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# *The MAST Journal*

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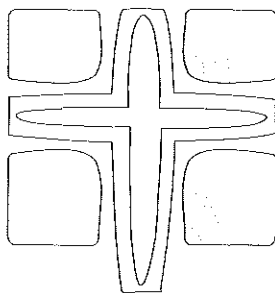
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Dear Readers of *The MAST Journal*:

The Mercy International Research Commission (MIRC) sponsored an invitational International Mercy Research Conference in Burlingame, California in November 2007. Thirty-two Sisters of Mercy attended, including some support personnel. The research papers, short presentations, and results (a “Vision, Theology, and Praxis”) of the Conference have been, and are still, available on the Mercy international website at [www.mercyworld.org/mirc](http://www.mercyworld.org/mirc). The sisters who attended the conference came from all over the Mercy world, and they hoped that the theological reflection process that occurred at the conference will, in itself, continue to be fruitful for all our global Mercy efforts wherever Sisters of Mercy, their associates, companions, and partners in ministry now serve God’s people throughout the world.

All the research papers and short presentations at the conference were profoundly stimulating of the participants’ reflection on the theme: “‘Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling’: Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century.” The papers and reflections focused on social analysis of the present world, our historical tradition as Sisters of Mercy, and dialogue with that analysis and tradition through scriptural and theological presentations and prayerful deliberation.

The Editorial Board of *The MAST Journal* wishes to reprint in this issue of the journal six of the research papers prepared for the conference. It would be ideal if all sixteen research papers could be reprinted here, but space does not presently permit that. Readers of the journal are encouraged to visit the website ([www.mercyworld.org/mirc](http://www.mercyworld.org/mirc)) where they can easily read and download wonderful papers and presentations on the current worldwide trafficking of women, the major slum sector (Kibera) of Kenya, the experience of Hispanic-American Catholics, the experience of women in the Pacific Islands, the histories of Mercy women in Guyana and the United States, political ministry in Australia, the history of Mercy spiritual ministry in Ireland, Mercy in a multicultural context (Jamaica), and spiritual implications for Mercy in the twenty-first century. These papers and presentations—by Sisters Betsy McMillan, Anne Ciku Itotia, Ana Maria Pineda, Senolita Vakata, Mary Noel Menezes, Dolores Liptak, Sophie McGrath, Bonnie Brennan, Theresa Lowe Ching, and Janet Ruffing—are powerful invitations to the local and global tasks before us if we will “get up again” as Catherine McAuley did, and wished.

The reflections of the Conference began a year before it took place with all the participants contributing in November 2006 to the following paragraph summarizing the trends they individually saw in the world around us. The summary paragraph reads as follows:

In the view of those who have been invited to participate in the International Mercy Research Conference scheduled for November 2007, the fundamental social and global trends which Sisters of Mercy need to take account of and dialogue with in order to be Mercy in the 21st century center around four widespread phenomena with far-reaching effects:

- *greed* in all its individual, corporate and national manifestations, especially among the world’s “haves”;
- *lack of respect* for the rights and needs of *all* persons and cultures in the human community, especially when they can be categorized as “different from us” or “expendable by us”;
- resort to *violence* as a legitimate “solution” at all levels;
- and a fundamental, though often unrecognized, *hunger* for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious, understanding and peace.

From these trends flow many specific problems, five of which deserve special attention:

- the extreme poverty and maldistribution of resources among the world's most vulnerable "have-nots";
- harsh treatment of migrating peoples, asylum seekers, refugees, and persons who in any way appear "different";
- trafficking in women and children for sexual, military, or other purposes;
- violation of the earth's natural resources and environment, in apparent disregard of the dire consequences for present and future generations;
- and inadequate, even debilitating, ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even, as we see it, among Catholics.

Several of these problems disproportionately affect poorer countries and women and children.

Perhaps readers of *The MAST Journal* would like to engage with others in their own theological reflection process on "Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century"—by using this summary paragraph, or their own, leading eventually to the global "Vision, Theology, and Praxis" that the conference proposes, or to their own version of the vision, theology, and praxis that the present world and time ask of us. In this way we can all be an active part of the global "Mercy—Kindling," the name the Mercy International Research Commission now gives to this process.

Inherent in all the efforts of the Research Conference is a sense of *global* Mercy responsibility, informing both local and global action. This involves awareness of the needs and trends of suffering people throughout the world, standing with the merciful ministerial efforts of Sisters of Mercy in the forty-four countries of the global family, and, where possible, bridging the gaps of consciousness, care and advocacy between them and us by whatever means are available to us. Reading the weekly edition of Mercy E-News on [mercyworld.org](http://mercyworld.org) could be a great help in that direction.

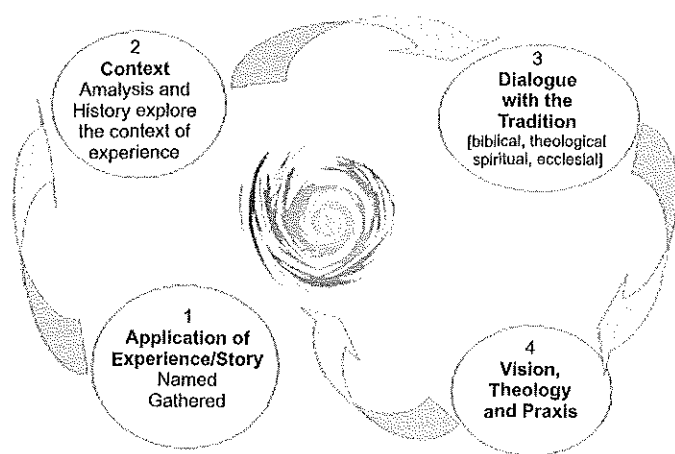
One of the great blessings of our way of life as Sisters of Mercy and of all those collaborating with the Mercy family throughout the world is that our vocation is an inexhaustible one. We can never say "we've done it" and "that is enough." There is always the call to go forward "relying with unhesitating confidence in the providence of God"—even when we are, as we all will be one day, lying sick in infirmaries, and the going forward is expressed in loving care, solicitude, and prayer for one another and for God's afflicted people.

Mary Sullivan, RSM  
Guest Editor

# Vision, Theology, Praxis of the Mercy International Research Commission

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.

The theological reflection process developed by the Mercy International Research Commission began with the articulation of experience, the naming and gathering of the story of Mercy throughout the world. This experience was analyzed and contextualized in a series of papers. At the conference held in Burlingame, California in November 2007, this social analysis and history came into dialogue with the tradition (biblical, theological, spiritual and ecclesial). From this dialogue emerged statements of vision, theology, and praxis. These now flow out into the Mercy world, inviting you, in all your various locations, to continue the spiral, undertaking your theological reflection processes in dialogue with what has begun here. This ongoing process we name “*Mercy—Kindling*.”



## Vision

*A vision is the reality of the future for which we yearn. Out of the first three stages of our theological reflection process, this vision emerged.*

We Sisters of Mercy in the twenty-first century are in radical communion beyond all borders. We

are grounded in the compassion of God. We are nurtured by the Gospel, and by the story of Catherine McAuley and of Mercy lived and living. Aware of our own brokenness, we join with others in healing the wounds of Earth and Earth's peoples.

## Theology

*Theology emerged from the major themes that both informed and provoked our process of theological reflection. Our theologizing was multifaceted, reflecting the different contexts of Mercy.*

Doing theology during these days spiralled into and out of our engagement with experiences of the contextual and historical realities we shared. These then spiraled into dialogue with the biblical, theological, spiritual and ecclesial traditions in which we stand.

We were touched deeply by the pain of those who are impoverished, especially women and children and the Earth.

We recognized our own complicity in the brokenness and woundedness and our need for forgiveness.

We were caught up into the womb-compassion, steadfast love, faithfulness and graciousness of God, of Jesus as embodied mercy and of the Spirit permeating all.

We were drawn into a theology of communion, of God who is communion.

We experienced in our theologizing a yearning for God to be imaged female as well as male.

We were impassioned toward a theology of mercy that is formed and tested by justice as well as compassion.

We were challenged to break the cycles of violence in our world and in our own realities through radical forgiveness of the other.

Recognizing that what we had begun was but a single moment, we were impelled to continue to develop theologies and spiritualities of Mercy that draw on the rich resources among us as Sisters of Mercy engaged in Mercy across the globe. This will enkindle in us the fire of Mercy in response to the cries and pain of the most wounded, including Earth.

## Praxis

*Praxis is reflective and reflected action emerging out of a new vision and theology for liberation and transformation.*

We Sisters of Mercy embrace the vision of a radical communion beyond all borders. Therefore, we will:

- ▶ Develop theologies and spiritualities for Mercy that flow from ongoing storytelling in our different contexts, in dialogue with our local and global experiences and with our sacred traditions and texts.
- ▶ Engage in theological reflection processes in ways that deepen and expand our theological understandings and praxis.
- ▶ Reclaim the motivating force in the call of Catherine McAuley and give new expression to the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy.
- ▶ Use multiple ways to share the passion and pain in the stories of Mercy so that our local experiences resonate with the global.
- ▶ Deepen and expand images of God in ways that will give women the confidence to know that they have been made in the image of God.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for cross-cultural, contextual, and global engagement through Mercy International Association, its expanded Mercy International Centre, and other organizations.
- ▶ Foster increased participation of women in leadership and policy-formation.
- ▶ Use the new technologies to enable the fire of Mercy to shape anew our local Mercy ministries and to increase our collaboration in global projects.
- ▶ Share our Mercy human and financial resources to facilitate this praxis.




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# **“Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling” Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century Social Analysis: A Canadian Perspective**

*Elizabeth M. Davis, R.S.M.*

## **Introduction**

Paul wrote to the Romans (12:15), “Rejoice with others when they rejoice, and be sad with those in sorrow.” *Gaudium et Spes* begins, “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.” Inès Maria dell’ Eucaristia wrote to the Daughters of Wisdom in 1994, “In this troubled world, we wish to express God’s love for wounded humanity and always we must answer the question: how can we dare Wisdom in the mosaic of our realities?” We cannot know with whom to weep or rejoice or what their joys and anguish are unless we understand the mosaic of our realities. Only then can we dare wisdom and mercy.

In this paper, I seek to describe the mosaic of our realities. I am a woman from a rural community in the poorest province in Canada, a teacher and health administrator by profession, a baby boomer by generation, a Roman Catholic by religious tradition and a Sister of Mercy by life-choice. Each characteristic influences the way in which I see the world. The choice of elements, sources and structure in this paper will reflect that influence. My analysis will be primarily of society in Canada with significant application to other Western countries and some application to other countries.

The paper is in three parts: (1) my description of realities today, (2) an analysis of four forces that are threatening to control these realities, and (3) the naming of questions facing those who minister in the midst of these realities. The paper will not follow a sociological methodology but will be eclectic in its approach.

## **The Society in Which I and We Live**

To put order in the description of today’s realities, I envision the image of a spiral with the elements of environment, person, and community swirling in that spiral and connecting with each other in multiple, ever-changing ways. The length of the paper precludes an in-depth discussion of any element.

## **Environment**

A recent statement on the state of our environment states, “The planet’s warming is unequivocal, its impact is clearly noticeable, and *it is beyond doubt that human activities have been contributing considerably to it.* Adverse effects include: agriculture and food security, oceans and coastal areas, biodiversity and ecosystems, water resources, human health, human settlements, energy, transport and industry, extreme weather events.”<sup>1</sup>

The report expresses concern about the increased risk of extinction of 20–30 percent of plant and animal species, decreased fresh water availability, loss of biodiversity, significant changes in Arctic and Antarctic ecosystems, ground instability in permafrost regions, and impact on health of humans marked by increases in malnutrition, increased deaths, disease and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms fires and droughts; increased burden of diarrhoeal disease, and increased frequency of cardio-respiratory diseases.<sup>2</sup>

An internationally negotiated response to this dire prediction is articulated in the Earth Charter. It begins:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.<sup>3</sup>

Human activities, having led to this threat to our planet, can reduce vulnerability to climate change. Why are we not taking this threat and this opportunity seriously?

## Person Generations

We live in a time and place where, for the first time in the history of humankind, we now have four

generations of adults living in large numbers at the same time. Each generation has been formed by different world events and has developed different values and qualities.

This diversity of underlying values increases the challenges to understanding and respect among the generations.

Three aspects of the generational reality must also be noted:

No country has ever before experienced large numbers of people over sixty-five. In Canada, this is paralleled by a declining birth rate and less intergenerational living. There are implications for labor market adjustments, life-long learning, adjustments to pension plans and entitlement, long term care provisions, and policies for "ageing in place" and "active ageing." How we view the elderly, especially elderly women, calls for more intentional consideration especially in an age obsessed with youth.

Qualities	Elders	Boomers	Generation X	Millenniums
<b>Time of Birth</b>	Pre-1946	1946 – 1965	1966 – 1979	1980 – today
<b>Formative Elements</b>	Patriotism, families, Great Depression, World Wars I & II, golden age of radio, growth of labour unions	Prosperity, focus on children TV, suburbia, Medicare, Cold War, women's liberation, space race	AIDS, stagflation, latchkey kids, single parents, computers, fall of the Berlin Wall, glasnost	Internet chat, school violence, TV reality shows, multiculturalism, the Gulf War, the Iraq War
<b>Values</b>	Dedication, sacrifice, hard work, conformity, order, patience, respect for authority, duty before pleasure, honour	Optimism, teamwork, personal gratification, health & wellness, personal growth, youth, work, involvement	Diversity, thinking globally, balance, techno-literacy, fun, informality, self-reliance, pragmatism	Confidence, civic duty, achievement, sociability, morality, diversity, street smarts, inclusion
<b>Qualities</b>	Conformists, conservative spenders, past-oriented, belief in logic not magic, loyalty to organization, wisdom, stability, experience	Driven, soul-searchers, willing to "go the extra mile," love-hate relationship with authority, loyalty to profession, strong work ethic, achievement oriented	Risk-takers, sceptical, family-oriented, bosses as colleagues, focus on the job not work hours, innovative, diverse range of skills, entrepreneurial & independent	Optimistic, prefer collective action, techno-savvy, connected 24/7, embrace diversity & change, highly technologically advanced, entrepreneurial & independent socially responsible

**Chart One: Generations Living Today**

In Canada, the declining birth rate is not consistent across all groups. Aboriginal people and immigrants have higher birth rates resulting in a disproportionate percentage of children living in poverty with poorer health status.

Increasing urbanization in Canada (close now to 80 percent) and most other countries means an increasing rural/urban divide: youth and young families continue to migrate from rural communities leaving behind an increasingly older population, and they are migrating to cities that are becoming more culturally diverse as migration across the world intensifies.

These generational and urban/rural complexities challenge governments and communities who strive to build societies that live in harmony while treasuring diversity.

## Women

Women in Canada make up 50 percent of the total population but 69 percent of the population over sixty-nine years of age. They constitute 47 percent of the workforce and have an average annual pre-tax income that is 62 percent that of men. They are more likely than their male counterparts to lose time from work for personal or family responsibilities, and to work part-time.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of seats held by women in Canada's Parliament is 20.8 percent (compare Australia at 24.7 percent, the United Kingdom at 19.7 percent, the United States at 16.3 percent, and the United Nations at 9.4 percent).<sup>5</sup>

Stereotypical attitudes and practices are working to the disadvantage of women and girls in families, educational institutions, religious institutions, workplaces, political bodies and media. Gaps in efforts to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women include increasing violence against women, under-representation of women in decision-making in all areas, discriminatory laws governing marriage, land, property and inheritance; disproportionate share of household and family responsibilities, lack of equal employment opportunities, lack of attention to mechanisms that support a balance between family and work responsibilities, disproportionate effects of poverty, devastating effects of conflict, impact of AIDS/HIV, and trafficking in women and girls.

Hannan expresses well what is needed: "An enabling environment for enhancing promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women needs to be developed by improving women's capabilities, including through education and health; increasing their access to and control over opportunities and resources such as employment, land and economic assets; enhancing their agency and leadership roles; as well as protecting and promoting their human rights and ensuring their security, including freedom from violence."<sup>6</sup>

Income in North America is now  
concentrated in the hands of the  
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World War II.

## Poverty

Growing economic, social, and technological gaps exist between the richest and poorest citizens in wealthy countries like Canada and the United States and between the richest and poorest countries. After forty years of stability in the richest countries, income since 1980 has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the top 0.01 percent of earners. The ratio of CEO compensation to average production workers' pay, which had averaged 42 to one in 1982, was 10 times higher—431 to one—in 2004.

Income in North America is now concentrated in the hands of the very, very wealthy to a degree not seen since before World War II. And with greater wealth comes greater political influence; public policy, including health policy, is increasingly driven by the priorities of the wealthy, overriding the concerns of the general population.<sup>7</sup>

In Canada, extreme poverty exists among Aboriginal people, recent immigrants, and non-permanent residents, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, lone parent families, and unattached individuals. Child poverty rates are disproportionately high among these vulnerable social groups. Approximately half (52 percent) of low income



children in Canada live in female lone-parent families. According to the 2001 census, 49 percent of children in recent immigrant families are poor.<sup>8</sup> The chances of living in poverty decrease as education levels, employment activity, and occupational skill levels increase.<sup>9</sup>

For the world's poorest countries, the past decade has continued a disheartening trend: not only have they failed to reduce poverty, but they are falling further behind rich countries. The Human Development Report 2005 describes it this way:

If the world were a country, it would have had an average purchasing power parity income of \$5,533 and a median income of \$1,700 in 2000. The gap between median and average income points to a concentration of income at the top end of the distribution: 80 percent of the world's population had an income less than the average. Meanwhile, the average income of the top 20 percent of the world's population is about fifty times the average income of the bottom 20 percent. Global income distribution resembles a champagne glass. At the top, where the glass is widest, the richest 20 percent of the population hold three-quarters of world income. At the bottom of the stem, where the glass is narrowest, the poorest 40 percent hold 5 percent of world income and the poorest 20 percent hold just 1.5 percent.<sup>10</sup>

The Millennium Development Goals are a global response intended to reduce extreme poverty by 2015.<sup>11</sup> Is the achievement of these goals probable? The 2005 Human Development Report says,

Today health is usually defined as a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity . . . Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being of the whole community.

"Today, the world has the financial, technological and human resources to make a decisive breakthrough in human development. But if current trends continue, the MDGs will be missed by a wide margin. Instead of seizing the moment, the world's governments are stumbling towards a heavily sign-posted and easily avoidable human development failure—a failure with profound implications not just for the world's poor but for global peace, prosperity and security."<sup>12</sup>

## Health

Today health is usually defined as a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.<sup>13</sup> An Australian Aboriginal definition broadens this definition: "Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life."<sup>14</sup> Key health issues internationally include food security and nutritional well-being, HIV/AIDS, tobacco, occupational health and safety, mental health, infectious diseases, violence, reproductive health, globalization and water, and globalization and health of indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup>

Determinants of health such as biology, gender, socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, and age have significant effects on the health of all people. Globally, factors affecting health include widening socio-economic inequalities between wealthiest and the poorest people, human migration and needs of migrating populations, impact of globalization on health and health systems including increasing mobility of health care professionals, new communication technologies, influence of private companies on provision of health services and insurance, role of international bodies and trade agreements, effects of climate change and environmental destruction, population growth, the overcrowding of urban areas and encroachment of human populations into previously uninhabited ecosystems, war, violence, terrorism, and gender inequalities.

## Community

### Religion

Eighty-five percent of Canadians indicate affiliation with an established religion yet fewer than 25 percent attend church regularly.<sup>16</sup> A Statistics Canada Report concludes that, in Canada, private devotion now plays a more important part in people's lives than attendance at religious services.<sup>17</sup> There is increasing attention to activities that reflect spontaneity and community (e.g., meditation, pilgrimage to Iona, Divine Mercy devotions, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament). Sheldrake speaks of "a privatization of spirituality and a concentration of interiority that sometimes separates spiritual experience from a social or public vision of ethics. In contrast to the inherited polarization between sacred and secular, the roots of contemporary spirituality are to be found in an emphasis on human experience in all its variety and pain, as the immediate context of God's self-disclosure."<sup>18</sup>

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Today's church members are diverse in their involvement in church. Reese, speaking about younger members, identifies *church in mission* (active in service and volunteer programs), *church in search* (single and divorced young adults over age of 30), *church youthful* (active in college ministry), *church apologist* (favoring devotional prayer and papal teachings), *church devotional* (Theology on Tap, parish activities), *church busy* (young professionals and young families), *church creative* (open to blending different faith traditions), and *church disconnected* (distant from church).<sup>19</sup>

Marie Chin, R.S.M., reflecting on diversity within religious communities, identifies four prevalent cultures coexisting today: (1) *essentialist* (unquestioning loyalty to church institutions, holding on to tradition and customs), (2) *existentialist* (emphasis on the individual, democratic say in community, little patience for mutual responsibility, dislike of uniformity), (3)

*liberation* (conviction of preferential option for the poor, priority of justice, critical of unjust structures in church and society), and (4) *feminist* (empowering self and others, mutuality of relationships, re-visioning and re-imaging, valuing inclusivity).<sup>20</sup>

### Technology and Computer

The world has moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age and now to the Network Age with its distributed, decentralized culture (citizen-centered not institution-centered). Frand characterizes the Network Age in this way: Computers are not technology but part of life, internet is better than TV, reality is no longer real, doing is more important than knowing, multitasking is a way of life, typing is preferred to handwriting, staying connected is essential, there is zero tolerance for delays, and the consumer and creator of information are blurring.<sup>21</sup> Words like iPod, iPhone, Facebook, MySpace, and text messaging describe a new way of relating.

