Street for eight years, but sometimes walked around the house late at night during the time that Catherine was at George's Hill to be sure that all the lights were out and that the women inside were at their rest.[14] These clerical friends also accompanied Catherine on foundation journeys, supported, encouraged, and advised her during the chaplaincy and Kingston experiences, advocated for the approval of her Rule in Rome and contributed financially to her work.

Chief among her supporters and advocates was Daniel Murray from whom Catherine received her first Holy Communion. By the time she was planning her ministry at Baggot Street he had become archbishop of Dublin and he offered "his most cordial approbation and visited frequently—all was done under his direction from the time we entered the House."[15] Archbishop Murray encouraged Catherine to found a religious community, agreed to approve a Rule without the imposition of cloister and, on the first anniversary of its opening, sanctioned the name "Mercy" for the institution and the works at Baggot Street. He also obtained approbation for the congregation from Gregory VI.

For every Walter Meyler and Bartholomew Sheridan—sources of bitterness and anxiety—there were others who advised and supported and sustained her and the community.

While Catherine and a local ordinary sometimes disagreed concerning the admission of a candidate without sufficient dowry, on the whole, the bishops with whom she worked admired and aided her. In a letter to Angela Dunne on January 20, 1841, she writes that the petition for the approval of the Rule "was accompanied by letters of strong recommendation" from eight bishops in Ireland and England. These letters notwithstanding, the wait for word of confirmation seemed protracted and evoked a comment of humorous exasperation in a letter to Frances Warde.

"These good Bishops take their own full time to consider any little affair, and those that are, like myself rather impatient for an answer, may just as well make up the mind to wait for one."[16]

Considering Foundations

Catherine's ease with the hierarchy is also glimpsed in the story of John England's unsuccessful attempt to convince her to make a foundation to Charleston, South Carolina. Catherine assured him that, with so many foundation already undertaken, Baggot Street was experiencing a severe shortage of professed Sisters. He asked, nonetheless, to place his petition before the community and she agreed. Before his arrival the next morning, Catherine conspired with Margaret Dwyer, a postulant. When Bishop England asked for a volunteer to act as superior on a Charleston foundation, Margaret Dwyer stepped forward and the point was made.

Catherine's even-handed and even-hearted manner of relating to the clergy is described by Angela Bolster in the *Positio*. She writes, "Clerical opposition reared its head just when progress in Baggot Street seemed secured; yet in neither condemning nor complaining against them, Catherine made no distinction between the priests who supported her and those who were responsible for some of her most bitter trials." This great generosity of spirit manifest itself clearly in Catherine's manner of receiving Dean Meyler who visited her deathbed. Vincent Whitty describes the scene. "She begged Dr. Meyler's pardon yesterday—if she ever did or said any thing to displease him—he said she ought not to think of that now & promised, I will take care and do all I can for your spiritual children—she looked at him so pleased and said, will you—then May God help & reward you for it."[17]

In *A Woman Sings of Mercy*, Carmel Bourke writes that, in choosing foundation superiors, Catherine considered the pluses and minus of each Sister.[18] Catherine nurtured a life-long discipline of considering the gifts and limitation of persons, of recognizing the blessings and trials in relationships, of accepting joys and sorrows, of embracing cross and crown. Her trust in the rhythmic evidences of God's providence enabled her to be steady and respectful in times of opposition while remaining committed to her position. The generous and supportive friendship of the many priests and bishops who were friends and collaborators enabled her to withstand the pain of dealing with the few who were not. She learned, as she wrote to Frances Warde that "Comfort" does indeed, "come after the well received trial."[19]

Notes

1 Bolster, Angela. *Documentary Study for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Catherine McAuley*, Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Prot. N. 1296 (Rome, 1985): 380.
2 Sullivan, Mary C. ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818–1841* (Baltimore: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004):113.
3 Ibid., p. 124.
4 Ibid., p. 96.
5 Bolster, op. cit., p. 306.
6 Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, 1818–1841, p. 165.
7 Ibid., p. 165.
8 Ibid., p. 113.
9 Ibid., p. 144.
10 Ibid., p. 159.
11 Ibid., p. 126.
12 Ibid., p. 179.
13 Ibid., p. 147.
14 Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995): 205.
15 Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818–1841*, p. 179.
16 Ibid., p. 430.
17 Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, p. 243.
18 Bourke, Carmel, *A Woman Sings of Mercy* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1987): 68.
19 Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818–1841*, p. 126.

Identity of Religious Women: "... as ithers see us ..."

Mary Jeremy Daigler, R.S.M.

Oh wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
T' see ourselves as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.
—Robert Burns, 1759–1796

The Current Reality

An Unclear Identity

Try as we may to clarify our identity as vowed women religious, we continually encounter *individuals* who have no idea of what our life is for or about. Non-Catholic employees at our large institutions still ask conversationally, "Sister, does your husband work here?" This occurs despite our publicly proclaimed vow of chaste celibacy. Even "cradle Catholics" wonder why we take time away from work for community events and travel such as to pre-Chapters or planning meetings. They cannot see the connection that we think is very clear between those activities and our practice of obedience, which "impels us to search together for God's will." Often our neighbors are puzzled by how similar to theirs our lifestyles seem to be and raise an interior eyebrow upon bumping into us at the dealership as we pick up a new car. Our *Constitutions*' explanation of our practice of poverty that "we surrender the independent use and disposal of material goods" is clear to few but ourselves. Non-Catholic and non-Christian women approach us to find out how they can become Sisters of Mercy, revealing to us that our identity as a community of Roman Catholic women is not clear to them. In this example, the inquirer's misunderstanding about us is perhaps reasonable since the phrase "Roman Catholic" appears nowhere in our *Constitutions*, and we generally speak about our relationship to "the Church" without specifying which one.[1] Our presumption that everyone else can read between the lines is false.

There is abundant evidence in each religious life that Sisters are recognized by others to be generous, kind, "different," helpful, well-educated, "sweet," competent, and a myriad of other positive adjectives. But those descriptors can apply to any person and they do not get to the essence of the vowed individual's life, nor of our communal life. The values to which we witness are inferred from our behavior, ministry choices, interpersonal interactions, educational directions, together with our rituals, such as community events, wakes and funerals, Chapters, incorporation ceremonies, and our public profession of vows. Our values also are embodied visually in such things as our home décor, the cars we drive, our clothing, and manner with others. We may have good reasons for our choices, but, if they confuse the "viewer," they can be counterproductive to our role as witnesses or "sacraments."

Not only are individuals unclear or misinformed about our identity, but institutions and society at large do not grasp what Sisters are about. Some Catholic colleges and universities presume that their vowed religious employees do not need to receive salaries comparable to their lay colleagues. When the pope is out and about amongst crowds, the photographers deliberately take pictures of habited Sisters, thus perpetuating an im-

Our *Constitutions*' explanation of our practice of poverty that "we surrender the independent use and disposal of material goods" is clear to few but ourselves.

age of our identity that is no longer universally true. The media publish stories implying that Rome pays for our health care and retirement needs and thus deserves sympathy for its financial problems.[2] The stage, screen, and advertising worlds continue to misrepresent our lives.

We think we are bearing witness to one set of values, and usually the surrounding culture perceives in us something very different. If individuals, institutions, and society do not see us clearly, perhaps it is not their fault.

We think we are bearing witness to one set of values, and usually the surrounding culture perceives in us something very different. If individuals, institutions, and society do not see us clearly, perhaps it is not their fault. One can presume that our current discussion about clarifying our identity flows from that realization. Yet the first step must be to learn how others actually see us. Then we can either change our public statements that are expressed in a private language understood by only ourselves or we can change our behaviors. Or we can decide that it is not important that anyone other than ourselves understand the deep significance of the vowed religious life: "As long as they perceive us to be kind and merciful, that's enough." Only after gathering data and analyzing it can we make an informed choice that seems most true to our identity. With the poet Robert Burns, therefore, I moan: Oh would that some Power give us the gift to see ourselves as others see us! If we were to receive that gift, it would indeed "free us from many a blunder and foolish notion" in our identity discussions.

The Principle of Sacramentality

The fact that we do spend much time, energy, and resources on clarifying our identity so as to be a clear sacrament flows from our Catholicity. No theological principle or focus is more characteristic of Catholicism, or more central to its identity, than the principle of sacramentality, writes Richard McBrien.[3] This principle includes not merely the seven formal sacraments, but habitual practice of reverencing all the moments of human experience and all created things because we and they are all sacraments or "sacramentals," as earlier times had it. And what is it to be a sacrament?

Theologians Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, and Edward Schillebeeckx described the function of a sacrament as showing us that God is "already always there." In our daily lives, we often find that this is what our purpose in life and ministry amounts to: not bringing God to a situation—for God is already there—but simply revealing the divine presence by our actions or words. The adage attributed to St. Francis of Assisi captures our day-to-day life and ministry: We preach the gospel at all times and only if necessary do we use words.

We know from our experience that a sacrament bears witness. The formal sacrament of matrimony, for example, does not cause a couple to love one another, nor even cause them to remain perpetually committed to one another. The sacrament bears clear, public witness to the already existing reality of their love and of their commitment to life-long fidelity.

Sisters of Mercy continue to grapple with the question of how to make our life's meaning better understood, not only because theologians challenge us to do so, but because our founder herself also reminded her community members, "We should be as shining lamps, giving light to all around us." Perhaps she was adapting the gospel passage that urges the followers of Jesus in these words, "Let your light so shine before all, that they may see your good works and give glory to God who is in heaven."[4] In any case, theologians, gospel writers and holy persons rely on the imagery of "light" to urge us to be clear about our identity, not for ourselves but so that whose who view our lives will give praise to God.

Sisters Presented in the Media

How others see us is the measure of our sacrament-ing, and we can easily gather some data on

that subject by viewing photographs, cartoons, comedy, and movies "t' see ourselves as ithers see us." On the one hand, Sisters have very often been pictured as silly, little girl-ish, naïve, and asexual. The photographic persistence of habited merry-go-round riders, ice cream cone eaters, softball players and hula hoop-ers illustrates this phenomenon. This we recognize and find annoying. On the other hand, some of us were outraged at the nationally published 2004 cartoon by Pat Oliphant, who portrayed Mel Gibson as a tiny child being banished from the classroom by a towering, black-habited, ugly, ruler-wielding, snarling Sister. The cartoon caption implied that it was from Sisters that Gibson learned the violence and brutality he includes in his films, especially "The Passion of the Christ."[5] A certain percentage of the population perceives women religious as bitter, angry, mean, and physically abusive. Parades and comedy acts routinely include men dressed in women's religious habits, usually engaging in frivolous, seductive, or lascivious behavior. In visual arts, satire, and entertainment, we find that a certain percentage of the population imagines us to be sexually perverse and libertine beneath our external image.