Hogue speaks of societal impact when computers are such a part of our way of life:

As consumers, citizens and scholar-educators, most of us live, move and breathe in a technological whirlwind, and this profoundly affects our moral self-understanding, our interactions with others and our cultural and natural habitations. The moral problem of contemporary technology results not from its ubiquity and not from the power of its specific applications but from the dominance of a specific technological pattern, the device paradigm . . . this displacement, in spite of its seductive promises of liberation and enrichment, corrodes creative relationships between and among selves and between selves and their environments.<sup>22</sup>

### Conflict, Security and Peace

The last two decades have demonstrated that the main threats to our security now come from terrorism, epidemic disease, organized crime, conflict over natural resources, climate change, and environmental degradation. "Security is increasingly interpreted as security of people, not just territory; security of individuals, not just of nations; security through development, not through arms; security of all people everywhere—in their homes, in their

jobs, in their streets, in their communities, and in the environment."<sup>23</sup>

Since 1990, more than three million people have died in armed conflict, and many millions more have died as a result of the disease and famine associated with war. Conflict is now strongly associated with poverty. During the period between 1990 and 2003, low income developing countries constituted more than half of all the countries and territories experiencing violent conflict.<sup>24</sup>

At Assisi in 2002, Pope John Paul, together with two hundred other religious leaders, articulated the *Ten Commandments of Peace* in response to this reality. It is worth noting how little visibility this decalogue has received.<sup>25</sup>

## Analysis Through Four Forces

Forces of globalization, technology, consumerism, and postmodernity are threatening to pull this spiral of environment, person, and community into a controlled and mono-cultural expression.

## Globalization

We live in a world increasingly ignoring borders. Travel and trade between nations increased four-fold between 1980 and 2000. Four billion dollars in cross-border currency now changes hands every six hours. Eight hundred million persons crossed international borders in 2005. Forty million people migrate a year. The number of migrants working outside their own countries is at least thirty million with billions of dollars yearly going back to their home countries. Scientific projects with international teams; fifty thousand global NGOs; drug and private arms trade, arms control, terrorism, money laundering, pollution, refugees, ocean and atmosphere, television, global warming, the Internet, and infectious diseases know no borders and shape a "community of common fate and responsibility."<sup>26</sup>

This trans-border reality is one indicator that never before has change come so rapidly—in some ways, all at once—on such a global scale, and with such global visibility. The following description captures the inherent imbalance of the resulting globalization:

Globalization denotes the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening

impact of trans-continental flows and patterns of social interaction. It refers to a shift or transformation in the scale of human organization that links distant communities and expands the reach of power relations across the world's regions and continents. But it should not be read as prefiguring the emergence of a harmonious world society or as a universal process of global integration in which there is a growing convergence of cultures and civilizations. For not only does the awareness of growing interconnectedness create new animosities and conflicts, but it can fuel reactionary politics and deep-seated xenophobia. Since a substantial proportion of the world's population is largely excluded from the benefits of globalization, it is a deeply divisive and, consequently, vigorously contested process.<sup>27</sup>

Global governance exists in a limited way today through the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization. Corporations, mostly Western, are pressuring for a more extensive and powerful system of global governance that would allow them to promote global trade policies that serve their interests above those of less powerful actors such as smaller companies, indebted nations, or small and vulnerable national enterprises. Such a system will effectively subordinate human rights, social values, ecological concerns, and all other dimensions of the common well-being of the planetary community to the economic needs and interests of these corporations.<sup>28</sup>

Others seek a more humane globalization and are working toward a global ethic. The Commission on Global Governance report, *Our Global Neighbourhood*,<sup>29</sup> and that of the Commission of the European Catholic Bishops 2001, *Global Governance: Our Responsibility to Make Globalisation an Opportunity for All*,<sup>30</sup> are recent expressions of this global ethic.

Open economies will not be sustainable without the willingness of states to open up politically as well. The political will to achieve and maintain a system of global governance must be nourished by firm convictions and values. In a world where no single power—even the strongest—can or should exert full control, worldwide agreement on a list of basic values and principles is essential. Global governance, as opposed to global government, means a networked approach to global problems that involves

governments, business, and nongovernmental organizations as well as churches and other religious communities.<sup>31</sup>

Both reports endorse common values for a global world: respect for human dignity, responsibility, solidarity, subsidiarity, coherence, transparency and accountability.<sup>32</sup>

### Postmodernity

Postmodernity concentrates on the tensions and similarity erupting from processes of globalization: the accelerating circulation of people, the increasingly dense and frequent cross-cultural interaction and the unavoidable intersections of local and global knowledge.<sup>33</sup> It has been said that postmodernity is both "emancipatory and demonic."<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to describe all the elements of postmodernity, but the following are key features: (1) *rejection of objective truth* (everything depends on personal perception) leading to many different traditions being equally valued and the seeking of faith without boundaries or definitions; (2) valuing of *multiple forms of knowledge* leading to an acceptance of symbols, intuition, imagination, and experiential learning; (3) a sense of *all reality being fabricated* leading to a valuing of plurality, multiplicity, and diversity; (4) deep *suspicion of authority* leading to an aversion to meta-narrative because no meta-narrative is open or large enough to include the realities of all people (therefore, they are oppressive or unjust) and to rejection of institutions; (5) *search for the transcendent* with craving for reconnection with the spiritual all around us and relationship with all creation; (6) an understanding of *salvation as intra-worldly* not extra-worldly leading to a separation of religion and

spirituality; (7) a sense of *fragmentation* leading to self being constructed in a number of ways to suit the situation and world of isolated individuals and consumerism; (8) *blurring of morality* leading to multiple standards of morality with expediency priming morality; (9) *influence of the media* with confusion between truth and fiction; (10) *weakening of government* leading to greater power for multi-national corporations (11) *quest for community* with relationship and participation as key to meaning; and (12) *living in the material world* wanting the good things in life with time as a commodity.<sup>35</sup>

Holland sets out four contending strategies promoted by societal elites who are attempting to define the new cultural era. He parallels these with alternative cosmological visions to promote a more resourceful creation of the new culture of life.<sup>36</sup>

In a world of fragmentation, ambiguity and the end of meta-narrative, how can we become creators of this new culture of life?

### Culture of Technology

Technological innovation and proliferation significantly shape our contemporary existence. The culture of technology is well described by Kirby: "The pseudo-modern cultural phenomenon par excellence is the internet. Its central act is that of the individual clicking on his/her mouse to move through the pages in a way which cannot be duplicated, inventing a pathway through cultural products which has never existed before and never will again."<sup>37</sup>

Technological innovation and proliferation significantly shape contemporary human moral existence. This is because of both the obvious ubiquity of technology and the morally seductive, culturally embedded technological promise to manage the

Strategy	Vision	Perspective	Threat
Economic neo-liberalism	Mechanistic colonization of planet	Ultramodern (objective-instrumental)	Ecological-social devastation
Academic reconstructionism	Deconstruction of all meta-narratives	Ultramodern (subjective-expressive)	Ethical relativism and nihilism
Religious restorationism	Reassertion of patriarchal values	Secure defence of ultramodern	Authoritarianism and militarism
Scientific bio-engineering	Scientific conquest of life	Total triumph of autonomous reason	Neo-totalitarianism

Chart 2: Non-Authentically Elite Postmodern Strategies

contingency and vulnerability of the good life. In light of this, I contend that one of the primary theological ethical challenges of our time is to think critically through technology's cultural pattern rather than simply its particular applications . . . development of a bio-cultural theological anthropology, then, provides an orientation to human moral life that binds critical appreciation of technological power with vigilant preservation of the cultural and moral ecologies within which the creative goodness of loving God and others flourishes.<sup>38</sup>

We need to think theologically and ethically about the cultural pattern of technology and imagine a vision for living responsibly within it.

### Culture of Consumerism

Consumerism is a way of being in the world expressed in a moral and cultural attitude based on life-orienting beliefs prevalent in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies. It rests on a flawed anthropology that places a primacy on things by emphasizing *having* rather than *being*. It is a modern (and postmodern) phenomenon that has arisen with the market economy, a distinct cultural distortion of human freedom that occurs in the context of free markets, but is not a necessary result of free markets.<sup>39</sup>

Wells expresses the tragedy of consumerism in this way:

Across a broad front we gather materials for the construction of ourselves. We build a public self in what we buy and what we voluntarily choose to do. This front runs from cuisine (Thai, French, or Mexican tonight?), to fashion (Ferragamo shoes or faux furs?), to particular products (antiques or Swedish contemporaries?), to music (Bach or the Grateful Dead?), to sexual lifestyles (monogamous or casual,

heterosexual or gay?), to beliefs (Christian, New Age, or postmodern doubt?). Beneath it all is the same compulsion to be in a state of constant inward evaluation, taking an inventory of needs and wishes, and then reaching out for a "product" to satisfy the felt emptiness and to project who we are. This takes channel surfing to a high art as we slide from product to product, from relationship to relationship, from style to style, seldom lingering long before the shape of our internal inventory tugs us in another direction in search of different fulfillment.<sup>40</sup>

Kavanaugh concludes, "There is no intrinsic human uniqueness or irreplaceable value. The person is only insofar as he or she is marketable or productive. Human products, which should be valued only insofar as they enhance and express human worth, become the very standards against which human worth itself is measured."<sup>41</sup> How can we be a counter-cultural witness, negating this lifestyle of consumerism, competition, hoarding, planned obsolescence, and unnecessary waste?

### Conclusion

These four forces are actually neutral in themselves. Each has both redeeming potential and damning potential. How our human community directs these forces will determine the extent to which they shatter our living spiral or swirl it into life-giving promise.

Therefore, we, as Sisters of Mercy, ask how we can dare wisdom and mercy in the midst of this mosaic:

- How can we focus on the centrality of the Word when there is, in our time, a rejection

Strategy	Vision	Perspective	Gift
Bioregional Economics	Global network of diverse bioregional communities	Authentically postmodern	Sustainable economic creativity
Neo-realist philosophy	Recovery of practical wisdom rooted in ancient traditions	Authentically postmodern	Re-rooting education in communal needs
Charismatic-prophetic religion	Celebration and defence of culture of life	Authentically postmodern	Celebratory-prophetic spirituality of life
Holistic-evolutionary Cosmology	Co-creative participation in evolutionary holism	Authentically postmodern	Ecological-mystical consciousness

**Chart 3: Authentically Postmodern Alternative Movements**

of objective truth and confusion between truth and fiction?

- ▶ What does theology mean when meta-narrative is no longer trusted or even believed?
- ▶ What will be our expression of Church in a time and place when organizations are no longer credible and culture is person-centered not institution-centered?
- ▶ What does spirituality mean when religion and spirituality are no longer seen as congruent?
- ▶ How can we hold the integrity of multiple traditions while living in harmony?
- ▶ What does solidarity mean in a distributed world, with multiple generations, and increasing gaps between the richest and poorest within and among countries?
- ▶ How can women be leaders in this age when gender equity and empowerment of women are still distant dreams?
- ▶ How do we continue to live viable and credible religious life in a time when freedom and autonomy of individuals are paramount?
- ▶ How can the energy of a woman who lived before the modern age inspire a community that lives in a postmodern age?
- ▶ What can we learn from history in a time when "the maps they gave us were out of date by years?"<sup>42</sup>

And the ultimate question remains, "How can we dare wisdom and mercy in the mosaic of our realities?" Perhaps part of the answer lies hidden in these insightful words from a small Newfoundland outpost:

One boat sails east and one sails west  
With the selfsame wind that blows.  
It's not the gales but the trim of the sails  
That guides where the good ship goes.

Let us have the insight to know that the good ships need to go in multiple directions, seek the wisdom of the winds that blow, and have the courage to trim our sails. Then perhaps we will be better prepared to dare both wisdom and mercy in our church and our society.

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# Catherine McAuley in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries

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Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.

One might say that Catherine McAuley (1778–1841) lived in a very different world from that of the twenty-first century. She lived intermittently on two islands, on one of which was the seat of the British colonial empire. On the other were the colonized Irish Catholics controlled politically, socially, and economically by the British Parliament and by Anglo-Irish politicians more or less resident in Ireland, but directed by London.

From another perspective, Catherine's smaller world was not all that different from the present world—at least not in deliberately inflicted misery. The rapacious penal laws against Irish Catholics in the years after the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 to roughly 1720 were by 1778, the year of Catherine's birth, in part repealed or somewhat generally unenforced. Other penal laws were repealed in subsequent years, climaxing in the Act of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. But the worst of the dire social, economic, and religious effects of these laws remained for decades: widespread destitution throughout the country with consequent slums in the cities; disease, epidemics, and famines among the poorer classes; widespread begging; widespread lack of education for poor Irish Catholics who would not succumb to Protestant proselytizers; virtually nonexistent health care for poor Catholics (i.e., 75 percent to 80 percent of the population); foundling hospitals with abysmal mortality rates; and workhouses such as those Charles Dickens portrays in *Oliver Twist*.

Edmund Burke said of the penal code: "It was a complete system, full of coherence and consistency, well digested and composed in all its parts. It was a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man."<sup>1</sup> William Lecky, the British historian, writing in the nineteenth century, says:

Almost all the great persecutions of history, those of the early Christians, of Catholics and Protestants on the Continent, and, after the Revolution, of Catholics in England, were directed against minorities. It was the distinguishing characteristic of the Irish penal code that its victims constituted at least three-fourths of the nation, and that it was intended to demoralize as well as degrade . . .

. . . The penal code, as it was actually carried out, was inspired much less by fanaticism than by rapacity, and was directed less against the Catholic religion than against the property and industry of its professors. It was intended to make them poor and to keep them poor; to crush in them every germ of enterprise, to degrade them into a servile caste who could never hope to rise to the level of their oppressors.<sup>2</sup>

## Catherine McAuley's World

Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, amid the aftereffects of this savage conquest. Because her Catholic father took advantage of the oath of allegiance to the King of England in 1778, which Catholics who wished to own property were then allowed to sign, and because she lived for more than twenty years with Protestants (from at least 1800 or 1801 until the death of William Callaghan in 1822), she was, in those early years, personally spared the economic plight of the majority of Irish Catholics. However, when she became independently wealthy in 1823 as a result of

Catherine's world was not all that different from the present world—at least not in deliberately inflicted misery.



the Callaghan legacy, she began the process of ever deeper solidarity with the poor of Ireland and England and of gradually more thorough identification with and ministry to their needs and deprivations, their ignorance and sufferings. She did not become like "The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League" who "Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall" of the "worthy poor," allowing "their lovely skirts to graze no wall" in the Chicago slums, as in Gwendolyn Brooks' satiric "Lovers of the Poor." Rather, she became in her lifestyle, and for the rest of her life, as far as she could, *one with* their sufferings and "dejected faces," seeing in them "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'" (Rule 3.1, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 297).

**When she had the freedom and means to do so, Catherine's response was to create a House of Mercy to shelter homeless girls and women; and a poor school in which to educate poor girls.**

Contemplating Catherine's life and work in the early nineteenth century, and then reflecting on what might be—perhaps ought to be—the life and work of Sisters of Mercy in the early twenty-first century, one could be easily overwhelmed with the magnitude of vocational responsibility, and then resort to silence, inertia or escape.

Therefore, one has to try to espouse Catherine's two-fold commitment to trust and urgency: "While we place all our confidence in God—we must act as if all depended on our exertion" (*Correspondence* 323).

In November 2006, Mercy scholars, reflecting on their experience of the present world, identified many serious global trends and problems. Among the trends noted were "greed in all its individual, corporate and national manifestations, especially among the world's 'haves'; and "a fundamental, though often unrecognized, hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious, understanding and peace." These Mercy

researchers saw the following two problems as flowing from these and other trends: "extreme poverty and maldistribution of resources among the world's most vulnerable 'have-nots,'" and "inadequate, even debilitating, ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even . . . among Catholics."<sup>3</sup>

While many other phenomena characterized the world Catherine McAuley experienced, the realities noted above were central to them. When she had the freedom and means to do so, Catherine's response was to create a House of Mercy to shelter homeless girls and women; and a poor school in which to educate poor girls. She did this not only at Baggot Street in Dublin, but in every town or city in Ireland and England where she made a foundation. In these places, she also visited sick and dying poor adults, instructing them in Christian faith, in neighborly love, and in the love and consolation of God. These were her clear priorities. In the first paragraph of the Rule she composed, she declared: "The Sisters admitted into this religious congregation besides the principal and general end of all religious orders," such as attending to their own personal and communal growth in fidelity to the Gospel, "must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of the Sisters of Mercy, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character" (Rule 1. 1, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 295).

It was in view of the congregation's commitment to these endeavors that Catherine so strongly admired the self-sacrifice of the six English women who came to Baggot Street in early 1840 to serve a novitiate and prepare for a new foundation in Birmingham, England. She wrote of them to Frances Warde:

They renew my spirit greatly—fine creatures fit to adorn society, coming forward joyfully to consecrate themselves to the service of the poor for Christ's sake. This is some of the fire He cast on the earth—kindling. (*Correspondence* 282)

She had earlier written in the same way to Elizabeth Moore in Limerick about the first five to arrive:

It is very animating to see five persons most happily circumstanced, leave their friends and country, to enter on a mission so contrary to our natural inclinations, but the fire Christ cast upon the earth is kindling very fast. (*Correspondence* 270)

As to the “happy circumstances” of these young English women and their fitness “to adorn society,” Catherine remarked of Marianne Beckett:

Sister Beckett . . . is quite equal to Sister [Clare Augustine] Moore in all arts and sciences—languages—painting, etc., etc. She brought her finery to Ireland, her under dresses trimmed with lace. (*Correspondence* 207)

By now, Catherine’s own “under clothing,” as Clare Moore informs us, “was always of the meanest description” (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 114), and it is doubtful that Marianne Beckett herself had lace underwear in Birr where she eventually became the assistant superior, then the superior, of that very poor community.

### Voluntary Poverty

The voluntary material poverty of Catherine McAuley and the earliest Sisters of Mercy was directly related to their works of mercy, to their “being Mercy in the 1830s.” Their vow of poverty was not primarily regarded as a separate requirement of religious life, disconnected theoretically and practically from their mission. For Catherine and for them, it was a *necessity*, and not because the available money from Catherine’s inheritance was almost completely depleted in the early years of the decade—which it was. Voluntary poverty was for them a theological and practical necessity because it was the only means of funding more and more needed works of mercy; it was a necessity if they wished to live in credible solidarity with the impoverished people among whom they served, the “have nots” of their world; it was a necessity if they wished, as Catherine certainly did, to “bear some resemblance” to the earthly example of Jesus Christ; and it was a necessity if they truly

believed that all women, men, and children were their sisters and brothers with whom Jesus Christ was identified, the children of a common God.

Twice in the early chapters of her Rule, Catherine cites Matthew 25.40: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” This scriptural verse was the guiding text of Catherine’s life and work. Although she never spoke about the “prophetic” quality of religious life or about its “countercultural” character—such vocabulary and analysis were unavailable to her—her life and that of the first sisters *was* fully and voluntarily prophetic, not the least in their mode of relating to material goods. As Sandra Schneiders notes: “the greed and self-centeredness of an approach to material goods as to be acquired for oneself to the greatest extent possible regardless of the need of the neighbor is challenged by the commitment to evangelical poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

For the sake of their mission, the first Sisters of Mercy intended to be and were in fact voluntarily poor in their lifestyle. They held Charity Sermons, lotteries, and bazaars to raise money for the works of mercy, not to improve their own living conditions; they begged for the needs of the poor from door-to-door (Catherine euphemistically called this “collections”); using a legacy they had just received, they built a commercial laundry to support and train the sixty homeless, unemployed women then in the House of Mercy, and Catherine rejoiced in this prospect: “What a comfort if I am permitted to see some secure means of supporting our poor women & children established, not to be entirely depending on daily collections which are so difficult to keep up” (*Correspondence* 132).