The popular medium of film, too, reveals a great deal about how writers, producers, and directors have often perceived women religious. Documentaries are written for a more educated audience and so their writers and producers generally do some serious preparation. However, feature films are meant to appeal to society at large, in order to increase box office revenues. Such films reveal the perceptions, fantasies, and confusion of the movie industry as well as of the general public. They resonate, to a certain extent, with what the audience understands us to be, or else they would not appeal to the public.

As an indicator of the studios' concern about financial gain, we notice that there was a proliferation of films about Sisters after the Roman Catholic Church organized The Catholic Legion of Decency in 1933, forbidding under pain of serious sin that Catholics attend certain movies. In order not to lose a Catholic audience and its money, the studios decided to makes films of particular attractiveness or inspiration to Roman Catholics. Noting this trend, you will find at the end of this article a list of some of these films and their dates of release. The list would be even longer if films about priests and brothers were included.

In addition to the films about Sisters intended to attract mainstream Catholics, there exists, too, a cinematic subgenre called "Nunsploitation"—films that cater to a minority of viewers. They are pornographic, explicitly sexual, and usually violent in their content; and, though they are not worth viewing, it is very important for us to remember that some people do see us in that way.[6] Women religious would be naïve to discount the relevance of this subgenre in our attempts to clarify our identity.

Sisters have very often been pictured as silly, little girl-ish, naïve, and asexual. On the other hand, a certain percentage of the population perceives women religious as bitter, angry, mean, and physically abusive.

Analysis of Films about Sisters

Human experience is the ground for theologizing, and one can experience some of the films listed below that substantiate—for the most part—the claims made above. In each film listed, a woman religious is either the primary character, as in "Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison," or in a significant supporting role, as in "Company of Strangers." Some of the films are available for rental only at art film shops or through a library. Most of the films were made during the period in which Sisters were actually very clear about their identity, which lends a touch of historical irony to the viewing of them. Recall that chastity was associated with our garb, poverty with our lack of spending money, obedience with the annual turnover of Sister staff in our ministries. How could the vowed religious life have been so full of clear externals, and still so misunderstood and misportrayed?

The exercise of viewing films is most useful if some reflection is done during and afterwards. It is

especially instructive and rich when viewed and discussed with others.

1. Consider how each vow was represented, both explicitly (words, deeds, appearance, demeanor) or implicitly. Recall a scene depicting that representation.
2. What is the Sister's attitude toward "the world"? Does she feel that the world is good, bad, to be feared or something else? What scene reveals that attitude of hers?
3. Consider the same three questions about her attitude toward her body, and then her attitude toward the Catholic Church.
4. Describe her personality.
5. Notice the reaction to her from those around her.
6. Overall, to what was she trying to witness?
7. Was she effective in that attempt?

Selected Feature Films about Vowed Women Religious

Thais (1914, 1916, 1984)
The Gray [sic] Nun of Belgium (1915)
Teresa de Jesus (Avila) (TV series 1984; silent film 1927)
Cradle Song (1933)
Song of Bernadette (1943)
Bells of St. Mary (1945)
Black Narcissus (1946)
Come to the Stable (1949)
Thunder on the Hill (1951)
Seawife (1957)
Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison (1957)
Conspiracy of Hearts (1960)
The Nun's Story (1960)
Lilies of the Field (1963)
Father Goose (1964)
The Sound of Music (1965)
The Singing Nun (1966)
The Trouble with Angels (1966)
The Nun (1966)
Flying Nun (made for TV 1967)
Where Angels Go, Trouble Follows (1968) (a.k.a. Strangers in Good Company)
Change of Habit (1970)
Two Mules for Sister Sarah (1970)
Brother Sun, Sister Moon (1972)
In This House of Brede (1975)
The Abbess of Crewe (1976) a.k.a. Nasty Habits
Blues Brothers (1980)
Body and Soul (made for TV 1981)
Shattered Vows (1984)
Agnes of God (1985)
Therese (of Lisieux) (1986)
Nunsense (1986)
Damned if You Don't (1987)
Company of Strangers (1990)
I, the Worst of All (Spanish) (1990)
Nuns on the Run (1990)
Brides of Christ (made for TV 1991)
Sister Act I and II (1992 and 1993)
Anchoress (1995)
Dead Man Walking (1995)
Wide Awake (1998)
Mr. Barrington (2003)
The Magdalene Sisters (2003)
Pact of Silence (2003)

Conclusion

There is no denying that society has created and perpetuated a distorted and sometimes completely erroneous image of vowed women religious. Why is our witnessing to our profoundest meaning so ineffective? Is it "them"? Is it "us"? Is it inevitable? Unless we wish to continue the image of ourselves as naïve ("Most people understand what our mission and meaning is") or unrealistic ("It does not matter what others think of us"), our struggle to be clear, cogent witnesses will continue.

We can take some inspiration from the gospel and lives of the holy women. The following incidents and individuals indicate that the problem does not belong to us alone.

> He was in the world, and through him the world was made, yet the world did not know who he was (John 1:10).
>
> And they rose up and put him [Jesus] out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill where the city

> was built, so that they might throw him down headlong (Luke 4:29).
>
> And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebel and by the prince of demons (Mark 3:22).
>
> John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a drunkard and a glutton" (Matt 12:18).

Hildegard of Bingen's witness in giving Christian burial to a young revolutionary resulted in the Church's imposition of an interdict on her monastery.

> Catherine was then [in 1837] the target for particularly harsh criticism and injustice.[7]

There is something appealing about choosing the "inevitability" answer to the question about the need to clarify our identity. At the very least, it relieves us of the struggle to make ourselves clearly understood. At the very most, it can put us in touch with the great women and men of our Judaeo-Christian tradition for whom others' misunderstanding led to explicit rejection and occasional violence.

We recall that our most basic identity is enshrined in our Constitutions: "We profess by public vows to live in chastity, poverty, and obedience, and to serve the poor, sick and ignorant."

Notes

1 For sections on the vows as quoted, see Constitutions §§ 2, 20, 24, 28.

2 For example, "Church faces huge shortfall for care of retired in orders" *Baltimore Sun* (July 28, 2006).

3 Richard McBrien, "The Church is Catholic Because it is Sacramental." *National Catholic Reporter* (January 15, 1993).

4 Matthew (5:16).

5 The cartoon can be found online at washingtonpost.com February 26, 2004. Caption reads: "In his early school days, little Mel Gibson gets beaten to a bloody pulp by Sister Dolorosa Excruciata of the Little Sisters of the Holy Agony, and an idea is born." There are sexual exploitation films about other groups besides women religious.

7 M. Carmel Bourke, *A Woman Sings of Mercy* (Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1987): 31.

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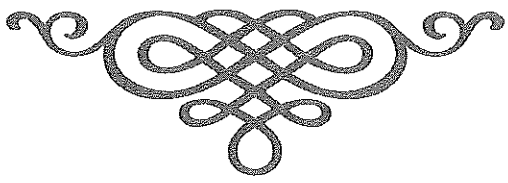

What is the Identity of a Sister?
Vatican Documents and Canon Lawn

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., and Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.

(ER) Paul proposes a mega-identity for Galatians as a believing community, "There is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free; all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:24–26). Obviously, the Galatians were debating several fundamental questions: Who are we? How are we different from other groups in Galatia? How do our religious beliefs unite us, even if we are very different as individuals? Is it really possible to imagine ourselves in a way that transcends our differences?

(VV) The report from phase one of Sacred Circles dated 18 October 2007 mentions that a goal of the process was to come to a common understanding of our identity. What the process found was deep desires, yet diverse understandings, which flow from a range of theologies that have evolved in our life together. With Catherine McAuley, we all seem to agree that our lives are centered in God for whom alone we go forward or stay back. The law of the Church calls us to preserve the heart of our Institute as Catherine established it (canon 578). The feedback from Sacred Circles finds that we hold together the shared values of our quest for God, our trust in divine providence, our love for our community of Mercy and our value of union and charity. Beyond that core, we find ourselves diverse.

(ER) Analogous questions face women religious in trying to imagine our identity as distinct from other women. Since Vatican II, we tried to free ourselves from an identity based on a model of the states of perfection, in which celibacy was imagined as a higher spiritual calling than marriage. Now we imagine these states as parallel paths, or a wheel on a horizontal plane. Religious women are less numerous than laity, and have chosen a distinct form of relationship with God in the Church. But the call to holiness is extended to all believers, no matter their state in life. Thus, theologically, we understand union with God as the call given to all followers of Jesus, no matter their state in life (*Lumen Gentium*, § 43).

(VV) Religious life is not a kind of intermediate way between the clerical and lay states of life, but a special gift for the entire Church calling forth both lay and clerical members (*Mutuae Relationes* § 10). Although we treasure our membership in the Catholic Church, our Sacred Circles feedback tells us there is diversity among us regarding the institutional face of the Church. The Church is more than her institutional face. We are the Church. It is our responsibility not merely to criticize but to work from within for reform we might see as needed in both community and Church.

(ER) Is the solution to diversity of views among us as women to imagine that "we are one in Christ Jesus?" Our diversity involves geographic location, family history, native talents, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, first language, education, work and ministerial history, ecclesial culture, and time of entrance and novitiate training. At what point does diversity of opinion about Church teaching, for example, start to shred our identity as women of the Church?

(VV) Sacred Circles feedback tells us that we desire to live a kind of spirituality that brings balance in our lives. It seems we yearn for the rhythm of contemplation and action at the heart of Mercy identity in Mercy Constitutions § 15. We affirm that our highest rule of life is to be the following of Christ as proposed in the gospel (canon 662) and prayer is at the heart of that discipleship (canon 663). We already hold much in common about our identity.

(ER) In one sense, Paul's solution of a transcendent commitment to the following of Jesus makes us like the early Christians. We share a common belief, a common baptism, a common claim to belong to the

community of The Way, those who identity with Jesus of Nazareth, as our teacher and Lord. In this sense, women religious are one with all baptized Christians. Even though there may be differences of history and doctrine with Protestant churches, baptism creates a communion with all who name Jesus as Lord and Savior. Because of this sacramental bond, we are destined, as *Vita Consecrata* (1996) says, to be "experts in communion."

(VV) Vatican II reminded us that our consecration in vows is "rooted in that of baptism and is a fuller expression of it (*Perfectae Caritatis* § 5). The focus of our lives must be the closer following of Christ (*Evangelica Testificatio* § 7). In 1987, speaking in San Francisco, John Paul II addressed religious of the United States and called us to "a heightened awareness of the urgent needs of the modern world where religious, in close union with the bishops and in close collaboration with the whole Church, seek to carry out the work of the Good Shepherd, the Good Samaritan and the Good Teacher."