When Catherine moved permanently into Baggot Street in 1829, at age fifty, she slept in a dormitory with seven others; their cheap mattresses were stuffed not with horse hair, but “cow’s or dog’s or something so dreadful that,” according to Clare Moore, “the smell for several months was most sickening” (13 September 1844, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 94); and for the first reception ceremony on January 23, 1832, the “postulants dresses [of the seven novices] were altered and patched up into habits,” and they got the “white veils, only one new one, old guimpes” that had been worn by Mary Ann Doyle, Elizabeth Harley, and Catherine at George’s

Voluntary poverty was for them a theological and practical necessity because it was the only means of funding more and more needed works of mercy.

Hill (Ibid. 95). Moreover, the meals at Baggot Street were “wretched,” according to the artistically refined and blunt Clare Augustine Moore:

Even when I entered [in 1837] the diet was most unfit for persons doing our duties. Leg of Beef with onion sauce, beef stakes [sic] that seemed as if they had lain in a tanpit, hash of coarse beef, and for a dainty, fried liver and bacon, though boiled and roast mutton came in sometimes.

The breakfast table was a trial to one’s nerves; sugar of the very blackest and coarsest kind with no sugar spoon, and for that matter the juniors seldom had a little lead spoon apiece, weak tea, very little milk, plates of very stale thick bread with a very thin scraping of butter. (“Memoir,” in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 207)

(The purpose of citing Clare Augustine Moore’s account is not to endorse malnutrition as a positive value, but to illustrate the poverty of the community, as she experienced it.)

Catherine McAuley and the  
respective founding parties  
traveled to make new  
foundations by “the poorest and  
cheapest mode of traveling,  
often to her own great  
inconvenience, and her bed [in  
these foundations] was usually  
on the floor . . . she never waited  
for a new Convent to be  
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opening to extend the good  
effected by the Institute.

Catherine McAuley and the respective founding parties traveled to make new foundations by “the poorest and cheapest mode of traveling, often to her own great inconvenience, and her bed [in these foundations] was usually on the floor,” according to Clare Moore who often accompanied her:

“she never waited for a new Convent to be comfortably arranged, being satisfied to have any kind of opening to extend the good effected by the Institute” (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 114–115).

Catherine’s letters repeatedly allude to the community’s poverty for the sake of mission. She speaks of what one might call “common life” in ways that extend its meaning far beyond those living within Mercy convents to the people they sought to serve. The description in Acts 4 was broadened in Catherine’s behavior to solidarity and sharing with those off the streets, in slum hovels, in cholera depots, and on rural roads.

During the cholera epidemic of 1832, after the death of a woman who had just given birth, she brought the infant home in her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed, probably a small cabinet drawer, in her own room. In 1835, in order to create “a school for the poor girls whom we every day saw loitering about the roads [in Kingstown] in a most neglected state,” Catherine gave “the coach house, stable, and part of our garden, with some gates, doors, and other materials for the purpose,” as well as the total proceeds of that year’s bazaar (£50), even though they were “six pounds in debt for things got at Nowlan’s on the Bachelor’s Walk” (*Correspondence* 86). In December of that year the community had to borrow £20 from Charles Cavanagh, their volunteer solicitor, because “We have so often cautioned all those who supply us—not to give any credit on our account—I doubt would they now, if we were to ask them” (*Correspondence* 70). In 1836 when she discovered on arrival how extremely damp the Charleville house was, with little chance of postulants joining them, she considered abandoning the foundation, but “yielded to . . . her own compassion for the suffering members of Christ (being greatly touched by hearing a poor woman exclaim, ‘Ah! it was the Lord drove you in amongst us!’)” (Bermondsey Annals, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 120). In 1838, when she could not pay the court’s judgment (£375) in the unjust lawsuit brought against her by the builder of the poor school in Kingstown (the lawsuit apparently brought with the parish priest’s acquiescence), and the sisters in Kingstown had to leave suddenly, before an eviction notice was levied, Catherine said, not just of this circumstance: “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere

should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford" (*Correspondence* 164).

In 1868, Clare Moore, who had lived with Catherine in Dublin for eight years and after that for brief periods in Cork and Bermondsey, compiled and published the *Practical Sayings* of Catherine McAuley, the first and most authentic source of her sayings. Clare's draft was, she says, reviewed and verified by other eyewitness Sisters of Mercy, including those still living at Baggot Street and elsewhere. Ursula Frayne then in Melbourne wrote to Clare: "How exactly dear Reverend Mother's words are noted down, I could almost fancy myself listening to her once more" (Bermondsey Annals (1868) 2:[125]). The *Practical Sayings* notes that on the topic of voluntary poverty Catherine frequently said:

In the use of temporal things a Religious should always remember that she has not come to a house of plenty, but to a state of strict poverty.

The truest poverty consists in seeing that our wants are scantily supplied and rejoicing in the scarcity . . .

The fruits of poverty are: 1<sup>st</sup>. Great peace of mind under all circumstances . . . 2<sup>nd</sup>. Great joy in the Holy Ghost which the want [lack] of temporal comforts will never lessen . . .

We find those who can enumerate very particularly all that Jesus Christ said and did, but what does He care for that? He said and did so, not that we should recount it in words, but show Him in our lives, in our daily practice. (*Practical Sayings* 6–8, 25)

Catherine's most formal description of the voluntary poverty she advocated is presented in chapter 17 of the Rule she composed in the mid 1830s. Here she focuses on the example of Jesus Christ and on self-restraint in the use and accumulation of material goods. Her placement of this chapter

The vow of poverty is a global declaration of embracing the kind of detachment, insecurity, vulnerability, dependence—in short, the homelessness—that Jesus [embraced and] asked of his itinerant disciples.

(and those on Chastity and Obedience) at the end of part I of the Rule and Constitutions (i.e., at the end of the Rule proper), whereas she places the chapters on the works of mercy (chapters 1–4) at the very *beginning* of this part (contrary to the arrangement in the Presentation Rule) reinforces the belief that for her the vows were at the service of the works of mercy and ordered toward them. They were not ends in themselves but a necessary means of following Jesus Christ and furthering the mission of the Sisters of Mercy in the world. In the Rule, Catherine writes:

As the Sisters in order to become more conformable to . . . Christ Jesus have . . . renounced all property in earthly things, they should frequently revolve in mind how tenderly He cherished Holy Poverty. Born in a stable, laid in a manger, suffering hunger, cold and thirst in the course of this mortal life, not having a place to lay His head, naked on a cross, He consecrated this virtue in His sacred Person and bequeathed it as a most valuable patrimony to His followers. (Rule 17.1)

Catherine's language is, understandably, dated, but beneath her vocabulary she is conceptually very close to the thinking of, for example, Sandra Schneiders: "The vow of poverty is a global declaration of embracing the kind of detachment, insecurity, vulnerability, dependence—in short, the homelessness—that Jesus [embraced and] asked of his itinerant disciples."<sup>5</sup> Where Jesus asked his disciples to "carry no purse, no bag, no sandals" (Luke 10.4), Catherine McAuley says simply:

The Sisters shall therefore keep their hearts perfectly disengaged from all affection to the things of this world, content with the food and raiment allowed them and willing at all times to give up whatever has been allotted to them. (Rule 17.2)

Nothing shall appear in their dress, but what is modest and grave, nor can they keep in their cells anything superfluous, costly or rich, in furniture or decorations . . . (Rule 17.3)

The woman who wrote those words voluntarily laid aside Coolock House, its land and carriages, its comfortable way of life, her inheritance, her future security. Her life became a powerful witness against greed and the wanton consumption of resources it entails and fosters, as well as a credible witness of genuine solidarity with those who had nothing and whom others considered "the least," and so, expendable and castaway. For her the

economic plight of the poor became her plight. What she chose to forgo was for their sakes, so as to share with them. In this she chose to resemble Christ who “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2. Cor. 8.9).

### The Spiritual Works of Mercy

Today Mercy scholars throughout the world see in those among whom they work, and discern in those about whom they read, a “hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious, understanding and peace,” which is often related to their “ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even . . . among Catholics.”<sup>6</sup> This present-day hunger and ignorance—whether in the rich or the poor—is not unlike the lack of religious understanding Catherine McAuley perceived in women, men, and children of her world, nor unlike the poverty of religious awareness to which she ministered through the spiritual works of mercy which were always her stated goal, in and through the corporal works.

In creating schools for poor girls in every foundation except Carlow (where the Presentation Sisters already had such a school); in urging the opening of a House of Mercy in each foundation, with a program of religious education and employment training in each House; in visiting the sick and dying poor; in going out to and welcoming adults for religious instructions, especially in Tullamore, Cork, Bermondsey, Birr, and Birmingham—the ministry of Catherine McAuley was always directed to enhancing people’s knowledge of and faith in God, with its obligations and consolations. The central message of her teaching was the Mercy of God, the mercifulness with which God regards and relates to all human beings.

Using the theological language of her day, she wished to “inspire” children “with a sincere Devotion,” to teach them how “to implore [God’s] grace to know and love Him and to fulfil His Commandments” (Rule 2. 2–3). In visiting the sick and dying she believed that “The Sisters shall always have spiritual good most in view”—for example, awareness of God’s pardon and mercy, the need for repentance, the peace and joy of resignation to God’s

will, the principal mysteries of faith, God’s divine care (Rule 3. 9–10). Where death was “not immediately expected,” she believed it was “well to relieve the distress first and to endeavor by every practicable means to promote the cleanliness, ease and comfort of the Patient, since we are ever most disposed to receive advice and instruction from those who evince compassion for us” (Rule 3. 8).

### Present-day hunger and ignorance—whether in the rich or the poor—is not unlike the lack of religious understanding Catherine McAuley perceived in women, men, and children of her world

She felt that the distressed women admitted to the House of Mercy ought “if necessary be instructed in the principal mysteries of Religion” and “their religious obligations.” They should also be instructed in the habits necessary for “suitable employment” so as to develop the grounds for a positive recommendation from the House and the skills “on which they can depend for their future support.” Catherine sadly realized that “Many leave their situations not so much for want of merit as incapacity to fulfil the duties they unwisely engaged in” (Rule 4. 1, 2). In general, she was convinced that

no work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found. (Rule 2. 5)

This is why—at such enormous future financial trouble to herself—Catherine asked to have a poor school built in Kingstown for the poor girls she saw “loitering about the roads in a most neglected state” (*Correspondence* 86). This is why she defended the sacramental needs of the sixty women in the Baggot Street House of Mercy against the parish priest who refused to appoint a regular chaplain

and at a salary she could manage. This is why she trudged through mud and melted snow to visit poor deluded families in Birr who were deeply wounded by the longstanding parish schism. This is why she resisted Protestant proselytizing in Dublin, Kingstown, Birr and London. This is why she founded a convent in "poor Limerick," a barracks town where women were exploited, and why she visited there "a respectable person who is in a desponding state of mind" (*Correspondence* 156–157). This is why she urged that poor children and adults be well instructed in the meaning of the sacrament of Confirmation and "the gifts and graces it imparts" (*Correspondence* 92–93).

## Her charity did not confine itself to relief of their temporal wants only; she took pity on their spiritual ignorance and destitution.

Even as early as her years at Coolock she was, "indefatigable in her exertions to relieve the wants and sufferings of the poor." Her charity "did not confine itself to relief of their temporal wants only; she took pity on their spiritual ignorance and destitution . . . She collected the poor children of the neighbourhood in the lodge, which was placed at her disposal, and devoted a great portion of her time to their instruction." Apparently the religious instruction Catherine offered to poor children soon called forth another audience, for Mary Vincent Harnett continues:

Her solicitude for the interests of the poor soon drew around her many who hoped to derive from her advice, relief and consolation. Everyone who had distress to be relieved, or affliction to be mitigated, or troubles to be encountered came to seek consolation at her hands, and she gave it to the utmost of her ability; her zeal made her a kind of missionary in the small district around her. (Limerick Manuscript, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley* 144).

Concern is often raised today about use of the word "ignorant" in the Act of Profession of Sisters of Mercy, on the assumption that the word is intended

to indicate materially poor people, and so de-means them. This is a limiting assumption. Though Catherine's primary efforts were focused on those who were poor in material ways, for her "ignorance," even debilitating ignorance, was not equivalent to "uneducated" or "undereducated." Highly educated people were often, in Catherine's day as they may be today, spiritually ignorant of a mature theology of God, of the full meaning of the gospel, of the obligations of universal charity, of the common humanity and dignity of all people before God, and of the ungodly greed, violence, and selfishness on the part of some that often lie at the root of the extreme poverty of others. Wherever there was spiritual ignorance Catherine sought to relieve it because she believed in the universal mercy and consolation God initiates and bestows, and hence in the dignity of all human beings.

## Conclusion

If Catherine McAuley lived in the flesh today, she would exert herself and her sisters to do three very specific works of mercy, works that would seem to her to be the greatest present obligations of Sisters of Mercy, make the strongest use of their talents and expertise, and have the most potential to enable them to be effectively "Mercy in the Twenty-First Century":

1. She would renew her own, and ask others to renew their, vowed commitment to *voluntary material poverty*—not primarily as a canonical requirement, but as an act of solidarity with the world's poorest people, as a witness against the widespread greed in all its manifestations that leaves them in extreme poverty, and as a necessary means to mount new works of mercy among them.
2. She would use her own and the sisters' long accumulated educational expertise, in fidelity to one of the primary reasons why they were founded, to create for women and children new *Mercy schools* of all types in destitute areas of the world where they are most needed.
3. She would dedicate herself and the sisters more extensively and explicitly to the specific work of *spiritual/religious instruction* of chil-

dren and adults, in all its formal and informal modes—the spiritual works of mercy which have always underlain the mission of Sisters of Mercy as she envisioned it—so that all in the human community may know and experience the merciful consolation of God and their common humanity before God.

When Catherine quoted Luke 12.49—without any biblical training on her part, though she had read widely—she was amazingly close to present-day interpretations of this difficult text. In applying Jesus' words, on the eve of his journey to Jerusalem—"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (RSV)—to the self-sacrificing readiness of the Birmingham postulants for the mission to be entrusted to them, Catherine was interpreting these words much as Daniel J. Harrington has recently interpreted them:

The fire that Jesus came to light was the Kingdom of God. Jesus was convinced that in his own person and mission a new phase in God's plan for the world was beginning. Through his teachings and miracles, and especially in his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus was igniting a fire that will culminate in the fullness of God's Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

When Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831, there were only *thirteen* sisters; two of these died, two left, and two more entered within the next year. From the life, example, and effort of these *eleven* have come, through the providence of God, the 9710 Sisters of Mercy in the world today. Surely these 9710 are enough to be powerfully "Mercy in the Twenty-First Century." If they generously welcome into their lives the Spirit's kindling of the "fire Christ cast on the earth," they could be this even if they were only eleven.



## Notes

- 1 Quoted in W.E.H. Lecky, *History of Ireland in the 18th Century* 1:144.
- 2 Lecky, *History of Ireland*, 1:145, 152.
- 3 "Summary Paragraph of Experience" (26 December 2006). Participants in Mercy International Research Conference, November 9–12, 2007.
- 4 Sandra M. Schneiders, *Selling All*, 109–110.
- 5 Schneiders, *Selling All*, 260.
- 6 "Summary Paragraph.
- 7 "Fire, Baptism and Division," *America*, 13–20 August 2007, 38.

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# Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy as Justice, Wisdom, and Holiness

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*Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M.*

**T**he theme of the conference, “Fire cast on the earth—kindling” is an evocative one. Catherine draws language and imagery from the Gospel of Luke to capture the power of mercy as it is cast onto the earth like a fireball, and to turn our attention to the one who casts it. She juxtaposes this with the word *kindling*, which shifts the mood of the metaphor from power to the imperceptible catching alight, the initial bursting forth of a flame, the tending and nurturing that the fire might take hold. Imperceptibly indeed, she has nuanced the Lukan verse in which Jesus says: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49), so that the Lukan text now echoes through Catherine’s text and through us and our texts as we gather to reflect on “being mercy into the twenty-first century.” It echoes, however, with the nuances Catherine gave it for her times and it has echoed and will echo through us in our times as we engage this theme, informed as we are by all that is our world as we have sought to describe and analyze it and all that we have focused into our articulations of the call to mercy into the twenty-first century.

## Circles and Spirals of Storytelling

We are drawn into circles and spirals of storytellers and storytelling. We are being animated by, becoming aglow with passion<sup>1</sup> as we draw into the spiraling process of our meaning-making, the lives and commitments, the passion and the pain of women and men of mercy—in the barrios of Brazil; in the “informal settlements” of Boksburg, South Africa; in the high-rise United Nations buildings of New York city; on the islands of Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand, and Australia where silenced voices seek to be heard and justice to be done for the *tua*, for the first peoples, and for those who are diaspora in this region; among those living in poverty and

dying of aids in Kibera, Nairobi, and across the African continent; beside those working with and on behalf of the planet; and with those educating for justice and change anywhere in our world. Mercy has been kindled, mercy is kindling, mercy seeks rekindling as it is cast anew on the earth in this new century with its poverties and its potentialities, with its powers and its perversities.

We have heard and we will continue to hear the voices of our sisters, the voices of our partners in mercy, the voices of all those with and among whom we live and work. It is this that calls forth a new storytelling as did Catherine’s time. We carry all of this with us in our consciousness, as we have heard it articulated in our initial paragraphs describing how we hear the call to mercy, as we heard it particularized in the papers of Elizabeth Davis, Anne Itotia, Senolita Vakata, Ana Maria Pineda, and Elizabeth McMillan. We will do as Catherine did as we tell our sacred story anew, letting that story echo in our re-telling, letting traces of that story intersect in wonderfully creative ways to shape a new tapestry of texts, a newly woven story or stories.<sup>2</sup>

We will do as Catherine did as we tell our sacred story anew, letting that story echo in our re-telling, letting traces of that story intersect in wonderfully creative ways to shape a new tapestry of texts , a newly woven story or stories.



## As we dialogue with our tradition in and through the Matthean gospel story, we can encounter the Jesus of this story as mercy embodied or as embodied mercy.

With all this consciousness, I want to dialogue in this paper with the gospel of Matthew,<sup>3</sup> to explore *embodied mercy/mercy embodied* drawing into that exploration mercy's intimate connection with wisdom [as seen in Elizabeth Davis's paper and as is evident in the gospel of Matthew]<sup>4</sup> with justice [as the Gospel of Matthew connects them and as that connection echoes through Psalm 84 and the prophetic literature as well as through much of our theologizing as women of mercy over recent decades], and with holiness [a connection made recently by Joan Chittister in one of her lectures in Auckland and which can be drawn into the fractal imaging of embodied mercy as we know it and seek to live it].<sup>5</sup>

### Encountering Embodied Mercy

The Jesus of any one of the gospels can be imaged in multiple ways. Each of the evangelists/storytellers sought to tell Jesus' story and their community's story as they intertwined. We now re-tell that story as our story, as the Jesus story, the Matthean story, and our story intertwine. As we dialogue with our tradition in and through the Matthean gospel story, we can encounter the Jesus of this story as mercy embodied or as embodied mercy.