(ER) A troubled relationship with the institutional Church, which many religious feel is "patriarchal and oppressive" still does not diminish the fact of our claim as baptized persons to share all the privileges of membership as Roman Catholics. As baptized women and as members of a pontifical institute, we identify ourselves as having a special, visible, consecrated, and ministerial relationship within the institutional Church. Mercy Sisters, however, are not a "church within a church." We are committed to ongoing dialogue within the Church. In some ways, we can imagine ourselves as not only praying for the Church, but also thinking for the Church. We develop our thoughts and giving voice to our self-understanding within the Church, not as a secret, but as a light set on a bushel basket.

(VV) Religious life means life in the Church. Our vows are a public commitment taken before the Church (*Lumen Gentium* § 44). Our ministry is not the work of individual persons even when one of us might be the only Sister of Mercy serving in a particular place. Our ministry is not the work of Mercy alone but work that is entrusted to the Institute by the Church. For this reason, the apostolic activity of religious institutes is not simply a human effort to do good but "an action that is deeply ecclesial" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* § 60). The Church gives the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas a public sharing in the Church's own mission (*Ad Gentes* § 40). Sacred Circles feedback tells us that we value the prophetic role that religious life is to serve in our Church and world, but we stumble in our personal and communal integrity of living out such a role. If we are to call our world to justice, we must first be just among ourselves carefully safeguarding the rights especially of the least among us, making sure that all our internal processes respect the rights of each member.

(ER) The vows of women religious do not diminish, but rather expand the claims and entitlements to express themselves, and to receive just treatment by the Church, for example in the area of employment contracts. It is a mistake for women religious to think that since they have vows, they "traded in" or sacrificed the rights they would have if they had remained baptized laywomen.

(VV) As vowed religious, we must stand up for our rights and also the rights of those who find themselves unable to defend themselves in society and in Church. Sacred Circles feedback tells us that we continue to feel deeply called to live out our fourth vow of service, yet some of us wonder if our institutions have served their purpose as our personal participation in such institutions diminishes. In 1987, John Paul II praised the fruits of our ministry: "Every place I have visited in this vast country bears the marks of the diligent labor and immense spiritual energies of religious of both contemplative and active congregations in the Church." He went on to praise the Catholic education and health care systems and the highly developed network of social services. "The history of the Church in this country is in large measure your history at the service of God's people."

(ER) Another aspect of the identity of women religious is the simple human fact of having been born women, not born men. For decades, the spiritual teaching represented in those volumes on the shelves of our convent libraries represented an approach which assumed that the souls of men and women were not essentially different. Most of the volumes were written by men, with certain social stereotypes about how women should "turn out" and behave. Women religious will profit from a re-examination of the kind of spiritual teaching that formed them—what is of permanent worth,

and what must be sorted and set aside, according to wise, discerning feminist analysis?

(VV) The first book of the Bible tells us that God created us in the divine image, which is both male and female. For centuries, most religious inquiry and writing was done by men. Humanity suffered from that one-sided perspective. Before other lay women could hold positions such as administrator of a hospital or principal of a school, women religious enjoyed such privilege. It is our privilege, our right, and our serious duty to add the perspective of woman to the wisdom of society and Church. It has been our goal since the founding event and our goal articulated in the first Institute Chapter to support women who are seeking fullness of life in society and Church. That seeking of full life now has a new dimension for us as Mercy in different kinds of commitment: members, associates, and Mercy Corps and perhaps the still developing role of companions. The fifth type of diversity among us that arose from the Sacred Circles sharing is a desire to complement one another in various forms of commitment in advancing the mission and spirituality of Mercy while not blurring the identity of the varied forms of commitment.

(ER) Women religious can find sisterhood with women taking cues from liberation movements in third world countries. Through United Nations sponsored programs, women focus on the need to challenge and reform patterns of subordination which subject them as civilians to violence in war, as well as familial, sexual, economic, and political discrimination. Women religious are women like other women, not just ministers to women in need. To find solidarity with other women as human beings opens up new dimensions of the meaning of religious life.

(VV) A second phase of Sacred Circles is being planned for the Institute to help us come to a deeper communal understanding about our identity. In 1987, John Paul II spoke of the past twenty years bearing witness to "the enduring identity of religious consecration and mission in the life of the Church. At the same time, they have testified to the need for religious to adapt their activity to the needs of the people in our times." Religious consecration "belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium* § 44). In Mercy, we have always seen ourselves called to respond to the cry of the poor (Constitutions § 3) and assess the needs of our time (§ 7). What aspects of our current reality call us to the prophetic edges of life and into the future as women religious?

(ER) A blurry area of the identity of women religious is their citizenship. I heard a respected woman religious say at a professional meeting recently, "But when we entered religious life, we knew that we were going to serve God through our community's mission, and we agreed to forego our rights." I agreed that surely this includes some rights, such as the right to marry, and to live wherever we choose. But as far as other claims any citizen has—freedom to vote, to have one's privacy protected, to seek redress for wrongs and injuries, to have one's physical safety protected by law enforcement, to be guaranteed access to transportation and education without discrimination, to have insurance claims enforced, to have the same standards against sexual harassment apply whether in secular or religious employment—these expectations are surely based on the fact of my citizenship, not the fact that I am baptized or have vows.

(VV) Since Vatican II, the Church has been clear that there are rights of the human person that flow from divine law. *Gaudium et Spes* lists some of those rights: "[E]verything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and right full freedom even in matters religious" (GS, § 26). As women religious, we retain our rights as human beings and our rights as citizens of the countries in which we reside. We do not lose these rights in becoming religious profession but we gain rights in the Church specifically as members of an Institute of Consecrated Life. It is important that we become aware of our rights and ensure that they are safeguarded in our internal processes. There is that old saying, "What you are is shouting so loud that I cannot hear what you are saying." If we would be prophets of the reign of God in our times calling others to justice as well as mercy, we must first be just among ourselves.

Book Review: *From Piety to Professionalism—and Back?* by Patricia Wittberg

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.

Genre: Non-fiction: Women in charitable work; Monastic and religious life of women; Women in the professions; Group identity; Religious institutions

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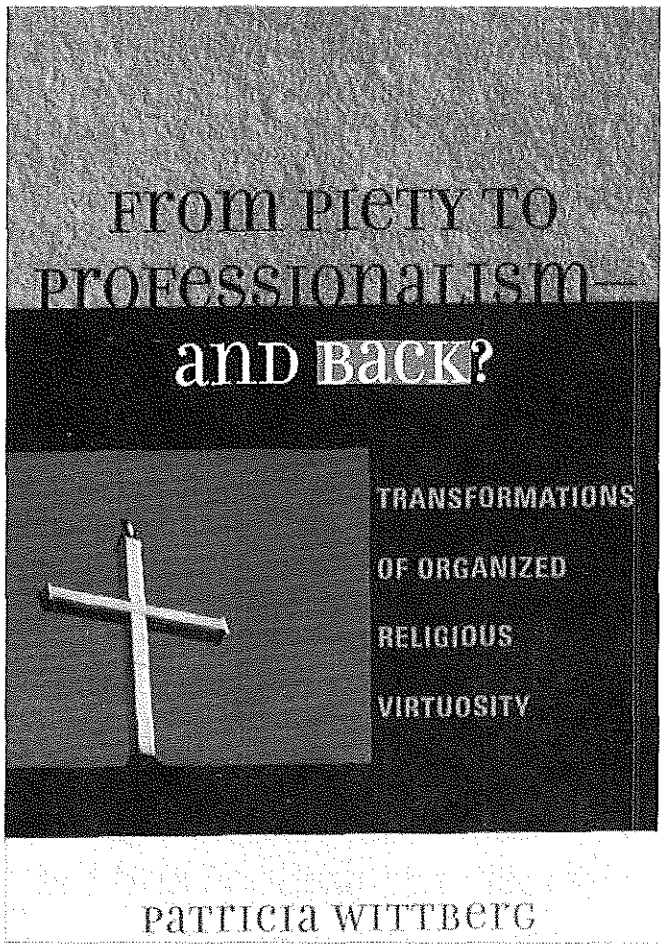

Ambiguity abounds in Patricia Wittberg's latest work. "From piety to professionalism" suggests linear progression, perhaps even deterioration. However, the closing phrase—"and back"—suggests a circular motion, perhaps even a spiral development. The question mark of her title continues to be significant as her study unfolds. Wittberg is a sociologist. She is studying, through the lens of sociology, the phenomenon of women's organized religious virtuosity[1] within mainline Christian denominations. How have women's religious virtuosi organizations served mainline Churches? In what ways have their life cycles been similar? In what ways have they differed? Why? How has the decline of the institutional base of these organizations effected the ecclesiastical institutions and, within that reality, the sponsoring organizations themselves? The latter question, in particular, is Wittberg's concern.

Her main argument in *Piety* is that the attenuation or dissolution of their institutional ties has affected denominations—and especially specific denominational subgroups such as Catholic religious orders, Protestant deaconesses, or women's missionary societies—in profoundly important ways: shifting or obliterating their recruitment bases, eroding their power both in society and in the larger denomination, altering the backgrounds and expectations of their leaders, and often causing fundamental transformations in the very identity and culture of the groups themselves (Wittberg, p. 11–12).

Wittberg makes no judgment regarding this fundamental transformation. Her purpose is to raise consciousness regarding the reality and to encourage exploration and evaluation within the various organizations vis-à-vis the sociological data offered.

Patricia Wittberg is imminently qualified to provide an analysis of such transformations within organized religious virtuosity. As a member of the

Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, she has spent several decades of her own life within a Roman Catholic religious congregation experiencing the transformations she describes. More importantly, she has spent the last twenty years of her scholarly life pursuing the phenomenon of religious virtuosity as exemplified by Roman Catholic religious congregations of women. She has three previous works—*Creating a Future for Religious Life* (Paulist Press, 1991), *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders* (SUNY Press, 1994) and *Pathways to Re-creating Religious Communities* (Paulist Press, 1996). These attest to her contributions to a subdiscipline within the sociological field of religious virtuosity. Her latest work broadens the focus of her study beyond Catholic religious orders to embrace Protestant deaconesses and women of missionary societies within Protestant churches.

Wittberg acknowledges in the introduction that Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M., "first alerted me to the similarities in the experiences of Catholic religious orders and Protestant Women's Missionary Societies" (p. xi). She also acknowledges, in the same introduction, that the Sisters of Mercy of the Baltimore Regional Community/South Central Community provided financial resources and focus group participants for her research endeavor.