One of the earliest metaphoric namings of Jesus is Emmanu-el or G\*d with us.<sup>6</sup> That G\*d who can be imagined in many ways, is called *Rachamim*, the Womb-compassionate one in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 33:19, 34:6; Isa 30:18; 49:13, 15; 54:10), the one who called a people out of Egypt [Matt 2:15, quoting Hos 11:1–4, a poem replete with female images of the divine].<sup>7</sup> But such an early naming of G\*d's *rachamim* as embodied in Jesus is in anticipa-

tion. Indeed, as a newly born baby, Jesus, with his parents, is under threat politically from a puppet king, Herod. Like so many children around our globe today, Jesus is displaced at birth. His parents must flee with him for their very lives. We are not told of the reception these refugees receive in Egypt. As readers, however, we fill in the gaps in the story, recognizing that the survival of this family and their capacity for choosing to return to their homeland as its political climate changes points to a possible favourable reception in Egypt. What this story does, therefore, is to situate embodied mercy in a context of political upheaval and its incumbent displacement of peoples.<sup>8</sup> It is a context that calls out for the fire of *rachamim* to be cast on the earth and for the G\*d who called "his [sic] son " out of Egypt [Matt 2:15 quoting Hos 11:1] to call all the displaced of our world out of their exile through those who today embody *rachamim*.<sup>9</sup>

A second aspect of the fire of *rahamim* cast on the earth and made visible in the birth of Jesus is embodiment and materiality.<sup>10</sup> Jesus, while being of a spirit that is holy (1:18, 20), is of the body of Mary, his mother (Matt 2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21). She, in her turn, stands in a line of women who give birth from their bodies—Tamar (1:3), Rahab and Ruth (1:5), and Bathsheba (1:6) and the many unnamed women—birth to sons as the story's emphasis suggests but also birth to daughters. The embodiment of mercy turns attention to the material—the materiality of bodies but also the materiality of the universe. The story of embodied mercy is not only located in human persons. It is also located in place—the place where the child was (2:9), the star that guided the wise ones to this place (2:2, 7, 9, 10), a place which is then called *oikos* or house (2:11). The wise ones then return to their own country or region [their *chôran*]. One cannot tell the story of embodied mercy, one cannot be embodied mercy, kindling the fire cast on the earth, apart from location, apart from the materiality of all that makes up that location. Mercy into the twenty-first century means that this materiality needs to be honoured and valued as is the human, protected from political and economic domination as the newly born Jesus is protected from the political machinations and destructive intentions of Herod.<sup>11</sup>

And before leaving the opening stories of the *Rachamim* that is cast on the earth and is the with-us

G\*d, it is important for us to note that this embodied *rachamim* is located in family [*whanau*] and genealogy [*whakapapa*].<sup>12</sup> It is located in culture, the Jewish culture of first century Palestine, an occupied country whose people's religious and other cultural traditions were being shaped by the colonizer as well as being held to firmly by the colonized. Embodied mercy today is likewise located in cultures, cultures being colonized by globalization with its development of a global culture that consumes the local, the indigenous. Reading the Jesus story with the lens of embodiment, materiality, and the centrality of family, genealogy and culture is to read with the Jesus of history, with the Matthean community of the first century Roman empire and with the daughters and sons of Catherine kindling the fire of mercy in our day in all the varieties of their locations and cultures. It is to hear, to experience the winds that blow from our shared sacred story through our many realities and to know the shared call to mercy.<sup>13</sup>

### Wisdom-shaped Embodied Mercy

One of the characteristics of today's world that impacts on all of our contexts is globalization.<sup>14</sup> We may do well to examine it in dialogue with the pervasiveness and power of the Roman empire in the first century. Jesus proclaimed an alternative *basileia* [empire] to that of Rome, a *basileia* characterized by righteousness or right ordering, not the unjust *pax Romana*, a peace or ordering won by power and might rather than justice and love.<sup>15</sup> Jesus proclaims that this new *basileia*, the *basileia of the heavens*, the *basileia of G\*d*, is near at hand, is indeed embodied in his ministry of preaching/teaching and healing [Matt 4:17, 23–25 and 9:35 which frame Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching and healing]. It is this *basileia* that also frames the beatitudes (5:3–10), woven through as they are with challenges to do righteousness [*dikaiosisunç* or right ordering] and mercy [*eleos*]. The wisdom Jesus teaches in the beatitudes and throughout the Sermon on the Mount is that of embodied mercy/justice or righteousness (5:6, 7, 10, 20; 6:1, 2, 3, 4, 33).<sup>16</sup> The healing action that Jesus undertakes in proclaiming the *basileia* (Matthew 8–9) is womb-compassion.<sup>17</sup>

To stand in the gospel tradition, to continue to tell the gospel story of the *basileia* of G\*d/the *basileia* of the heavens ought to engage us subversively but perhaps the fact that both socially and ecclesially, we now belong predominantly to the empire has obscured our commitment to the subversive.

To stand in the gospel tradition, to continue to tell the gospel story of the *basileia* of G\*d/the *basileia* of the heavens ought to engage us subversively but perhaps the fact that both socially and ecclesially, we now belong predominantly to the empire has obscured our commitment to the subversive. We are among the “haves” rather than the “have-nots,” those possessing rather than distributing the world's resources for the alleviation of poverty. To become embodied mercy/justice and righteousness, we may need to proclaim that the *globalization of G\*d is near at hand*. What would that mean—that just as Jesus sought to imagine, proclaim and work for an alternative to the *basileia* of Rome, we need to imagine, proclaim, and work for an alternative to the *globalization* of today's Romes. This would not entail a denial of globalization but rather a seeking after ways in which we might critically analyze it, read, or decipher the signs of our times with wisdom in order to determine what will not lead to the right ordering that is of G\*d and those elements of the global networking which can be turned toward justice, mercy and fullness of life for all.<sup>18</sup> Such a task is not one that we can do alone but one in which we must participate with others across Christian and all faith traditions. This would be to continue the telling of a gospel that was subversive. This would be to embody the mercy that comes from wisdom sought out in our day as Jesus sought, proclaimed and lived it in his day.

## Embodied Mercy—Seeking after Holiness

There are many stories, many aspects of mercy embodied or embodied mercy that we could explore in the Gospel of Matthew with the many intertexts from the scriptures of the Matthean community that have been drawn into their storytelling of Jesus. I will, however, take up just two stories and explore them in a little more depth that they might contribute to our theologizing and open up ways in which different communities of mercy might theologize about the embodying of mercy in many different locations. The first story is that of the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21–28. It is a story that one can return to over and over again and it will yield up new insights. As we place this story in its literary context (15:1–28; 14:13–16:12), we find contestation over holiness: is it found in the “tradition” or is it seeking to hear what is of G\*d (15:3, 6, 8–9). Jesus, the wisdom teacher, challenges disciples: do you not understand that holiness is of the heart (15:17–20).

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Following this exchange, the Matthean storyteller invites the listening community into a story in which Jesus is tested in relation to his embodying of mercy and holiness. This story is located on the border between Tyre/Sidon and Upper Galilee. It is a borderland story and it is not completely clear who is in whose territory as Jesus and the Canaanite woman meet: one has come out and one has gone to or into (Matt 15:21). The story is set, therefore, for the possibility of something new emerging from such a context and such an encounter as Gloria Anzaldúa indicates:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somewhat healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once see through the serpent and the eagle eyes.<sup>19</sup>

The woman represents in this story the female-headed household of the outsider or the other, the one who crosses cultural boundaries to seek healing for her daughter.<sup>20</sup> She is named in the language of religious outsider (Canaanite) but she is also ethnic outsider [of the region of Tyre and Sidon]. And her daughter/her household, she designates as demon-possessed. There are a number of ways in which the first-century Matthean community might have understood the designation “demon-possessed.”<sup>21</sup> For our purposes, I want to explore just one of them, namely that the daughter bears in her body the dislocations associated with the social, economic, and political conflict within the region where Tyre/Sidon and Upper Galilee met.<sup>22</sup> She represents the women and children trafficked across borders, the people of Kibera, especially the children of the female-headed households, all those whose lives are marred profoundly by the social, economic, and political situations in which they seek to survive. The breakdown of human relations is visited on the body of this young daughter and on the land itself, the land which becomes the border across which healing mercy is negotiated: “Have mercy on me,” the woman cries (Matt 15:22).

The shock for us in this story is that Jesus does not respond to the woman’s cry for mercy in this boundary encounter. In fact, the Matthean storyteller narrates that he ignores her. This rejection is followed by a similar rejection from the disciples of Jesus, those learning embodied mercy through the teaching, preaching and healing ministry in which they are engaged with Jesus, who propose to send her away.<sup>23</sup> And as part of the construction of a threefold barrier to this woman’s cry for mercy receiving a favorable response, Jesus moves from the boundary encounter to the centrist religious position: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (15:24). Jesus like the Pharisees of 15:1–9 and like the disciples (15:23) must grapple with a new situation that calls for a new challenge. He knows and articulates the theology of “chosenness” as Leticia Guardiola-Saénz calls it,<sup>24</sup> a theology

that would have been considered both 'word of God' and 'tradition' (Matt 10:5; Is 53:6; Jer 50:6; Ezek 34 and Gen 18:19; Deut 7:6; 14:2; Isa 41:8 by way of example) in Jesus' context. Faced with this woman who is "other," who is from across the border, whatever that border might be, Jesus is challenged to discern what it means to be the embodied *rachamim* of the G\*d of Israel, the prophet of the "spirituality of life" in this situation, which is new, this situation in which it is not "one's own" but the "other" who begs for mercy. This is the discernment required of one who seeks the right ordering, the justice and the holiness which is of G\*d.

The boundary-walker, the woman who is "other" refuses to accept the construction of insider and outsider that Jesus began in v. 24 and continues in v. 26 in response to her second cry for help (v. 25). Rather she tentatively proposes a new household that would enable herself and her daughter to share the same bread with Jesus and his disciples—even if partially, like the dogs who eat the crumbs! Her courageous and persistent engagement in this situation of challenge with and of Jesus enables Jesus to move back to the margins where he recognizes what she desires as being of G\*d.<sup>25</sup> Healing/holiness is effected in this encounter as the cry of mercy is heard "where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God"<sup>26</sup> when the one who seeks to embody mercy can allow that G\*d will be always new in the cry of the one most in need. Tradition, word of G\*d, and holiness, justice and right will always need to be negotiated in the face of human need both within the congregation as we explore some of our centralist hermeneutics—whiteness, western-focusedness, resource richness, and other perspectives that we must name together—and more

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broadly as cultural and religious traditions of our world call us beyond what is known and safe. The G\*d/*Rachamim* with us will be always new, asking new embodiments of mercy of us in the new situations we encounter. Displacement of peoples, trafficking in women and children, the rape of the earth and the solidifying of traditions of holiness/spirituality into authoritarian demands for conformity—all these cry out for new embodiments of mercy.

### Mercy Ever Embodied Anew

The final story I wish to explore is one that points to the "going away" of one embodiment of mercy in the person of Jesus but the remaining of that embodiment in those who come after. It is the story of the woman who pours out healing ointment over the head of Jesus. In exploring her story, I want also to demonstrate that in this story, the threefold aspects of the Matthean right-ordering or justice spiral: right-ordering of resources/Earth; right-ordering of community relationships; and right-ordering of the human/divine relationships.<sup>27</sup> But this is not all. In looking briefly at the different ways in which this tradition of the woman with the ointment spirals through the other gospels, I will suggest that notions of a metanarrative seem to be foreign to the origins of our Christian traditions. This in its turn might provide us with ways of understanding how we might hold "the integrity of multiple traditions while living in harmony."<sup>28</sup>

The ministry of Jesus prior to his arrest and crucifixion as told within the Matthean community closes with a great parable in which those who follow after Jesus are separated out into those who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the imprisoned and those who do not (Matt 25:31–46).<sup>29</sup> And through the parable, Jesus proclaims that "as long as you did it to the least, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Embodied mercy as Jesus did for the hungry, the stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned (Matt 11: 4–5 and *passim*) will now be done by those who belong to the Jesus movement and it will be as if they are doing it for Jesus, their teacher, healer, and friend, the one whom they saw embodying compassion.

This parable is played out before the listeners/readers almost immediately when a woman with

an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment pours it over the head of Jesus while he is at a meal in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper (Matt 26:6–13). There are many ways in which this story has been understood and I have no wish to contest these, but I want to suggest another reading that is important for our theologizing. The reader, at this strategic moment in the unfolding of the Jesus story is drawn into a web of relationships. Jesus is introduced as being in a particular space, a space into which a woman comes with an alabaster flask of costly ointment of pure nard that she pours over his head.

In Matthew's gospel, the house is a place of teaching and healing, the ministry of embodied mercy.<sup>30</sup> The naming of the house as that of Simon the leper focuses particular attention on healing and Bethany is also a place of refuge (Matt 21:17). The materiality of village and house give a significant context to the action of the woman. It is in this space that attention is drawn both to the woman—to the alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard that she has—and to her action, which brings her into relationship with Jesus. The naming of the *alabastron* turns our attention toward Earth and the stalagmitic deposits from which this translucent marble called *alabastron* was obtained. Earth has given of its resources to provide the woman with an appropriate container for the costly ointment or perfumed oil. Earth and the material of Earth are drawn into relationship with the human and invite the human person to be attentive to the gift.<sup>31</sup>

Into the *alabastron* has been placed very costly ointment [*myron*] of pure nard. *Myron* is a general word used to describe a wide range of perfumed ointments or oils both of which are prepared from plant substances grown in the Earth. The woman's breaking of the stem of the flask and pouring out of the ointment on the head of Jesus is an act of giving. She is the instrument of the giving, of the gifting, through her identification with the ointment but the ointment is the gift [it has been received by her as gift and will be given to Jesus as gift]. Jesus as recipient freely receives the gift that will strengthen him to give the ultimate gift, his life. As Anne Primavesi says:

*These interactive relationships between giver and receiver, between giver and gift and between gift and receiver link them openly, materially, sensually, with the link made tangible (usually) in some object passed by one*

*to the other; chosen by one for the other and received by one from the other.*<sup>32</sup>

Power is in the gift, in the *myron*, a power to bestow something that is lacking, to respond to the cry, the need. The context, Matt 26:1–5, points readers toward the lack: it is two days before the Passover and the chief priests and scribes are seeking to arrest Jesus and kill him. Jesus is facing into death with all the emotional turmoil that would entail. *Myron* poured over the head would put “good odours to the brain” Athenaeus says in the *Deipnosophistae* and this, he affirms, is “a highly important element of health” (XV.687 d). He goes on to say that “the sensations of the brain are soothed by sweet odours and cured [or healed] besides” (XV.687 d). The healing power of the *myron* of pure nard, this *pharmakon*, remedies the lack in Jesus so that he is able to face death: in pouring out the ointment, she has prepared my body for burying (26:12). His need has been met by the merciful generosity of the woman and the power of the ointment. Had the gift been withheld as the indignant ones would have wished, the deficiency in Jesus would have been felt more acutely. And what she has done, her good work, is gospel and is to be proclaimed, to be enacted in the whole world (Matt 26:13). It rightly orders the human-to-human, the human-to-other-than-human and the human-to-divine relationships. Mercy will be embodied in each new enactment, beyond the ministry of Jesus, beyond the death of Jesus, beyond the work of Catherine and all those who remember her story. Mercy will be ever embodied anew when such gifting takes place and where such right-ordering is enacted.

And this story that is told similarly in the Markan community (Mark 14:3–9), spirals out in other extraordinary ways in different communities' telling. In the Johannine community, Mary of Bethany anoints the feet of Jesus with the ointment/*myron* of pure nard and wipes them with her hair in an action that parallels that of Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples and wiping them with the towel with which he girded himself (John 12:1–8 and in particular John 12:3; and cf 13:5b). This paper does not allow me the space to explore the characterization of Mary of Bethany in any detail but it can be shown that the sexually suggestive nature of her action indicates that it is the type of act that would normally be performed by a courtesan.

san or prostitute. Since Mary is nowhere else presented as a courtesan, then her action would seem to be symbolic like that of Jesus, who is not a servant but who washes the feet of his disciples as would a servant. The action of both Mary and Jesus is that of crossing boundaries and entering a state of liminality; and it is the urgency of the time that calls forth such radical actions of boundary crossing. Mary's extreme act seems to be expressive of her extraordinary friendship in the exigency of the moment and its impending danger both for Jesus and those associated with him. Dangerous times call for courageous actions, symbolic actions, which might convey the depth of feeling, the depth of meaning of those times. This, it seems, is how the story of the alabaster jar of pure nard is woven into the tapestry of the Johannine narrative. And what an extraordinary story it provides for us as we explore the exigencies of embodied mercy into the twenty-first century and their continuing beyond our current embodiment.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude this section, I note ever so briefly how the Lukan community re-shaped this story (Luke 7:36–50). Reading against the grain of the Lukan characterization of women in that gospel, we encounter an anointing woman who embodies love (Luke 7:41–43). She knows herself forgiven by G\*d<sup>34</sup> and she gives expression to her recognition of embodied compassion in the person of Jesus. Within the three opening verses of the narrative (vv. 36–38), this woman acts in a highly erotic and excessive manner in relation to the body of Jesus,<sup>35</sup> taking the initiative, doing actions intended to give pleasure to Jesus, sexual pleasure, not just once but continuously. Intimately woven into and through her actions is the materiality of the human body, its substances and fluids, and the material of Earth, its substances and fluids. Jesus in no way interrupts her actions that catch him up in the interplay of bodies, Earth, fluids, and substances. Rather he receives her ministrations. Her actions transgress both the physical space of the house of the Pharisee as well as the culturally gendered politics encoded in the text in and through the material that the text evokes.

Engaging intimately with the materiality of body and Earth, she has shown the hospitality that Simon failed to show to Jesus who is a prophet. Jesus demonstrates his prophetic insight not by stereotyping the woman but by recognizing in this

woman of outrageous love expressed in and through powerfully erotic materiality, the great love of one who has been forgiven. She knows herself forgiven before she acts. She has not waited for the men in this context to tell her she was forgiven whatever her sins were that have been hidden from the readers of this text. She has a relationship with the Loving Forgiving One quite separate from that affirmed or denied by either the Pharisee, or the one whom the gospel names as Teacher. Having been drawn into the intimate and erotic experience of the forgiven woman, Jesus the prophet recognizes in her great act of love that Loving Forgiving One whom she acclaims through all that we have seen caught up in her actions. The permeating *myron* infuses and is infused by the radical incarnationality manifest in the woman, in Jesus and in the erotic intimacy of their encounter which is caught up into divinity. This is embodied love, holiness, wisdom and justice—it is radical and situational and invites ongoing storying in our different context of incarnationality.

Exploring these three iterations of an early Christian tradition of embodied mercy reminds us that stories and traditions of mercy will be multiple in our day. Like the early emerging communities of faith and love, we too are being invited to embody mercy and tell our stories of mercy in the many different modes and manners that characterize our contexts. And as we who have carried these stories in the vessel of religious life engage with and give way to others who will carry the stories in the vessels of different life choices, as did Jesus, embodied *Rachamim*, we will receive the ministrations of mercy of others as Jesus did as life is handed over. The storytelling will go on and it will go on in extraordi-

Like the early emerging communities of faith and love, we too are being invited to embody mercy and tell our stories of mercy in the many different modes and manners that characterize our contexts.

narily rich and new ways as did the telling of the story of Jesus, the *Rachamim* of G\*d with us.

## Conclusion

What I have been able to trace in this short paper is like the finger pointing toward the moon. It indicates what is possible, it opens up potential. It will, however, be the ongoing storytelling in our different contexts in dialogue with the multiplicity of our situational questions and issues and with our sacred traditions and texts that will enable us to embody *rachamim*/mercy as wisdom, justice, and holiness in today's world and into the twenty-first century.