Her chapters address the impact of institutions—both religious virtuosi organizations and the service organizations they sponsor—on organizational identity, recruitment, and power; and the impact of the decline of these institutions on matters of identity, recruitment, and power for the denominations, but, especially, for the religious virtuosi organizations themselves.

This, then, is a book based somewhat on "our story" as Sisters of Mercy and may be of interest for that reason alone. Reading this work, however, requires a certain awareness of technique and purpose as well as an appreciation of the contribution of various disciplines to the meaning of human experience. Watching a sociologist analyze a history you have lived and a vocation you treasure will be fascinating to many deaconesses, Sisters, and members of missionary societies. To others, this experience may be frustrating and, perhaps, discouraging.

The theological framework that validates the understanding of the transcendent aspect of these women's religious virtuosi organizations is absent—and necessarily so. Wittberg's discipline is sociology. She is studying the sociological reality of these organizations. She assumes that these congregations belong to the world in which they function and, therefore, organizational, political, and sociological principles influence their reality; these same categories can be used to examine elements of their experience in a particular time and place. She does not assert that these are the only principles affecting this congregational reality, but only that these are the principles she is equipped to utilize in her analysis and study. She offers her contribution to understanding current happenings within these realities from the perspective of her expertise.

Wittberg's theoretical lens is organizational sociology. She examines Roman Catholic sisterhoods, Protestant deaconesses, and Protestant missionary societies through the culture (rituals, symbols, deep story) around which they construct their choices and activities and shape the values and beliefs of their members and through the organizational field in which they find themselves. She moves carefully through data garnered in a review of the literature regarding the dynamics of development and decline in organizational life and the secularization of religious institutions.

Her significant and creative energy, however, rests in the manner in which she brings personal experiences and insights gleaned from numerous focus group sessions to bear on the question of the impact of these phenomenon on the sponsoring religious body—both organization and denomination.

Her chapters address the impact of institutions—both religious virtuosi organizations and the service organizations they sponsor—on orga-

nizational identity, recruitment, and power; and the impact of the decline of these institutions on matters of identity, recruitment, and power for the denominations, but, especially, for the religious virtuosi organizations themselves. For example, Wittberg asserts in chapter 8: "Impacts on Identity II: Common Life and Culture" that "schools, hospitals, and social service agencies . . . provided locales in which 'communities of memory' could develop" (p. 187). Through these common experiences of working together, Sisters and deaconesses and mission society members built a sense of tradition and purpose and common story. She then proceeds through specific conversations within the focus group sessions to address the question: What happens when the settings and activities that once fed these "communities of memory" are no longer available? Her conclusions in this and other similar chapters are both challenging and provocative.

Throughout her work, Wittberg relies on a linear analysis of organizational development and decline. She also assumes that the primary purpose of the organizations under study—Roman Catholic sisterhoods, deaconesses, missionary societies—is linked to a transformative social task in education, health care, and social services. As one reviewer observes, "If we follow the Weberian model, as Wittberg invites us . . . we come to realize that the issue under study is best understood as secularization . . . What we have here is a clear case of internal secularization due to environmental pressure, organizational imitation, institutional redundancy, and cultural trends at work after the Second Vatican Council."[2]

While there is much to learn from such analysis, the contributions of quantum physics, chaos theory, and process theology posit the necessity of radically different methodologies with the possibility, at least, of quite different conclusions.

Wittberg invites such interaction with her work and, in fact, encourages a multi-disciplinary approach to the subject matter that has become a major portion of her scholarly efforts. She encourages religious virtuosi organizations to take themselves more seriously as agents in a world of need. "It is curious," she observes, "that denominations and denominational groups have not examined their own institutional identity with anything like the urgency their former [hospitals, schools, social agencies] have expended to examine their religious identity" (p. 277).

Perhaps that is why she concludes her book with suggestions for preliminary action steps that religious orders, deaconesses, or missionary societies could take. Perhaps, too, accounts for her call to action: "As religious orders and denominational societies have moved away from a religious virtuosity based on institutional service, they have each written new chapters in their own 'deep stories.' It is time for them to read these chapters, to assess the story they have told, and to choose, insofar as they can, the story of their future." Reading Wittberg's careful analysis would be an excellent first step toward such assessment and choice.

Notes

1 Religious virtuosity is a term introduced in the work of Max Weber, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political economist and sociologist. Weber asserts that all religions contain a majority of average participants, together with a minority of "virtuosi" who are particularly interested in a deeper commitment within their particular religion. As Wittberg defines the term in an earlier work (*Pathways to Recreating Religious Communities*, p. 19), "the term 'religious virtuoso' simply refers to someone who desires more than the 'church on Sunday' level of devotional practice . . . religious virtuosi have devoted themselves to a quest for the transcendent spiritual dimension to human existence."

2 Patricia Wittberg, *From Piety to Professionalism—and Back?* reviewed by Lluis Oviedo, Antonianum University, Rome, Italy. See http://catholicbooksreview.org/2007/wittberg.htm.

Contributors

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Mary Jeremy Daigler, R.S.M. (Baltimore), has been living and working in Baltimore, Maryland. She earned a master's degree in classical languages from The Johns Hopkins University, another in Linguistics from Indiana University, and a doctor of ministry from Andover Newton Theological School. She has served in higher education as teacher and administrator, primarily in educational institutions sponsored by religious communities other than the Sisters of Mercy. After serving twenty-five years in Catholic higher education, she published *Through the Windows: A History of the Work of Higher Education among the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* (University of Scranton Press, 2000).