## Notes

- 1 Among the meanings that *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (J. M. Hughes, P. A. Mitchell and W. S. Ramson, eds; 2nd ed.; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 620, gives to the word 'kindle' are "arouse or inspire" and "become animated, glow with passion."
- 2 One of the images that I wish to use not only to inform this paper but to inform our process of theologizing in a postmodern age, described as it has been by Elizabeth Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of our Realities," (Paper prepared and distributed for the International Mercy Research Conference 9–13 November, 2007), 9–11, is that of the fractal or the Mandelbrot Set. From a foundational imprint, multiple spirals emerge going in different directions forming the most wonderful patterns as modern computers image a mathematical formula that seeks to explain aspects of our universe. In the same way, from the foundational imprint of the gospel, multiple ways of theologizing and living mercy will emerge—this may be one way of celebrating the "prophetic spirituality of life" [Davis, 10] rather than a neo-totalitarianism that would seek to make all the same. For further exploration of these fractal images see <http://www.math.utah.edu/pa/math/mandelbrot/mandelbrot.html#applet> (Accessed 3.9.07) and for examples of the design see <http://images.google.co.nz/images?q=Fractals&svnum=10&um=1&hl=en&ie=UTF8&start=20&sa=N> (Accessed 3.9.07).
- 3 I am very conscious of the extremely limited aspect of this paper in which I have had to choose to engage with the Gospel of Matthew in a very limited way and through that the biblical tradition in an even more limited way. Our theologizing could engage with and needs to engage with the manifold threads of mercy and justice that weave their way through our sacred story.
- 4 This is the connection made by Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom."
- 5 Joan Chittister used the phrase "keepers of mercy's flame," which resonates with the imagery of our conference as she explored holiness in today's world in a paper delivered recently in Auckland. See also Nico Koopman, "Confessing and Embodying the Holiness of the Church in the Context of Glocality. A Rage for Justice," paper delivered to the ANZATS Conference, Canberra, 8–12 July, 2007, in which he used the phrase "a holy rage for justice" which he takes from the Danish theologian Kaj Munk.
- 6 One of the ways which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has proposed to interrupt our familiarity with the naming of the divine and its accompanying male imaging is to write that name in this way: G\*d (see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus—Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), n. 3, 191. I will use this nomenclature throughout this paper to invite us as women of mercy to be/come deeply aware of the power and pervasiveness of dominant male images in our consciousness, woven into our spirituality and theology and given expression in our language and symbol systems. I believe that unless we shift patterns of thought and language, we will not be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those, especially women and children, whom such language marginalizes and renders invisible and hence of no account.
- 7 For one exploration of this imagery, see Elaine M. Wainwright, "The *Rachamim*/Womb compassion of Israel's God: Shared," paper given at the 2006 conference of the Australian Health and Welfare Chaplains Association, Brisbane, Australia, 9–13 July. This can be accessed at [http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral\\_ministries/hospital.php](http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral_ministries/hospital.php). This paper demonstrates how *rachamim* intersects with many other ways of naming the G\*d of womb-compassion, one of which is *chesed* or covenant fidelity.
- 8 Anne Itotia, "Africa—Urbanization and Proliferation of Slums: A Case Study of Kibera—Nairobi," 5–7, 10–12, shows the complex history of colonization and displacement of peoples that characterizes not only Kenya but much of Africa. This theme of displacement of peoples is also at the heart of the Visioning Statement of Mercy International [<http://www.mercyworld.org/projects/index.asp>, accessed 31.8.07] and hence is a central call to us into the twenty-first century.
- 9 Many women of mercy today work with displaced peoples either in their diaspora context or as they

- return to their homeland through Mercy and Jesuit Refugee Services as well as with other organizations.
- 10 I want to draw our attention to the pervasiveness and multiplicity of materiality in our sacred story in order both to raise awareness of the other-than-human which we have so often overlooked in our focus on the human/divine encounter only and to encourage us to learn to read anew for embodiment and materiality so that we might develop an ecological consciousness necessary for saving our fragile planetary home.
  - 11 Our storytelling also needs to take account of the "male children of Bethlehem," the children for whom Rachel weeps, who are not saved as Jesus is saved (Matt 2:17–18). Who are the ones that our storying and our living of Mercy leave to annihilation by the political oppressors [as the Matthean storying of embodied mercy does to the male children]? These are uncomfortable and challenging questions but ones which we must not avoid for to do so may lead us to avoid giving attention to who and what we leave to annihilation.
  - 12 I use here the two Maori words *whanau* and *whakapapa* because of their centrality in Maori culture and life and the awareness that this raises in New Zealand society [or at least segments of it] of the importance of family and genealogy and its connection to location and culture. For further exploration, see Tui Cadigan, "A Three-Way Relationship: God, Land, People. A Maori Woman Reflects," in *He Whenua, He Wāhi/Land and Place: Spiritualities from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Helen Bergin & Susan Smith eds; Auckland: Accent Publications, 2004), 27–43.
  - 13 I am drawing here on the imagery and language of the poem of Adrienne Rich with which Elizabeth Davis closes her paper. See Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom," 13.
  - 14 Davis, "How Can We Dare Wisdom," 8–9.
  - 15 Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), reads Matthew's gospel in the context of the Roman Empire of the First Century CE. See also his *Matthew and the Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburgh: Trinity Press International, 2001) in which he explores that culture more fully and *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). See also Mary Ann Beavis, *Jesus and Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2006).
  - 16 I have explored this more fully in "The Spirit of Compassion of Jesus Healer: Shared," the second of four papers given at the 2006 conference of the Australian Health and Welfare Chaplains Association, Brisbane, Australia, 9–13 July. This can be accessed at [http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral\\_ministries/hospital.php](http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/pastoral_ministries/hospital.php).
  - 17 Immediately following the repeated summary of Jesus' ministry in 9:35 [see the parallel and framing aspect of 4:23/9:35], the narrator says that when Jesus saw crowds as he went on his itinerant ministry journey, preaching, teaching and healing, that he had compassion on them—womb-compassion. The verb used is *splanchnizomai* which scholars suggest means moved in the depths of one's being, one's bowels, one's womb. For other uses of this same verb to describe Jesus' ministry of compassion, see Matt 14:14; 15:32; and 20:34.
  - 18 *Gaudium et Spes* called us to read the signs of our times in 1965 and the Commission of the Bishop's Conferences of the European Community, *Global Governance: Our Responsibility to Make Globalisation an Opportunity for All* (2001. Available at <http://www.comece.org/comece.taf?function=euroworld&sub=trade&id=4&language=en>. Accessed 31.8.2007), 5–6, to which Elizabeth Davis drew our attention, makes a similar contemporary call in the face of globalization. The Commission lists the core values that are possible within globalization as respect for human dignity, responsibility, solidarity, subsidiarity, coherence, transparency and accountability.
  - 19 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 78.
  - 20 See Itotia, "A Case Study," 7.
  - 21 See Elaine M. Wainwright, *Women Healing/Healing Women: The Genderization of Healing in Early Christianity* (London: Equinox, 2006), 125–127.
  - 22 Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. L. M. Maloney; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 79, says that "[a]ggressive prejudices, supported by economic dependency and legitimated by religious traditions, strained the relationships between the more thoroughly Hellenized Tyrians and the Jewish minority population living either in Tyre or in its vicinity, partly in the city and partly in the countryside. The economically strong Tyrians probably often took bread out of the mouths of the Jewish rural population, when they used their superior financial means to buy up the grain supply in the countryside."
  - 23 The Jerusalem Bible translation of this verb is "give her what she wants" but this is questionable given the use of the same verb, *apoluein*, at 14:15 when the disciples propose to Jesus that he send the hungry crowds away to buy food for themselves and 15:32 when Jesus does not want to send the crowds away hungry lest they collapse on the way. The two stories of multiplication of loaves/bread form a frame around the story of the Canaanite woman. It seems strange, therefore, that the verb would be used with a different



- meaning in this context, especially when there is no indication in the story itself that the disciples want Jesus to respond to her need. Rather their response is in line with Jesus' initial ignoring of the woman's request.
- 24 Leticia Guardiola-Saénz, "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21–28," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 72, who, from her position of Mexican-American interpreter, challenges that "[i]f the ideology of chosenness has proven to be fatal and exploitative to the two-thirds of the world, then it is an ideology that needs to be challenged by all liberative readers."
  - 25 The language of what she desires/wills in v. 28 echoes that of what G\*d desires in the prayer of Jesus (Matt 6:10). For a variety of approaches to this Matthean story, see my *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (BZNW 60; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 102–116, 217–247; "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21–28 in an Australian Feminist Key," in *Reading from This Place: Volume 2—Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Fernando F Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert, eds; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 132–153; *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 84–92; and *Women Healing/Healing Women*, 153–155; and 123–130 for the Markan parallel.
  - 26 Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 141, describes the prophetic aspect of contemporary religious life as wanting to be "where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God."
  - 27 Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), explores such intersections in much more detail than is possible here through the metaphor of house which he claims as being central to the Matthean gospel story. This could warrant further exploration in our theologizing mercy.
  - 28 Davis, "Can We Dare Wisdom," 12.
  - 29 This parable is so often used to refer to the "corporal works of mercy."
  - 30 For teaching see Matt 5:15; 7:24, 25, 26, 27; 10:12, 13, 14; 12:25, 29; 13:1, 36, 57; 17:25; 19:29; 24:17, 43 and healing 8:6, 14; 9:10, 23, 28.
  - 31 Anne Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science* (London: Routledge, 2000), 160, says that "[t]o see life as a gift event is to see that I am alive because I am continuously gifted with what I need to live. I am gifted because other organisms and species have not evaded or ignored the demands I make on them. Ultimately, this fact does not allow me to evade or ignore my dependence on the earth. Or to ignore my responsibility to return it, at the very least, the gift of gratitude."
  - 32 Primavesi, *Sacred Gaia*, 156.
  - 33 For further exploration of this story from this perspective, see Elaine M. Wainwright, "Anointing/Washing Feet: John 12:1–8 and Its Intertexts within a Socio-Rhetorical Reading," in *I Sowed Fruits into Hearts* (*Odes Sol. 17:13*): *Festschrift for Professor Michael Latke* (Pauline Allen, Majella Franzmann and Rick Strelan, eds; Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2007), 203–220. See also Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36–50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124.4 (2005): 675–692, for the symbolism of unbound hair.
  - 34 Jesus' description of the woman's being forgiven in v. 47 is in the perfect passive tense—she has been forgiven—and because of this she shows great love to Jesus as the one who represents the G\*d whom she knows has forgiven her. The same tense of the verb is used in v. 48 when Jesus says to her: your sins have been forgiven [he does not say that he forgives her sins]. This very significant insight for the interpretation of Luke 7:36–50 is discussed in detail in Evelyn R. Thibaux, "'Known to be a Sinner': The Narrative Rhetoric of Luke 7:36–50," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993): 151–160. On the basis of the perfect passive of the verb, Thibaux skillfully demonstrates (p. 152) that "the woman's sins have been forgiven before she performs the loving actions in vv. 37–38" and that the words of Jesus are simply "his offering her assurance (sure knowledge) that God has forgiven her sins and salvation is hers."
  - 35 'Erotic' is used here to connote love generally together with its most typical implication, sexual love.

# Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements

*Doris Gottemoeller, R.SM.*

**T**he challenge “to be Mercy in the twenty-first century” precisely as *Sisters of Mercy*, from within and in the name of a 175-year-old community that bears that name, invites comparison with other contemporary options. Specifically, how is our modality of “being Mercy” distinct from that of the new ecclesial movements that originated in the twentieth century? What can we learn from these other responses to the gospel imperative to respond to the needy of our time? What distinctive contribution can we make to the trends addressed in our summary paragraph, precisely as Sisters of Mercy? In the pages that follow I will profile the new phenomenon in order to address these questions.

## New Ecclesial Movements

To begin with, the movements are difficult to define and classify neatly. An Irish theologian, Tony Hanna, describes them as “groupings, mostly comprising lay persons, but also clerics and religious, who are striving for an intense religious life in the community and a renewal of the faith in the Church.”<sup>1</sup> In a letter to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in May, 1998, Pope John Paul II defined a movement as “a concrete ecclesial entity, in which primarily lay people participate, with an itinerary of faith and Christian testimony that founds its own pedagogical method on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes.”<sup>2</sup> Given the generality of these definitions, it’s not surprising that they assume many forms. Some of the better known are:

- ▶ Communion and Liberation
- ▶ Neo-Catechumenal Way
- ▶ Regnum Christi
- ▶ Focolare
- ▶ The Community of Sant’ Egidio

## ▶ The Charismatic Renewal

To illustrate the power and reach of some of the movements, I will briefly describe three of them, drawing as much as possible on their own sources.

## The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation<sup>3</sup>

The movement took its present name in 1969, growing out of a student movement founded by Fr. Luigi Giussani in Milan, Italy in 1954. It continued to grow until, in 1982, it was recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity as a “juridical entity for the universal Church” and declared to be an Association of Pontifical Right.<sup>4</sup> In recognition of its thirtieth anniversary in 1984 John Paul II received 10,000 CL adherents in an audience, giving them this mandate: “Go into all the world to bring the truth, beauty, and peace that are encountered in Christ the Redeemer. This is the task that I leave with you today.” In a letter to Giussani in 2002, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of its juridical recognition, John Paul II described CL as “[aiming] at helping people rediscover the tradition and history of the Church, in order to express this in ways capable of speaking to and engaging the men of our time.”

CL defines itself as a movement because it does not take the form of an organization or structure with formal membership, nor as a special insistence on some particular aspect or practice of the life of the faith, but as a call to live the Christian faith in the present social, political, cultural, and educational environment. There are no membership cards, but only the free association of persons in groups called fraternities. The basic instrument for the formation of adherents is a weekly catechesis, called the “School of Community.” Despite this seeming informality, the movement claims more

than 44,000 men and women in seventy countries who have committed themselves to a program of personal asceticism, daily prayer, participation in encounters of spiritual formation including an annual retreat, and commitment to the support, financial and otherwise, of the charitable, missionary, and cultural initiatives promoted or sustained by the fraternities. It is supported by extensive publications in more than a dozen languages. There is a General Council (commonly called the "Center") presided over by an international leader and uniting the directors in Italy and abroad for every sphere—school, university, work, culture, etc.—in which the movement operates. Each of these spheres is led by its own group of leaders.

Within individual nations, regions, or cities the movement is guided by "diakonias," i.e., groups of leaders available for service to the life of the community.

In addition to the fraternities there are special sub-groups or off-shoots:

Memores Domini is an association of lay persons in CL who have made a choice to dedicate themselves to a life of virginity, living in houses of women or men and following a rule of group living and personal asceticism.

The Fraternity of St. Joseph is made up of those who wish to dedicate their lives definitively to Christ in virginity, while remaining in their current life situations.

The Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo is a clerical missionary group recognized since 1989 as its own Society of Apostolic Life. Members live in communities on five continents.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Assumption is a pontifical institute that separated from the Little Sisters of the Assumption in 1993. Its principal ministry is aimed at the family, through helping in the home, caring for the sick, for children in difficulty and for the elderly. It currently has about one hundred members.

### **The Neo-Catechumenal Way<sup>5</sup>**

This movement was founded in the slums of Madrid, Spain, in 1964 by Kiko Arguello, an artist and musician, and Carmen Hernandez, a graduate in

chemistry. Moved by the plight of the poor and dispossessed, they began a program of evangelization of adults that took the form of a post-baptismal catechesis, hence the name. At the invitation of bishops and pastors to establish the program in their parishes, it spread rapidly. By 1990, the movement was established on five continents, and Pope John Paul II, in a letter to the Vice President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, recognized it as "an itinerary of Catholic formation valid for our society and modern times." In 1997, in the course of an audience given to the initiators and the itinerant catechists of the Neo-Catechumenal Way, the pope encouraged them to carry on the work of crafting their statutes. The statutes were subsequently approved by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on June 28, 2002.

Facilitating the spread of the NC Way are special diocesan seminaries, called Redemptoris Mater seminaries, which possess their own statutes and a rule of life approved by the respective bishops who have erected them. In 2000, there were about 1500 seminarians enrolled in forty-six of them: twenty in Europe, fourteen in the Americas, six in Asia, one in the Middle East, three in Africa, and two in Australia. By that time, 731 priests trained in the NC Way had been ordained. At the same time, it was reported that about 4000 young girls from Neo-Catechumenal Communities had entered religious life, especially in enclosed orders. These priestly and religious vocations were nurtured in the 16,700 local Neo-Catechumenal Communities inserted into 5000 parishes within 880 dioceses.

According to the Decree of Approval, the NC Way "places itself at the service of diocesan bishops and parish priests as a means of rediscovering the sacrament of Baptism and of a permanent education in the faith, offered to those faithful who wish to revive in their life the richness of Christian initiation, by following this itinerary of catechesis and conversation. The Neo-Catechumenal Way is furthermore an instrument for the Christian initiation of adults preparing to receive Baptism." In practice, new members, called "catechumens," undergo a seven-year long formation program. Although they continue to live at home, they are organized into communities of fifteen to thirty individuals who meet at least twice a week for catechesis and to cele-

brate the Eucharist. Day-long meetings are held monthly, as well as occasional social gatherings and regular "scrutinies" and liturgies to mark the transition to a new stage of formation. Eventually some members become "itinerants" and move on in order to establish communities elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

### **Regnum Christi (and the Legion of Christ)<sup>7</sup>**

Like the NC Way, Regnum Christi is also closely associated with a clerical movement. It was founded in Mexico City in 1959 by Marcial Maciel, eighteen years after he began the Legion of Christ in Mexico City as a twenty year-old seminarian. After his ordination, Maciel had taken his followers to Spain and then to Rome for further studies. By 1948, Pope Pius XII had granted the Legion a *Nihil Obstat* and the bishop of Cuernavaca raised it to the status of a diocesan congregation. In 1965, Pope Paul VI recognized the Legion as a clerical congregation of pontifical right. It operates educational institutions and centers for the formation of the laity.

Meanwhile, the movement known as Regnum Christi continued to grow. It describes itself as "an international Catholic movement of apostolate at the service of the Church." Its participants number in the tens of thousands in some two dozen countries. Some fifteen thousand members participated in the sixtieth anniversary celebration of the foundation of the Legion of Christ in Rome in 2001. It chooses not to be identified with a particular project (education, missions, youth work, works of Christian charity, etc.), but rather it "endeavors to prepare a specific type of person who will be able to respond to the needs of the Church and the world. Its specific contribution is to place at the service of the Church men and women committed to Christ, enthused with his message, and capable of establishing far-reaching apostolic projects." To live this spirituality, members rely on a personal commitment to daily prayer, regular spiritual direction, and the frequent reception of the sacraments. They also benefit from working with other members, coming together in teams that meet weekly to reflect on the gospel, apply it to their concrete circumstances, and review the progress of this apostolic activities. Priests from

the Legionaries of Christ usually provide spiritual and apostolic direction for the members.

The extent to which these movements have penetrated the United States is not clear. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops publishes the *Directory of Lay Movements, Organizations, and Professional Associations 2007–2009*, but none of the foregoing are listed. However, their websites do reference United States locales. Anecdotally there are stories of bishops who have welcomed them into their dioceses and at least one who has banned the NC Way.

### **Observations and Reflections on the Movements**

Each movement owes its origin to a charismatic founder whose personal spirituality and passion for mission attracted followers. In addition to the founders already identified, we could cite Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement, Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Community of Sant' Egidio, and Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Furthermore, the more successful movements have grown rapidly, spreading from country to country around the world, attracting the allegiance of hundreds of thousands of participants, whether or not they have specific membership rolls.

This rapid diffusion is not a consequence of minimalist requirements for participation. On the contrary, the movements call for uncommon generosity, the gift of time and talent and even money beyond what is expected of the average Catholic. Their requirements include explicit and demanding formation programs and rigorous ongoing spiritual and apostolic practices. Frequent meetings, spiritual guidance from senior members, and personal accountability to movement leaders are all typical.

At their best, the movements represent a flowering of the gifts of the laity, congruent with the insights of Vatican II. At the same time, they also involve clergy and religious. As noted above, CL includes various types of lay fraternities as well as a priestly fraternity and a religious congregation of women. The NC Way runs seminaries around the world, preparing priests who will propagate the Way. Regnum Christi is associated with the Legion-

aries of Christ. On September 4, 2007, the NC Way held a youth rally in Loreto, Italy, attended by about 100,000 young people and presided over by Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. When the leaders made a "vocation call," some 2,000 men and 1,200 women stood up to show their readiness to become priests or consecrated religious.<sup>8</sup>

At present the movements occupy a kind of legislative vacuum in the church. The Pontifical Council for the Laity has general oversight, as noted above, but the generality of the relevant canons provides opportunity both for creative experimentation and for aberrant or heterodox development. The latter observation leads to some critical reflections which have been leveled at the movements.

The first criticism is that the movements can become divisive and cult-like. The NC Way is particularly open to this criticism, since its practice is to provide a separate celebration of the Eucharist for its members within each parish (including a separate celebration of the Easter Vigil). These celebrations are held on Saturday evening, often at a place other than the normal place of worship, and are frequently not listed in the parish bulletin as available to all parishioners. While the celebration generally follows the *Novus Ordo Missae*, certain parts have been deleted or placed in a different location.<sup>9</sup> This exclusivity and allegations of heterodoxy have prompted some bishops to ban the NC Way in their dioceses. The most extensive inquiry was undertaken by Bishop Mervyn Alexander, in Clifton, England, in 1996. The panel charged with reviewing the NC Way concluded that it had damaged the spiritual unity of the three parishes where it was established, and it was subsequently banned. On December 1, 2005 the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments sent a letter to the leaders of the NC Way admonishing them to follow the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the message in an audience with them on January 1, 2007. Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul-Minneapolis banned the Legionaries of Christ from his diocese. He further instructed parish heads that *Regnum Christi* is to be "kept completely separate from all activities of the parishes and the archdiocese," not using parish or archdiocesan property for any meeting or program. His objection was that "pastors sense that a parallel church is being encour-

aged, one that separates persons from the local parish and archdiocese and creates competing structures." The diocese of Columbus, OH, has a similar policy.<sup>10</sup>

Doctrinal positions of some of the movements have also come under criticism. CL is sometimes described as fundamentalist in its theological focus, idealizing the Middle Ages as a time of unity between faith and life, without appreciation for the contributions of the Enlightenment and modern culture. It aroused considerable controversy in the 1980s with its allegations of a huge conspiracy among Communists, Protestants, secular humanists, progressive political parties, liberal Jesuits, and Catholics committed to ecumenical dialogue for "selling out" true Christianity.<sup>11</sup> Other issues have arisen with both the CL and the NC Way over their relationship to dioceses, including that of priests to their bishops.

## Movements can become divisive and cult-like. The NC Way is particularly open to this criticism.

Finally, some of the movements have been criticized as lacking social awareness or an appropriate commitment to inculturation of the gospel message. Because the movements are so numerous and extensive, it would be far beyond the confines of this paper to document all of the relevant testimonies and experiences, both positive and negative. My purpose here is only to sketch out the reality with enough detail to illustrate some challenges for the church today and particularly for religious congregations such as the Sisters of Mercy.

## Learnings and Challenges for the Sisters of Mercy

Our Institute itself may be regarded as an expression of a movement. Through the centuries the church has been enriched by the monastic, the mendicant, and the apostolic movements. Each

was a distinctive response to the Spirit's gifts to the church; each responded to the needs of the time. The foundation of the Sisters of Mercy was part of the apostolic movement—the birth of hundreds of congregations in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and their rapid diffusion to the New World, as well as new foundations in North America, which, in turn, moved out to Africa and Latin America. These movements yielded distinctive congregations that conformed to the canonical regulations of their time. Except in a few areas of Eastern Europe and Africa, the movement of apostolic religious life is in decline today.

This is not a judgment based on an appraisal of the sincerity of current members, but simply an observation that our numbers have declined precipitously since the 1960s and a reversal does not seem likely in the near term. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the number of women religious in the United States has dropped from 179,954 in 1965 to 63,699 in 2007.<sup>12</sup> The membership in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has declined by approximately a third since its founding in 1991. It is true that there are 165 “emerging communities of consecrated life and lay movements” in the United States founded since 1965.<sup>13</sup> CARA justifies the grouping together of religious institutes and lay movements on the grounds that many of the groups have not yet determined the type of community they hope to become or the ultimate status they will seek within the Church. However, the editors observe that most of the new groups follow, or plan to follow, traditional models of religious life. While this may seem like a new flowering of religious life, 45 percent of the groups report having six or fewer members. Only 25 percent have more than fifteen members. And, perhaps as telling, twenty-four of the communities listed in the 1999 CARA directory had ceased to exist by 2006 and another thirty-seven were determined to be ineligible for the later listing.

I would suggest that there are three learnings from the new movements that address challenges inherent in today's world and that are applicable to the Sisters of Mercy. These are observations based on the evident power of the movements to attract and retain members as well as on the treasure of our Mercy heritage.

The first learning is *the necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality that unifies a group*. Each of the movements profiled, and many others that could be referenced, has a characteristic approach to gospel living, bequeathed to it by a charismatic founder and nurtured by subsequent leaders. By spirituality here, we don't mean something casual or superficial. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>14</sup> “Experience” suggests that spirituality is not an abstract idea or theory, but a personal lived reality. “Conscious involvement in a project” means that it is neither an accidental experience such as witnessing a beautiful sunset or the result of a drug overdose nor a collection of practices such as saying certain prayers or going to church. It is an ongoing and coherent approach to life as a consciously pursued and ongoing enterprise. “A project of life-integration” means that it is an effort to bring all of life together in an integrated synthesis of ongoing growth and development. “Self-transcendence toward ultimate value” implies that spirituality is the choice of a direction toward a value that one perceives as positive not only in relation to oneself but in some objective sense. Now I am not suggesting that every participant in the movements we have briefly profiled achieves this integration and intensity of personal spirituality—only that a vision of the spiritual life is laid before each one with powerful clarity and urgency and that the followers collectively embrace it, thus encouraging and supporting one another.

It's not necessary to persuade Sisters of Mercy that we have had an equally powerful vision laid before us in the life and example of Catherine McAuley and reiterated by countless of her followers. From the day that the doors of the first House of Mercy opened in 1827 Catherine was showing us the way of mercy. Words spoken or written by her echo in our collective consciousness today; practices of sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and for women in distress, instructing young people still occupy our days. The convents she established followed a prescribed Rule and honorarium. Many of our documents since the post-Vatican II renewal began give contemporary voice to our inherited treasure.

At the same time, there are tendencies among us to an individualism in spirituality and a lack of shared practice that threaten to undermine the collective witness. The challenge of renewal has been to deepen our appropriation of our shared charism and to adapt our expression of that charism to contemporary needs—tasks of interior and exterior change that are reciprocally related. Without a doubt the council (and our leaders) underestimated the difficulty of the task, particularly of the interior change required. Perhaps forty years is too short a time to accomplish it. But the example of the movements tells us that a deeply appropriated common spirituality has the power to unite members and attract others. Moreover, the spirituality of Sisters of Mercy is an ecclesial one, nourished by the Eucharist and sacraments, a point that connects us to the next learning.

## There are tendencies among us to an individualism in spirituality and a lack of shared practice that threaten to undermine the collective witness.

A second learning from the new movements is *the importance of our ecclesial identity and relationships*. One of the characteristics of the movements we have profiled is their cultivation of episcopal and papal support (sometimes to the detriment of parish participation.) They are also closely aligned with clerical groups (CL's priestly fraternity, the Redemptoris Mater seminaries, the Legionaries of Christ). And, whether one participates in a CL fraternity, a NC Way community, or in a Regnum Christi team, there seem to be clear requirements and boundaries of belonging.

One of my favorite passages from the Apostolic Constitution on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata*, reads as follows: "The consecrated life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church . . . [it] is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission . . . it is a precious and necessary gift for the present and the future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness, and her mis-

sion." (§3) It is my observation that we have not always embraced this central role nor considered ourselves as being at the very heart of the church. Perhaps we subconsciously generalize from an experience of an unsympathetic bishop or a misguided pastor to the totality of the church and choose to stand apart from it. An aid to a deeper reflection might be the lines from the *Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas*, "We carry out our mission of mercy guided by . . . the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church." (§7) Unlike some of the lay movements, religious congregations have historically interfaced well with local churches. For this reason, pastors and bishops have sought them out, knowing that the establishment of a new congregation in a parish or diocese will bring blessings in its wake. Thus religious life became a reality that affects the whole church, a decisive element for her mission. The witness of a distinctive way of life contributes to the holiness of the church.

Another task for our future might be to give clearer identification and focus to our lay associates. How are they distinct from the members, while nourished from the same spirituality?

The challenge of choosing an ecclesial identity and cultivating ecclesial relationships was certainly known by Catherine McAuley. The fact that she only chose to found the Sisters of Mercy when it became evident that it was a necessary step to ensure the continuance of the mission she had begun, and the correspondence she maintained with numerous priests and bishops, attest to the attention that she gave to this responsibility.

The third learning has to do with *the centrality of corporate mission*. Here I am raising up something that is not a particular strength of the movements. This is an area where the gift of the Sisters of Mercy to the church can be most clearly demonstrated and where our visibility can be most evident. The gospel rootedness of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy is direct and unequivocal. The works of mercy address the widespread phenomena and specific problems with which our Conference is concerned. But the fact that the works of mercy embrace so many human needs can mean that our corporate effort becomes diffused.

Fifteen years ago a study entitled, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States* came up with the

observation that "Under the guise of 'we are more than what we do,' many individual religious and groups have relinquished the power of corporate witness for a variety of individual commitments in effective but unconnected ministerial positions. The emphasis on individual ministry or at times on simply procuring a position, has eclipsed the symbolism of and statement previously made by corporate commitments."<sup>15</sup> I find that statement perhaps even truer today than when it was first published. More recently, sociologist Patricia Wittberg asserted that the loss of connections with institutions contributes to a diminished sense of congregational purpose and public identity, lessens the sense of communal identity and culture, redirects the energies of the members into diverse and unrelated services, impacts personal and professional development, including mentoring of new leaders, and, finally, diminishes a group's power in the church and society.<sup>16</sup> While the authors of both studies are generalizing about religious congregations in the United States, I find their observations pertinent to the Sisters of Mercy as well. The situation will not be easily reversed.

There is a need to reaffirm our corporate mission for our times, not necessarily to choose corporate ministries—although these can be powerful expressions of the shared mission. The twofold test of whether a congregational mission is more than rhetoric is how effectively it shapes each member's choices (and the leadership's affirmation of those choices) and how much it contributes to the public perception of the congregation.

## After Thought

Any conclusions from this brief review of the phenomenon of the lay movements would have to be tentative and partial. My purpose has been rather to introduce a topic that deserves greater examination and analysis from the perspectives of sociology, theology, and religion. My suggestion is that the movements are a sign of our times, that they address "the fundamental hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious understanding and peace." and that the Sisters of Mercy have the resources to examine them further. Our goal should not be to adopt their characteristics, but to embrace more decisively what

makes us unique and distinctive, while learning from their genuine gifts. The same Spirit animates both religious congregations and lay movements. The church is richer for this diversity.



## Notes

- 1 *New Ecclesial Movements* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2006), p. 3.
- 2 Pope John Paul II, "Movements in the Church," *Laity Today* (1999), 18. Cited in Hanna, p. 5.
- 3 For the data that follows, see the official website of Communion and Liberation, [www.CLonline.org](http://www.CLonline.org).
- 4 Canons 321–326 provide for Private Associations of the Christian Faithful, and Canons 312–320 for Public Associations. The former possess autonomy, subject to the vigilance of ecclesiastical authority. The latter are erected by competent ecclesiastical authority, whether the Holy See, a conference of bishops in its own territory, or a diocesan bishop in his own territory.
- 5 For the information that follows, see [www.camminoneocatecumenale.it](http://www.camminoneocatecumenale.it)
- 6 Description of the formation program is found in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* article titled "The Neocatechumenal Way" at [www.christusrex.org](http://www.christusrex.org).
- 7 The information in this section is largely drawn from [www.regnumchristi.org](http://www.regnumchristi.org).
- 8 [www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org).
- 9 See Hanna, pp. 60–62, for a more detailed description.
- 10 Jerry Filteau, Catholic News Service, "Minnesota archbishop bars Legionaries from his archdiocese," Dec. 22, 2004.
- 11 See Hanna, pp. 39–45, for further examples.
- 12 The CARA Report, Vol 13, no. 1 (Summer 2007), p. 6.
- 13 See Mary E. Bendyna, RSM, ed., *Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States 2006* (Washington, DC, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University) for the data cited here.
- 14 "Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *The Santa Clara Lectures*, Vol. 6, no. 2, pub. by Santa Clara University. Lecture given Feb. 6, 2000. Passages cited here are from pp. 3–5.
- 15 David J. Nygren, CM, and Miriam D. Ukeritis, CSJ. Chicago, IL: De Paul University Center for Applied Social Research, 1992.
- 16 *From Piety to Professionalism—and Back? Transformations of Organized Religious Virtuosity*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006.



# Forgiveness— A Work of Mercy Newly Relevant in the Twenty-First Century

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*Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M.*

**T**he historical and contextual analyses provided (in this conference) for our interpretation of worldwide experiences in the twenty-first century are profound and thought provoking. The essays that probe these experiences constitute a serious challenge for discernment of what the Sisters of Mercy must do and be in this unfolding new century. The narratives (whether from Canada or Kenya, Oceania or Ireland, Guyana or Australia, Jamaica or the U.S.) offer a kind of book of pain. The particular foci (whether on human trafficking, gender troubles, globalization, or economic and environmental injustices) intensify the urgency of our continuing to read this book. Essays that connect what is in the book of pain to biblical and ecclesial guidelines for response and to the past and present vision and labors of the Sisters of Mercy offer new chapters and perhaps a new book of hope (whether through biblical explorations of embodied forms of mercy and justice, critical interpretations of traditions of spirituality, evaluative overviews of new movements in the church, or constructive proposals based on Catherine McAuley's commitments and the extension of these through time).

Out of all of the essays, there emerge moral imperatives, some explicit, some implicit. For us, there may be no genuine moral dilemmas as to what love and justice require in the human situation. Pain can be remedied, at least in part, and the inhumanity of

humans in relation to humans must stop. The more difficult question is what actions to choose that are possible or feasible, and what strategies to develop in the face of our own and others' deep human limitations. We now know almost too much about the intractability of sheer greed, abuses of power, and systemic evils that lie hidden behind "business as usual," genuine ignorance, or fear. Yet perhaps every situation in which the Sisters of Mercy have found themselves has been like this. There has always been the problem of more pain, more poverty, more oppression than this band of women could by themselves remedy. It seems abundantly clear, however, that this never made them turn back in despair or yield to paralysis of action. There were always works of mercy to be done—whether in response to pain of body or spirit. "Little by little" is a strategy of its own.<sup>1</sup> Each work of mercy done in a "spirit" of mercy constitutes a work of peace against the works of war, a work of instruction against the forces of deception, a work of healing against the damages of individual or societal poison.

For the Sisters of Mercy there have always also been designated priorities for choices about what and for whom works of mercy are to be done: priorities for the poor, for women, for the sick, for those hungry in body and in mind. Moreover, from Catherine McAuley, the Sisters of Mercy learned the importance both of perceiving genuine needs (of concrete persons in concrete situations), and of taking "any kind of opening" (rather than waiting for the perfect opportunity) to respond to need with the works of mercy.<sup>2</sup> Hence, although the challenge of the Sisters of Mercy to discern what they must do in this century remains a serious and difficult one, we are not without general moral principles or more particular strategic and ethical guidelines.

Given this, my aim in this brief essay is not to specify what we ought to do in every part of the world today. I take extremely seriously—and af-

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firm—the recommendations for concern and action contained in the other essays and I expect these recommendations to become even more compelling as we enter the process of the conference itself. Here, however, what I will try to do is to identify a particular work of mercy called for in a new way by the multiple situations in our time, in our world.

The work of mercy I have in mind is the spiritual work of “forgiving all injuries.” Given the terrible needs that characterize our world, it seems odd to focus on this particular “work.” I do so not to obscure the other urgent works of mercy, both “corporal” and “spiritual,” but to shed new light on these works and the “spirit” of mercy that informs them. Given the massive injustices that lie behind many of the terrible needs in our world, it may also seem dangerous to begin with forgiveness as an urgently needed work of mercy. I do so not by ignoring calls to resistance and restitution, but by incorporating them into my proposal regarding forgiveness. My argument will be that an attitude of “anticipatory” as well as “actual” forgiveness constitutes today a necessary challenge to the church as well as to groups, nations, and societies around the world. And those whose particular calling is to bring mercy to the world, both as agents and as signs, have a new and urgent responsibility for this work of mercy.

My effort to unfold this two-part argument involves four steps, each taken in the four brief—and largely, therefore, only suggestive—sections below. (1) I begin with a biblical text that asks of the church something it has little understood through the centuries, perhaps particularly in our own day. (2) Following this, I describe ways to understand forgiveness in experiences both of forgiving and being forgiven. (3) I turn then to examples and possibilities of the power of forgiveness in societal and ecclesiastical contexts of conflict and stark injustice. (4) Finally, I propose new ways of “seeing” that can be brought to situations of religious and civil conflict when an attitude of forgiveness is introduced.

## Forgive Them

The church has long believed that Jesus established it with a special power and responsibility to judge individuals and groups. It bases this belief, in part, on a text in the gospel attributed to John. In

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this text (John 20:19–23), we find the post-resurrection Jesus meeting with his disciples, greeting them in peace, giving them his Spirit, and sending them forth with this charge: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”<sup>3</sup> In the Roman Catholic community, these lines are traditionally (and certainly popularly) understood to refer to authority. They are frequently put together with Matt 16:19 (“On this rock I will build my church . . . give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”). Together these texts are thought to establish not only authority to judge on the part of the disciples of Jesus, but, beyond this, a structure and content for authority in the church that followed. Hence, most Christians (especially Roman Catholics) hearing this text think of judgment and of the authority of the church to whose judgment they are to submit. As those empowered to judge in and by the church determine, so sins will be either forgiven or not forgiven; the gates of heaven will be either opened to individuals who sin, or closed.

But what if there is another meaning to the text in John? What if its primary meaning is not that the disciples of Jesus, and the Church, are to sit in judgment on individuals and groups, but that they are to *free* people, and if they do not do so, the word of God is left silent? “If you forgive them, they are forgiven and freed; but if you do not forgive them, they remain bound. So then, *forgive* them, because if you do not, they will remain bound and unfree. And *if you do not forgive them, who will?*”

John 20:23 is not like Matthew 16, where there is reference, apparently, to technical rabbinic procedures. In the Gospel of John, Jesus shows the

disciples the marks of his wounds and then gives them a mission of forgiveness. As some theologians have argued (though not necessarily commenting on this particular text), the message of forgiveness is in a sense the Christian message in its entirety. It is the decisive gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> It is what makes possible a “new heart.” We are taught to ask for it every day: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” It reaches to communities as well as individuals. It requires repentance, but not total innocence. It is to be offered to all who desire to come to the waters to drink of the Spirit, to all who desire to come to the table of the Lord. Only a power that stretches between heaven and earth can provide such forgiveness, such undeserved but yearned for acceptance. And it is a power given not only to a designated few but to all who share in the gift of the Spirit, all who gather to receive God’s mercy and the mission to reveal it to others.

**It is easy to understand the necessity and the role of forgiving when treasured personal relationships are damaged . . . It is not so easy to comprehend the necessity or possibility of forgiving when we are harmed by institutions or groups, or injured by those in power.**

But is this the truth that Jesus said the Spirit would teach in his name, reminding us of all he had said? Jesus, after all, did make judgments; he did not offer instant forgiveness to all. Yet who were those he challenged and judged?—only the self-righteous, those whose hearts were hardened with their own self-assurance, those who recognized no need to drink of new waters or ask for greater mercy. Others—so many great sinners—Jesus did not examine for the perfection of their repentance; he simply forgave them when they approached

him. He rejected no one—not Peter, who had his troubles; not James and John, who needed a long time to learn humility; not any of those who betrayed him; not even Judas, with whom he shared a life and a table (and who today may shine in heaven as a blazing testimony to the power of a forgiven love.) No evil is so great that God’s forgiveness cannot overwhelm it.

What does all of this mean for the significance of forgiveness as a work of mercy in our time? What is the “new heart” that is made possible by the power of the Spirit and that is characterized by forgiveness? Jesus said he did not come to judge, although Christians (especially Christian nations and churches) have been jumping into the judgment seat ever since. What attitudes, dispositions of the heart, would be possible if this were not the case? And what would this mean in the multiple contexts of conflict and injustice today?

### **The Meanings of Forgiveness**

To forgive is not to be passive in the face of injury, neglect, betrayal, persecution, abuse. Indeed, forgiveness may be one of the most active responses possible in the face of whatever sort of breach occurs in human relationships. It is easy to understand the necessity and the role of forgiving when treasured personal relationships are damaged. We reach out to the one we love, participating in the restoration of the bond between us. Or at the very least, we wait patiently, holding on to the love and the hope that the relationship represents. It is not so easy to comprehend the necessity or possibility of forgiving when we are harmed by institutions or groups, or injured by those in power, violated by those who are in some real sense our enemies.

To forgive is to “let go” of something within us, in order to *accept* someone who has harmed us. But what do we “let go” of? Not our sense of justice, nor a sense of our own dignity as a person. Yet in forgiving another, we let go (at least partially) of something *in* ourselves—perhaps anger, resentment, building blocks of stored up pain. And we let go (at least partially) of something *of* ourselves—perhaps our self-protectedness, our selves as desiring renewed self-statement in the face of misjudgment or exploitation by another.

To fathom our experiences of forgiving—whether by gaining insight into our reasons to forgive or into the elements in the experience itself—it is useful to recall our experiences of being forgiven. When we recognize our own responsibility for hurting another, marring a relationship, losing what we treasured in the other and in our way of being with the other, we are afraid for the future that we had taken for granted and in which we hoped. To experience being forgiven, however, is to experience new acceptance, in spite of ourselves, and the restoration of a relationship with now a new future. It generates joy in us, gratitude that our failure has not finally broken the bonds of friendship, colleagueship, or family. The greater our infraction and our realization of its seriousness, the greater the possibility of our gratitude at being forgiven, and the greater our new love in response. Pointing to the depths of the mystery of a “forgiven love,” Jesus himself observes that the one who is forgiven much, loves more than the one who is forgiven only a little (Luke 7:41–41).