Mary Daly, R.S.M. (Mid-Atlantic), a Sister of Mercy for more than fifty-five years, resides at Mercy Center, a place for retreat and renewal in Madison, Connecticut. An artist and theologian, she is experienced in spiritual direction and retreat work. At the center, she occasionally offers programs on creativity and on the spiritual life. Mary's background includes teaching on the elementary level, on the graduate and undergraduate college level as well as serving in leadership positions for the Sisters of Mercy. Mary holds a doctoral degree in religious studies from Marquette University.

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Mercedes J. McCann, R.S.M. (Mid-Atlantic), is a clinical psychologist practicing at Saint John Vianney Center, a mental health facility for priests and religious in suburban Philadelphia. She is a consultant and facilitator for religious communities throughout the world. She has an M.A. in theology from Saint Charles Seminary and holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Seton Hall University. She has served her community as incorporation minister and presently serves as a life and ministry facilitator for the Mid-Atlantic community.

(continued on page 54)

Discussion Questions

(Carney) "In the face of these painful and negative experiences, it is perhaps difficult to understand Catherine's exhortation to respect for the clergy. Here, however, we witness the balance that she sought and also enjoined on the early Sisters. Our lives are a repeating rhythm of joys and sorrows, she believed, and descriptions of this rhythm occur frequently in her writings."

Are there parallels between Catherine McAuley's clergy relations and those of women religious and clergy today? What strategies are available to women religious today to deal with their ecclesial difficulties? Or have our resources and strategies not really changed that much?

(Daigler) "Most of the films were made during the period in which Sisters were actually very clear about their identity, which lends a touch of historical irony to the viewing of them. Recall that chastity was associated with our garb, poverty with our lack of spending money, obedience with the annual turnover of Sister staff in our ministries. How could the vowed religious life have been so full of clear externals, and still so misunderstood and misportrayed?"

Which of your favorite or unfavorite films portray religious life accurately, and which ones are frustrating misportrayals?

(Daly) "Catherine especially finds God present in the sufferings of her life, whether these derive from the deaths that seemed to always surround her or to the difficulties associated with new foundations, with clergy and bill collectors, with carriages or canal boats. The Passion of Jesus held special meaning for her. It gave her the assurance that God would guide her and ultimately bless her and her undertakings no matter how things turned out."

In what sort of sufferings do you find it most difficult to feel God is guiding you and blessing you? Do you share this conviction about God's benevolence?

(Julian) "It seems to me that we must be allowed to talk about the issue [of full participation of women in the life of the Church] and that the talk cannot be an institutional monologue. We need to have a genuine conversation. By conversation, I mean one in which the *question* is in control, not the conversation partners, neither of whom can predetermine the outcome."

What signs of progress do you see toward women's full participation in the life of the Church? Or is the work being done by women merely illusory of their full participation and evidence that the institutional monologue of clerics is being perpetuated?

(McAlpin) "It is also important to acknowledge that associates of Mercy, companions in Mercy, Mercy Corps members and so many collaborators in Mercy currently contribute to a multiplicity of Mercy ministries. Each one witnesses to the works of Mercy in a variety of settings."

How would you describe the specific identity of vowed members, given commitment to the works of Mercy as a shared charism and mission?

(continued on page 54)

Contributors (continued)

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Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M. (Cincinnati), is a canon lawyer with a J.C.L. from St. Paul University in Ottawa. She is the director of the tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as well as promoter of justice and defender of the bond, a position held since 1990. She served for twenty years in secondary education—English, theology, journalism, and administration. Her publications appear in canon law journals, *Studia Canonica* and *The Jurist.* She is an editor of *Jurisprudence* and has contributed to the Canon Law Society of America's *Advisory Opinions* and *Roman Replies*, as well as *Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. She is the author of *Catholics, Marriage and Divorce: Real People, Real Questions* (2004). She served as secretary of the Canon Law Society of America from 2004–2006.

Discussion Questions (continued)

(McCann) "We further need to look at and perhaps chisel away some of what we thought were perduring identities in each of our regional communities and form communities built on the real perduring identity of the Sisters of Mercy. This means chiseling away some of what we have come to know and love and some of what sets us apart from other Mercy communities."

In the new configuration of communities, what are the toughest things for you to have chiseled away or give up, and what are the easiest?

(**O'Neill**) Mary Aquin sums up Beverly Lanzetta's position and says that "many women have reached the limit of their respective religious tradition because we can no longer find meaning in dominating, exclusive, or triumphal images of God. Those for whom this is true then realize that we cannot keep going without compromising our own truth. If we are not willing to live a lie, or if we are exhausted from making excuses for the failings of our religion, we begin to look for new ways to interpret, understand, and reconstruct it."

What efforts do you see Mercy women making to interpret, understand, and reconstruct Catholic spirituality and tradition? Or are Mercy discourse and practice stalled?

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MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

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

MAST has been meeting annually since then, 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. Marilyn King, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its 22nd annual meeting in **Burlingame, California, at Mercy Center June 13–15, 2008.**

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 $25 per year, payable to Marilee Howard, R.S.M.,MAST Managing Editor, Sisters of Mercy, 535 Sacramento Street, Auburn, CA 95603. Email: mhoward@mercysisters.org.

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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. Marilyn King, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's executive director.

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