Between and among humans, the need for forgiveness is commonplace in our experience. Although, as Hannah Arendt notes, “willed evil” may be rare, “trespassing is an everyday occurrence . . . and it needs forgiveness . . .”<sup>5</sup> Why else are we enjoined to forgive “not seven times but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22)? Even when we know not what we do, we are in need of forgiveness (Luke 23:34). “Only through this constant mutual release from what we do are we freed to live into the future.”<sup>6</sup>

Although we no doubt learn what it means to be forgiven within human relationships, the potentially paradigmatic experience for us is the experience of being forgiven by God. Our experience with humans helps us to understand our experience with God, but God’s forgiveness is unique and it sheds distinctive light on what being forgiven means in every context. To experience the forgiveness of God is to experience ourselves accepted by the incomprehensible source of our life and existence, accepted even without becoming wholly innocent, without being completely turned around in our ways, accepted even while we are “still sinners” (Rom 5:8). From the almost incredible “good news” of this forgiveness, this acceptance, we learn of the love of God that exceeds our understanding and our telling, that invites us into communion with in-

finite goodness and beauty. And the one response that is asked of us and made possible within us is the response of trust. To trust in the Word of God’s forgiveness is to let go all of our objections and our fears and to believe. It is to surrender our hearts in our acceptance of being forgiven. It is, to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson, to “drop our hearts,” to feel them “drop” their barriers and burdens, in freedom, accepting eternal acceptance. It foreshadows the ultimate experience, of which we have inklings: “By my long bright—and *longer*—trust—I drop my Heart—*unshriven!*”<sup>7</sup>

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forgiven only a little.

At the center of human *forgiving*, too, is a kind of “dropping of the heart” that is the surrender, the letting go, of whatever would bind us to the past injuries inflicted on us by others. It entails a letting go of our very selves, a *kenosis*, that alone frees us to become ourselves. At the center of human *being forgiven* is another “dropping of the heart,” another kenotic letting go of whatever would prevent our acceptance of the new life held out to us in the forgiveness of those we have injured. “Dropping our hearts,” surrendering our selves, in forgiveness (or trust in being forgiven) is the beginning choice that makes renewed relationships possible. It comes full circle in the mutuality that restored relationships promise.

But what if the injuries we undergo leave our hearts incapable of the kind of love that makes forgiving possible? And what if those who injure us continue to do so? Whether knowing or not knowing “what they do,” what if there is no regret or remorse, no willingness or ability to accept our forgiveness? What if the perpetrators of oppression believe their actions are justified—by whatever twisted stereotyping, judging, stigmatizing? How can forgiveness be a remedy in the new killing fields of the century, this era’s tangled webs of enslavement, and new levels of destitution? Must our focus

now be not on forgiveness, but on justice? Not on “dropping our hearts,” but on a struggle against the evils that cry to heaven for change?

## Forgiveness and Resistance

Forgiving and being forgiven have nothing to do with tolerating grave wrongs, or—as I indicated earlier—with being passive in the face of massive injustices. Neither the forgiveness offered by God in Jesus Christ, nor the forgiveness that can be a graced and towering human work of mercy, is to be equated with “premature reconciliation” or a covering over of exploitation and ongoing violence. Christian and even human forgiveness can include a radical “No!” to the world as a place of injurious conflict, of gross injustice and needless destruction. It can require that we resist the forces of evil until we can do no more. The attitude of forgiveness, however, the disposition of heart required for this work of mercy, does entail that we must not return lies for lies, violence for violence, domination as a supposed remedy for domination. In relation to these evils, a stance of forgiveness can, nonetheless, mean “Never again.”

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Three stories come to mind that provide glimpses of the power of forgiveness (or at least its attendant possibilities) in diverse historical situations. The first is a story from the Catholic Worker movement during World War II; the second comes from more recent experiences of the role of “truth commissions” in bridging the gap between claims of justice and needs of broken societies; and the third emerges, perhaps most clearly, in the context of fractures within the church.

## 1. Dorothy Day and World War II: Who Are Our Enemies, and How Shall We Love Them?

Shortly after the United States declared its official entrance into World War II (which in the eyes of many was a “good” and necessary war), Dorothy Day wrote the following:

Lord God, merciful God . . . shall we keep silent, or shall we speak? And if we speak, what shall we say? . . . ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute you. . . . We are still pacifists. . . . Our Works of Mercy may take us into the midst of war. . . . I urge our friends and associates to care for the sick and the wounded, to the growing of food for the hungry . . . .’ “But we are at war,” people say. “This is no time to talk of peace. It is demoralizing to the armed forces to protest, not to cheer them on in their fight for Christianity, for democracy, for civilization.”<sup>8</sup>

Catholic Workers were being attacked in person and in the press for their ongoing refusal to support military action as such. They were accused of being cowardly, timid, too frail to stand up for allies unjustly overrun by hostile armies. Day’s response was “Let those who talk of softness, of sentimentality, come to live with us in the cold, unheated homes in the slums.”<sup>9</sup> She resisted the counsels even of friends who urged her at least to keep silent about the war. “But we cannot keep silent. We have not kept silence in the face of the class war, or the race war that goes on side by side with this world war . . .”<sup>10</sup> Day took her stand on the words of Jesus: “‘Greater love hath no one than this, that he should lay down his life for his friend’ . . . Love is not the starving of whole populations. Love is not the bombardment of open cities. Love is not killing, it is the laying down of one’s life for one’s friend.”<sup>11</sup> Here forgiveness (of perpetrators of violence) is coupled with resistance, *kenosis* with action, and judgment (if you will) with love.

## 2. Truth Commissions: Can Truth Serve Forgiveness? Forgiveness Serve Justice?

Since the 1970s, “truth commissions” have been established in nearly twenty countries—in for example, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, and perhaps the best known of them all, South Africa. Although their results have varied, many of them offer insights into possibilities of transforming hostilities, equalizing relationships, and starting anew in ways

that do not always reach the level of forgiveness but also do not descend into the quagmire of past horrors of conflict and oppression.<sup>12</sup> The commissions aimed precisely to structure new approaches to rebuilding societies in the aftermath of horrendous acts perpetrated against innocent people—acts of abduction, torture, exploitation, widespread murder, and sometimes full-scale genocide. Previously, in similar situations, when the killing stopped there might have only been courts to re-establish justice, to judge and to punish perpetrators, perhaps to require some restitution. But when so many were involved in so much evil, the task of bringing all to justice in court systems appeared impossible. Judicial processes alone could not ferret out all who were guilty, nor determine exact degrees of guilt, nor heal the desire of victims for revenge. Courts by themselves could not bring about in a timely manner the healing of whole societies whose fabric had been torn apart by wide scale violence. Above all, courts could not mend the fissures from years and years of conflict between groups, now marked by so much blood.

If countries or societies were to have a future, something more was needed—that is, the freeing of the voices of the victims, the telling of their stories in order to make visible the truth of their suffering, making it known to the world, and receiving an official, public acknowledgment of what had happened. Not all victims lived to tell their stories; of those who lived, not all could by themselves tell the truth of their experiences; not all by themselves could forgive. But with truth commissions it was possible to develop procedures that might provide healing (and in fact did so in many instances). Here was a shared process aimed at remorse on the part of perpetrators and forgiveness on the part of victims.

Words, language, became the way to new life. Previously shattered, silenced voices were able to speak; what they spoke were their own stories, the truth of their experiences. Truth swelled up out of the seemingly dead ashes of broken lives and lost loves. Speaking the truth became a form of resistance to evil: “Never again” was part of its message. For victims, it became a way to recover one’s life, once again to gain control of one’s own agency and destiny. After testimony was given, witnesses were

asked what reparations they desired. The responses were modest: sometimes to go to college, or to have a plaque mounted in memory of lost ones; or just to know the name of the perpetrator who had tried to crush their lives, to silence their voices forever.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes in this process, forgiveness became possible; sometimes it did not. But even when it was not possible, or at least not yet possible, something happened to those who spoke or heard one another. The story is told of a South African woman who, after listening to the testimony of her husband’s killer and thereby “learning for the first time how her husband had died . . . was asked if she could forgive the man who did it. Speaking slowly . . . her message came back through the interpreters: ‘No government can forgive . . . No commission can forgive . . . Only I can forgive . . . And I am not ready to forgive.’”<sup>14</sup> Yet somehow her dignity was affirmed; she had been given the truth, and an opportunity to choose. Once again her own voice counted; the conditions for forgiveness began to be in place.

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What the stories of the truth commissions reveal is that forgiving and being forgiven have a role deep within large-scale conflicts and injustices as well as small. They offer alternative ways to provide “conditions for the possibility” of both justice and mercy. Thus cycles of external violence and internal violence (the poison of rage and revenge) can sometimes be broken; a new future can sometimes emerge.

### 3. Anticipatory Forgiveness: The Greatest Challenge of All?

There are situations, however, in which injury is ongoing; abuse, violence, and exploitation do not stop. How, then, is forgiveness possible and what would be its point? In such situations, is forgiveness simply a naive and futile work of mistaken and ineffective “mercy”? Is it here that struggles for justice must take priority over efforts at forgiveness? How, otherwise, are we not to be seduced into “premature reconciliation,” the kind of covering over of evil that allows it to continue unchallenged and unchanged? Is the disposition to forgive even relevant at all to responses of the oppressed to their current oppressors?

The challenge in each of these questions is not to be taken lightly. I want to argue, however, that even in situations where injustice still prevails, where the rights of individuals and groups continue to be violated, the dispositions in the heart of the oppressed and violated ought to include (insofar as this is possible<sup>15</sup>) forgiveness—or more precisely, ought to include the readiness to forgive. To argue this in no way contradicts what I have said about the need for resistance—against exploitation, abuse, domination. If we think that forgiveness all by itself is a sufficient antidote to injustice, this is a mistake. But if we think that struggles for justice are sufficient, no matter what is in our hearts, this, too, is a mistake. The challenge and the call to forgiveness in situations of ongoing humanly inflicted evil and suffering is a call to forgive even those we must continue to resist. Forgiveness in such situations is what I call “anticipatory” forgiveness.

Anticipatory forgiveness shares the characteristics of any human forgiving. That is, it involves a letting go within one’s self of whatever prevents a fundamental acceptance of the other, despite the fact that the other is the cause of one’s injuries. It is grounded in a basic respect for the other as a person, perhaps even love for the other as held in being by God. It does not mean blinding oneself to the evil that is done to oneself or to others. It does not mean passive acquiescence to subservience, or silence when it comes to naming the injury that is imposed. It does not mean failing to protect victims or to struggle with all one’s might to prevent the “breaking of the bruised reed.” It does mean being ready to accept the injurer, yearning that he or she

turn in sorrow to whoever has been injured; it means waiting until the time that the enemy may yet become the friend. It is “anticipatory” not because there is as yet no disposition for acceptance and love, but because it cannot be fulfilled until the one who is forgiven (the perpetrator) acknowledges the injury, and becomes able to recognize and accept the forgiving embrace.

Nowhere is this challenge and call to anticipatory forgiveness more clearly demanded than in the community of the Church. It is here that the moral imperative comes forth to love our enemies. It is here that grace should be passed from one to the other, making possible the melting of our hearts and the acceptance of friend and enemy, neighbor and stranger, alike. It is here that we are to be marked by the encomium, “See how they love one another.” It is here we learn of the model of God’s anticipatory as well as infinitely actual love and forgiveness—whether as expressed in the story of the “Prodigal Son” where the son is awaited and greeted with open arms, seemingly without judgment, seemingly only with yearning desire for the son’s return; or in the story of salvation historically enacted in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, which holds out for our recognition and acceptance, the forgiveness of God.

Many stories could be told, however, of those who have experienced injury in and from the church itself—from its leaders or co-believers. I know of one that remains vivid in my mind. A woman religious was judged by church leaders to be unworthy of her status as a woman religious. The reason for this judgment was that, although she served primarily the poor in her role in state government, the budget of her department also distributed funds for abortion for women with no other recourse. She could therefore, it was determined,<sup>16</sup> no longer continue as a member of her religious community. The rest of her life’s journey was marked, not only by utter service to the poor, but by a form of exile, by swords of sorrow, and by the cross. She responded to what was “done unto” her with integrity and visible humility. She remained faithful to her call no matter what forces tried to pluck it out of her heart. There was in her no bitterness and no loss of who she was. “I shall always be a Sister of Mercy in my heart,” she said to reporters in those most painful years. She remained in relationship to the community with which she said

she had “cast her lot.” She lived simply, even frugally. She prayed her office daily, said her rosary, shared in Eucharist. When, just before her death from cancer, she was asked whether she still needed to be reconciled with those who had harmed her, she said simply, “I forgave them.” This is what I mean by anticipatory forgiveness. In one context or another of all of our lives, it is asked of us—whether in the church or in the world. And my argument is that it is of particular need in the multiple conflicts, oppressive contexts, of the twenty-first century. It may be especially needed, but also especially possible in the church, where people die because of unreflective traditional teachings regarding sexuality, where people are starved spiritually because they are denied access to the table of the Lord, where actions for justice are sometimes considered betrayals of the gospel, and where power is exercised in ways that are harmful to the marginalized; but also where grace works in ordinary and extraordinary ways and can be counted on still to abound.

### New Ways of Seeing

A primary source of conflict among peoples, as well as of desire to maintain dominance, one people or group over another, is the way in which we “see” those who are different from ourselves. Hence, for example, perceptions of gender, racial, and class differences have long undergirded assumptions about superiority and inferiority among human persons. The same is true of cultural and geographical differences. Longstanding conflicts are sustained by myths of human difference, assumptions regarding “each one’s place,” and memories of the conquered and the conquerors.

The attitude of heart that I have been describing in terms of forgiveness, trust, and readiness to forgive, makes possible new ways of understanding human difference. It allows us, for example, to step back and to look again at biblical warrants for divine valuation of the importance of difference. A quick but extremely thought-provoking instance of this lies in new interpretations of the Genesis account of the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9).<sup>17</sup> In most of the traditional articulations of this story in Christian churches, it is said that God punished the descendents of Noah by confus-

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ing their language and dividing them, scattering them across the earth. In this rendering, the creation and reinforcement of difference is a punishment for human pride. An alternative reading of the story of Babel, however, is that God did not act out of wrath to punish the people who wanted only to stay together; who wanted only to build a city for themselves, with a tower in the midst high enough (“reaching even to the heavens”) *not* to challenge God, but to identify themselves among themselves, to give themselves a name so that they would not lose their unity.

On this alternative reading, God intervened not to punish the people but to prevent them from frustrating God’s *original plan* for diversity among humans. These people were not intentionally rebellious against God. Rather, out of fear of loss of one another, they attempted to absolutize their human community, in order to protect themselves from vulnerability and to enable progress in human invention and shared public discourse. The Christian ethicist John Howard Yoder has argued, for example, that what God may have done in this case was to respond graciously to this defensive effort on the part of a people, and thereby to restore God’s original plan for human diversification.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes, in earlier efforts at interpretation, this text has been coupled with the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1–11. And the question is raised: If diversity was God’s intent all along, why should there be—by the power of God’s Spirit—a seeming reversal of the importance of human difference, now making irrelevant the different languages, cultures, experiences that had marked the history of humans since God’s scattering them across the earth. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the text of Acts which says, after



all, not that everyone now spoke and heard the same language, but that *hearing and speaking different languages, they nonetheless understood one particular message*. Those present at this graced moment said to one another: "How can each of us hear [these Galileans] speaking of the mighty deeds of God in our own native language, speaking in our own tongues?" It seems that differences were not erased; deep human difference that is characterized by diverse languages, histories, cultures did not become irrelevant. From this we discern that the word of God is not foreign to any human experience; that difference can not only be accepted but needed (and blessed) because it forms the ears that can hear in every tongue the voice of the Spirit.

Today we can recognize in human relationships two meanings of difference, two attitudes in perceiving the "other." "Othering" can be negative or positive. It can mean our projection onto an "other" all the things we consider (however unconsciously) negative in ourselves; it can mean seeing the "other" as always a stranger, making it easier to see her or him as an enemy, or as less than human. In this first way of perceiving the "other," difference becomes a source of violence.

On the other hand, as my colleague Letty Russell has said many times, difference can be understood primarily as a gift needed for human community. If we were all exactly the same, the possibilities of community would be extremely limited. But if difference is necessary for the richness and vitality of community, then in a sense there is no real "other." As some groups have learned to say, "She is not the other; she is my sister." Or "he is not the other; he is my brother." The response made possible, then, to difference is not enmity, not exploitation, not violence, but hospitality.<sup>19</sup>

There remain, however, tendencies in us to make of difference a kind of eternal barrier between and among us. Religious diversity, for example, has been a tragic source of violence through the centuries. In our era, it has returned in multiple forms—the violence of judgment and rejection, exclusion and persecution, and even the ultimate violence of killing. Radically new ways of approaching this phenomenon must be tried, ways that will foster the "conditions of possibility" of acceptance, forgiveness, and friendship. Significant work is being done, especially but not only, by feminist

religion scholars.<sup>20</sup> A new initiative has been undertaken, for example, to heal the breaches among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. It involves a "new way of seeing" the heritage of these religions and the potential for peace among them. Instead of focusing, as in the past, on a putative unity among these traditions based on the common fatherhood of Abraham, women scholars of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism choose now to focus on their two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. These scholars believe that the problems and possibilities of the past and present can better be understood by following the history of these two women. They believe also that the responsibility of mutual understanding and shared actions for justice falls now to "the myriad children of Hagar and Sarah, now unto the thousandth generation," including those of us who are their daughters and sons today.<sup>21</sup>

A new "way of seeing" is made possible first by at least the minimal "dropping of our hearts" in respect for adherents of religions other than our own. Each tradition must find in itself reasons to respect the others. The new way of seeing is then forged through interacting, learning, attempting to understand the beliefs of other traditions, and to comprehend the histories that have led to the imposition of terrible harm. The farther we travel in this new way, the better we "see" our sisters and brothers, and the more clearly we recognize the imperative for being-forgiven and forgiving.



I began this essay by proposing that a particular work of mercy is called for in a new and urgent way in the twenty-first century and that those whose whole vocation is to bring mercy to the world have a special responsibility for this work. I suggested that this work of mercy, the "spiritual" work of forgiving all injuries, would not substitute for or counter the other works of mercy or of justice. As a disposition, it is radical enough, and sufficiently "embodied," to shape genuinely compassionate love at the heart of all the deeds of love, all the works of mercy. It is conducive to forming hearts that will comfort the sorrowful, counsel those under the stress and pain of doubt, share insight and wisdom, reveal Gods' beauty in God's mercy so that the hearts of others are awakened and turned to God and neighbor, endure wrongs not passively but actively, reaching out to forgive and transform. It is conducive, too, to

deeds of loving justice, and the further works of mercy: finding food and drink for the hungry and thirsty, clothes for the bereft, shelter for the homeless poor, companionship as well as fairness for the imprisoned; and it can motivate responses to the sick, and reverence for the dead.

If Sisters of Mercy can learn to embody this particular work in new ways, in all the troubled and troubling contexts of human distress and need, we will, I believe, be able to speak truth to power, stand in solidarity with those powerless and injured, challenge forces of evil whether in systems or ideologies, surrender our hearts in a plea for divine forgiveness for ourselves and for all whom we refuse to judge as our enemies. Insofar as this is today's challenge and call to all the world, and within the church, surely it is our call in a particular way.



## Notes

- 1 I borrow this phrase and its significance both from St. Paul and from Dorothy Day. Yet much of what Catherine McAuley said and did expresses its meaning just as fully. See *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).
- 2 I take the point about "any kind of opening" from Mary Clare Moore's "Bermondsey Annals 1841," cited in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).
- 3 Scripture quotations used in this essay are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition copyright 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
- 4 See, e.g., Walter Kasper, "The Church as a Place of Forgiveness," *Communio* 16 (Summer, 1989): 162.
- 5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Emily Dickinson, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 108.
- 8 Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 261-63.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 263.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 264.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 265.
- 12 I rely heavily here on the marvelous analysis of these truth commissions provided in Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For other useful views on the commissions and similar proposals for reconciliation, see Miroslav Volf, "Memory of Reconciliation—Reconciliation of Memory," *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Fifty-Ninth Annual Convention* 59 (June, 2004): 1-13; Denise M. Ackermann, "Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective," *ibid.*, 50-67; Raymond G. Helmick & Rodney L. Peterson, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001); Robert J. Schreiter, *The Memory of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). I note here that while my own rendering of the work of truth commissions emphasizes their positive value, they have had their many critics as well. Some of these are considered in the works cited above.
- 13 Phelps, 110 and 158 n. 19.
- 14 Timothy Garton Ash, "True Confessions," *New York Review of Books* (July 17, 1997): 36-36; as cited in Phelps, 112.
- 15 "Ought" may be too strong a term here. By using it, I do not want to impose yet another burden on those who suffer under ongoing oppression of whatever kind. I simply mean that it is an appropriate disposition, one that can be freeing and strengthening, even under these circumstances.
- 16 The determination was made by church officials, not by the leaders of her own community.
- 17 These interpretations are not as new to the Jewish tradition as to the Christian.
- 18 See John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 61-65. This same view is articulated from a Jewish perspective in Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002).
- 19 I am indebted to Letty M. Russell for key insights in this regard. See her forthcoming, posthumously published work, *Just Hospitality*, ed. Shannon Clarkson & Kathryn Ott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).
- 20 See, for example, the many relevant writings by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Diana Eck, and others.
- 21 See Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1.

# Women as the Image of God Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century

Patricia A. Fox R.S.M.

This conference, *Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling*, is one expression of our globalization as Sisters of Mercy. Some of the preparatory papers inform and challenge our reading of the signs of these times, others offer light and direction from our history and tradition. The issue we are pursuing together is about “being Mercy in the twenty-first century.” Doris Gottemoeller focuses the question more finely when she asks: “What distinctive contribution can we make to the trends addressed in our summary paragraph<sup>1</sup>, *precisely as Sisters of Mercy*?<sup>2</sup> It is this question that I would like to address in this paper. Given the capacities for communication and travel that have existed now for decades, it could be considered surprising that as a worldwide community of religious women, we have not responded to such a question with practical intent and in a sustained manner before. However, with the strong strands of autonomy and localization so firmly entrenched within our tradition, we can rejoice that, at last, in this twenty-first century, largely facilitated by the agency of Mercy International Association, we are finding ways to look at the big picture of our world and our times together. Both the urgency of our times and a more vivid and immediate access to Catherine’s

vision and charism prompt us to a deeper, responsive reception of our charism of mercy for the church and world.

It was the joyful commitment and energy of a group of attractive women recently arrived from England to join the new Institute of Sisters of Mercy, which evoked Catherine McAuley’s animated description to her friend Elizabeth—“the fire Christ cast upon the earth is kindling very fast” (*Correspondence* 170).<sup>3</sup> Her use of this vibrant gospel image indicates that she recognized this event of their arrival to be *God’s deed*, an initiative of the provident loving God in whom she had placed her trust and her hopes for the future of the Institute of Mercy. I believe that the invitation to us in these days,—to discover our global call as Sisters of Mercy in the twenty-first century—provides an opportunity for us to attend to *God’s new deed* in us. The global and local pictures of the current social reality could leave us disempowered by their sheer weight and complexity.<sup>4</sup> However, since it is God’s Spirit who creates events of communion, I want to recognize this event of our gathering as God’s deed, which offers us, a newly emerging international body of mercy women, some deeper wisdom and insight towards collective decision and action. This time together has the potential to “open a new way of ‘being centered in God’ in life and ministry in twenty-first century.”<sup>5</sup>

Both the urgency of our times and a more vivid and immediate access to Catherine’s vision and charism prompt us to a deeper, responsive reception of our charism of mercy for the church and world.

## The Spiritual Works of Mercy

I want to focus on an issue that has been raised in several papers and which I believe is intrinsic to our being mercy in the twenty-first century, and therefore to our common corporate mission as Sisters of Mercy. Mary Sullivan, when referring to one of the strands we identified to be within our present global reality, suggests that:

[t]his present-day hunger and ignorance—whether in the rich or poor—is not unlike the lack of religious understanding Catherine McAuley perceived in women, men, and children of her world, nor unlike the poverty of religious awareness to which she ministered through the spiritual works of mercy which were always her stated goal, in and through the corporal works . . .<sup>6</sup>

She goes on to emphasize that: “the ministry of Catherine McAuley was always directed to enhancing people’s knowledge of and faith in God”<sup>7</sup> and that “highly educated people were often, in Catherine’s day as they may be today, spiritually ignorant of a mature theology of God.”<sup>8</sup>

Spiritual ignorance of a mature theology of God is precisely the area I wish to address because of its very practical consequences for our mission of mercy. It is to this end that Elaine Wainwright in her paper on “Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy” chooses to use the nomenclature “G\*d,” in order to “to interrupt our familiarity with naming the divine.” Further, she wants:

to invite us as women of mercy to be/come deeply aware of the power and pervasiveness of dominant male images in our consciousness, woven into our spirituality and theology and given expression in our language and symbol systems. I believe that unless we shift patterns of thought and language, we will not be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those, especially women and children, whom such language marginalizes and renders invisible and hence of no account.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, Janet Ruffing, following the work of Beverley Lanzetta, draws our attention to “the soul wounds that women suffer as a result of patriarchal religion.” She notes that “there are profound spiritual dimensions to gender-based discrimination and violence from which we ourselves are not immune.”<sup>10</sup> So that while theologically, we know we are equally in the image of God and that God indwells in us as women, our Church consistently denies this profound reality in practice. Consequently, “we may live with anger and rage that has no place to go. We live with the sadness of betrayal because our church experience denies our deep feminine wisdom and agency.”<sup>11</sup>

Related to this, Elizabeth Davis, having set out a confronting mosaic of realities in contemporary society, identifies a series of “troubling questions.” One of these is: “How can women be leaders in this age when gender equity and empowerment of

women are still distant dreams?”<sup>12</sup> Any analysis of world poverty almost invariably identifies health, literacy, and education of women as intrinsic to its remedy. More than a hundred and seventy-five years ago, our founder, Catherine recognized with clarity that the agency of women was fundamental for the poor to be freed to live a life of dignity and joy. Since then the full force of the mission of Sisters of Mercy, spread to the corners of the earth, has been directed to that end. Yet it is still true that gender equity and empowerment of women, and therefore the leadership of women, are only distant dreams even while, globally, new and urgent determinations are made in our time “to make poverty history.”

Women’s work in theology, and  
in a particular way within  
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richer knowing of God.

### Women and the Theology of God

I want to argue that a mature theology of the God revealed by Jesus in the Spirit—one that does “shift patterns of thought and language” is crucial if we are “to be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those [afflicted by poverty], especially women and children.”<sup>13</sup> In the past few decades, women have had access to a theological and biblical education in ways previously not possible. One consequence is that the women, the “other” half of the human race, are for the first time interpreting sacred texts and contributing in significant ways to current theological and ethical discourse. Women’s work in theology, and in a particular way within feminist theologies, has challenged us to receive the “more” of God, to a deeper, richer knowing of God.<sup>14</sup> Theologian Anne Carr has rightly described this phenomenon as a *transforming grace* as it offers us the capacity for the conversion and transformation that can occur

My concern is about how the fruits of decades of women's work in biblical and theological research can be made accessible and be "received" by the people of God in ways that enable conversion and transformation.

when spiritual ignorance makes way for a more mature theology of God.

My concern is about how the fruits of decades of women's work in biblical and theological research can be made accessible and be "received" by the people of God in ways that enable conversion and transformation. To explore this, I will focus briefly on an area of theology that is familiar to me. As a Sister of Mercy, I have been privileged over years to have been able to study systematic theology with a particular focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. I was prompted to pursue such studies because my pastoral involvements had led me to recognize the practical effects of the beliefs we hold. I recognized in particular that the symbol of God as Trinity, which is at the very heart of our spiritual and theological tradition, has had little if any practical import in people's lives. For so many, it is still largely a dormant symbol, its power to communicate the dynamism of the liberating God Jesus proclaimed by his life and deeds mostly muted. In recent decades, however, many theologians have contributed to a widespread revival of this central symbol of our faith. The work of women in this enterprise, as in every arena of theological work, has been and will continue to be crucial.

Many would be familiar, for example, with the work of North American theologian and Sister of St Joseph, Elizabeth Johnson. Johnson addresses the issue of why the doctrine of the Trinity became irrelevant to Christian life. Her focus on the practical impact of the symbol of God uncovers how this central symbol of God as Trinity has functioned for millennia "to support an imaginative and struc-

tural world that excludes of subordinates women" and how in turn, this "undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God."<sup>15</sup> She shows how patriarchal religious culture has both confined women to an inferior place and limited speech about God to male images. The seriousness of this situation is emphasized early in her primary publication on the Trinity, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 1992, when she repeats in mantric fashion, "The symbol of God functions."<sup>16</sup> She uses this sentence like a red flashing light to alert the reader that "what is at stake is the truth about God, inseparable from the situations of human beings, and the identity and mission of the faith community itself."<sup>17</sup> In the context of this discussion, we could add to this by owning that the symbol of God can contribute negatively to the phenomenon of world poverty.

Johnson articulates here something that Catherine McAuley knew very well—that there is an intrinsic link between the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. How we speak about God, matters because "what is at stake is the truth about God, *inseparable from* the situations of human beings." The symbol of God truly does function. The God or gods worshipped by an individual person or by societies, shapes behavior. And it is for this reason that a consideration of the naming of God takes on a particular urgency. Johnson's method evaluates the effects of sexism within society and theological discourse and addresses the debilitating patriarchal effects of the names, imagery, and structure of the Trinity, on the Christian community and on women's lives in particular. She draws attention to a fact that has been steadfastly ignored by theologians for centuries: that exclusively male imagery for God has been used in an uncritically literal way, leading to a form of idolatry. This in spite of key theological principles for language about God commonly accepted at the heart of the tradition.<sup>18</sup> Further, she shows that while affirming and promoting the equality of the divine persons and their mutual interrelation, the classic doctrine subverts this by maintaining the rigid hierarchical ordering as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Johnson's constructive feminist theology of the Trinity along with those of many others<sup>19</sup> address the challenge posed by the limits of the trinitarian theology we have inherited and this growing body of work can be accessible to us. While it is not possible

within the scope of this paper to draw on the richness of this scholarship, I want to provide one example from British-born Sarah Coakley, presently teaching at Harvard, who elaborates an insight relevant to this present discussion on a mature theology of God. Coakley's trinitarian theology values the apophatic tradition as she examines the capacity of patristic sources to hold the contradictions and ambiguities of language necessary for appreciating both the mystery of God and self. She focuses on the work of Gregory of Nyssa demonstrating that the process of human transformation is the Trinity's very point of intersection with our lives. She suggests that such transformation requires "profound, even alarming shifts in our gender perceptions, shifts which have bearing as much on our thinking about God as about our understanding of ourselves."<sup>20</sup> She refers to Gregory's late work, the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* where he "charts in the highly imagistic and eroticized language, the ascent of the soul into the intimacy of the Trinity." Coakley observes that the message that Gregory wishes to convey is that if the soul is to advance to ultimate intimacy with the trinitarian God, gender stereotypes must be reversed, undermined, and transcended; and that the language of sexuality and gender, far from being an optional aside or mere rhetorical flourish in the process, is somehow necessary and intrinsic to the epistemological deepening that Gregory seeks to describe."<sup>21</sup>

Through such patristic evidence, Coakley attempts, to illuminate an "alternative" approach to the Trinity, which gives experiential priority to the Spirit and to prayer. In so doing she uncovers what she believes are the false divisions between "theology" and "spirituality."<sup>22</sup>

The careful and creative biblical and theological work involved to redress the major gender imbalance that has been in place for two thousand years is progressing, albeit slowly. It seems to me important that Sisters of Mercy are, and will continue to be, involved in this task, and that this happens through the lens of different cultures and perspectives. This endeavour comes under the rubric of *spiritual works of mercy* and as such has the potential to make a major contribution towards restoring the full humanity of women.

A related dimension of this work is the change that needs to happen at the more primal level of

human consciousness. And this is perhaps the most telling and the most difficult arena of transformation because the symbols that reside at the center of a person's identity and meaning need to be approached with reverence and care. This place is sacred ground. For some, the move to consider the *Holy One* at the center of their life as *God-She* or even *God-Three* can be so disturbing that it is simply covered over and put aside. For others, even when exposed to excellent theological sources and teaching, and even when intellectual assent is able to be given, the actual move to *receive* a fuller, orthodox, albeit often discordant, understanding of God is - finally aborted. When the reception of the incomprehensible God does not have the opportunity to move to the place of the affect, to the place where God is discovered as *Love beyond All Telling*, as *Compassion Poured Out*, theological truth can revert quickly to the previous default position—to the safe place of one's childhood or adolescence. The intellectual entry point closes over. It is all too threatening and *God-He* resumes his throne. This is one of the reasons why the spiritual works of mercy, or the ministry of spirituality is so important.

### The Ministry of Spirituality

As long ago as 1975, Margaret Farley writing about mutuality in a Trinitarian model and addressing the issue of gender in the naming of God, argued that: "What is important is that there be room . . . for women to know themselves as images of God, as able to be representatives of God as well as lovers of God."<sup>23</sup> Even longer ago, Catherine McAuley established the first *House of Mercy* in Dublin to provide a space where women could be treated with

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full human dignity, as persons made in God's image. Today that call from women worldwide is still ours. Moreover, since those first days in Baggot Street, the faces of literally thousands of Sisters of Mercy have been revealing the female face of God to those to whom they minister. As have the faces of multitudes of women everywhere. This fact however has, for the most part, not seemed to contribute to a reception of the truth that woman is made in the image of God and that our naming of the incomprehensible God needs to include female images. Nor has this truth of women as *imago Dei* been translated into practice within the church.

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I was profoundly moved recently when I attended a performance of the opera "Dead Man Walking" based on the experience and book of Josephite Sister Helen Prejean. Toward the finale, close to the point of the prisoner going to his place of execution, Helen finally enabled Joseph de Rocher (a fictional name) to own the evil effects of his murderous crime. She tells him he did a terrible thing and he is despair of forgiveness. The music from orchestra and voice soars as the climax of this work approaches:

<b>Joseph</b>	But could anyone forgive me?
<b>Sister Helen</b>	God is here, Joe, God is here right now.
<b>Joseph</b>	I did such a bad thing sister, Maybe my dyin' will give them folks some relief.
<b>Sister Helen</b>	Joseph, when they do this thing to you . . .
<b>Joseph</b>	Sister Helen, I'm gonna die!
<b>Sister Helen</b>	I want you to look at me, Joe. I want the last thing you see in this world to

be the face of love. *Look at me Joe. I will be the face of Christ for you. I will be the face of love for you.*<sup>24</sup>

The crescendo of music and dramatic action draws the viewer into the redemptive power of the moment portrayed and announces powerfully to anyone willing to hear: *a woman's face reveals the face of God!* Besides it being a relief to witness a woman religious portrayed with such authenticity, this opera based on an actual event acknowledges that a woman can indeed reveal Christ's face, God's face. More broadly, it is also a potent example of the ministry of spirituality at work.

Bonnie Brennan traces the evolution of this ministry in Ireland from Catherine and the early foundations until the present and for the purposes of her paper she defines the ministry of spirituality thus: "in an intentional way, [the ministry of spirituality] puts the focus on learning about God; fostering the relationship with God; and finding meaning in our live experiences in accordance with this relationship."<sup>25</sup> Following this definition, I am proposing that the work of facilitating the recognition that the truth about God is *inseparable from* the truth about women being made in the image of God needs to become one significant dimension of the ministry of a Mercy spirituality. I believe that this recognition is intrinsic to the spiritual works of mercy and an important arena for the ministry of Sisters of Mercy.

Other significant strands of an emerging Mercy spirituality—truly *God's new deed* in us—invariably arise and are deepened as we listen to each other describe the situations of our corporal works of mercy. Hence the importance to the work within this conference of the papers of our sisters from Kenya, Guyana, Jamaica, Tonga and from the "places" of ministry like that of Human Trafficking that are now distressingly global. A recent series of postings on *Mercy E-news* from sisters gathered from many countries provide powerful examples of this process at work. I refer to those who participated in the September *Mercy Global Concern* "Bridging the Gap," workshop organized at the United Nations by Deirdre Mullen, R.S.M. The focus of the workshop was "Promoting Human Solidarity and Care for Earth" and Sisters Claudette Cusack and Mary Daly recorded these entries respectively:

Deirdre had arranged an amazing program for us that gave us an insight into how the vision of Catherine McAuley was being lived out today in places of dire need around the globe. Day after day we were privileged to hear from our Sisters working to alleviate injustice and to change the systems that perpetuate suffering. Time after time we were made aware of the importance of communication and cooperation between those working on the ground and those working for systemic changes. Both are needed if the poor are to be cared for in the long term [paper number 7].

The MGC sponsored workshop, "Bridging the Gap," impacted me in several different ways. Hearing from Mercies around the world has deepened my appreciation for and understanding of the Mercy charism. It will affect the work that I do . . . [in] retreats and spiritual direction . . . I would like to revisit work I have done on Mercy spirituality and add or strengthen an emphasis on a contemporary understanding of mysticism and the experience of God; of the role of the experience of chaos and darkness; on the implications for spirituality of seeing God as subject rather than object; of the gift of Mercy emphasis on the relational and on systems for response; on chaos, darkness and the cross and the challenge of hope [paper number 4].<sup>26</sup>

This provides a glimpse of the formative effects of our ministries on our theology and spirituality. The fruits of this creative interplay between corporal and spiritual works are also evident more broadly within religious orders and lay ecclesial movements. For example, a recent radio program in Australia on human trafficking illustrated the creative impact of a nationwide network of women and men religious. Jennifer Burn, a senior lecturer in law who directs the Anti-Slavery Project at the University of Technology Sydney, commented:

There are whole groups of people and networks working across Australia in dealing with anti-trafficking. The religious networks are unique and have made an incredible contribution to the anti-trafficking movement in Australia and they have, in many ways, led the development of law reform and debate in this area.

Working in anti-trafficking, anti-slavery work is incredibly difficult. It's draining, it's complicated and there have been very few positive outcomes. One of the enormous benefits that I've found from working with religious communities is that they come to the area with a different framework. They have a theology and a commitment that might have a different motivation from the one that I'm working from. One of the things that they do is to think

about process . . . What they will do is to have some period of reflection that's built in to discussion . . .<sup>27</sup>

This observation identifies a distinctive contribution that religious communities as a whole have to offer the "incredibly difficult" work of addressing the raw issues of our time. In pursuing the question of what our distinctive contribution as Sisters of Mercy might be, I have drawn from our tradition of the significance of the dignity of women and linked it to the transformative theological and spiritual implications of women created in God's image. I have connected this to the spiritual works of mercy being intrinsically related to the corporal works of mercy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to draw from the insights that Doris Gottemoeller offers from her analysis of the elements that have contributed to the present flourishing of new ecclesial ministries within the church. Gottemoeller puts forward "three learnings from the new movements which address challenges inherent in today's world and which are applicable to the Sisters of Mercy . . . The first learning is *the necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality which unifies a group*."<sup>28</sup> She notes that "the example of the movements tells us that a deeply appropriated common spirituality has the power to unite members and attract others."<sup>29</sup>

I am suggesting from all of the above that as Sisters of Mercy in the twenty-first century we have the capacity to articulate and draw from a rich and deep spirituality of Mercy that is born of a mature theology of God, of an understanding of the profound importance of knowing women are created in the image of God, and from the accumulated shared wisdom that service of the poor unleashes. I believe that this is *God's new deed* in us: *Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling*. Our challenge is to find explicit ways to own and appropriate together, as a global entity of Sisters of Mercy, such a theology/spirituality/praxis. If that were to happen, the other two learnings from the new movements—*the importance of our ecclesial identity and relationships* and *the centrality of corporate mission*, would follow.

In 2001, in an article published in the bulletin of the Union of Institutes of Superiors General, Marie Chin quoted from the poem, *A Sleep of*



*Prisoners*, by Christopher Fry. Some lines from the same poem seem equally appropriate for us now:

*Thank God our time is now when wrong  
Comes up to face us everywhere,  
Never to leave us until we take  
The longest stride of soul [we] ever took.  
Affairs are now soul size  
The enterprise  
Is exploration into God.<sup>30</sup>*



## Notes

- 1 A one-page collation of the issues that those participating in this conference identified as descriptive of the world in which we minister today.
- 2 Doris Gottemoeller, "Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements," International Mercy Research Conference, November 2007. p.1. Emphasis is mine.
- 3 See Mary Sullivan, "Catherine McAuley in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries," pp. 4-5; Janet Ruffing, "Fire Cast on the Earth: Spiritual Implications for Mercy in the Twenty-First Century," pp. 1-2.
- 4 See "Summary Paragraph of Experience" (26 December 2006). Participants in Mercy International Research Conference, November 9-12, 2007.
- 5 Ruffing, "Spiritual Implications," p.7.
- 6 Sullivan, "McAuley in 19th & 21st Centuries," p. 12.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 15.
- 9 Elaine Wainwright, "Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy as Justice, Wisdom and Holiness," footnote 6.
- 10 Ruffing, "Spiritual Implications," p.17.
- 11 Ibid., p.19.
- 12 Elizabeth M. Davis, "Social Analysis: A Canadian Perspective, How Can we Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of Our Realities?" p.12. For two different perspectives on the issue of the leadership of women see also Senolita T. Vakata, "Social Analysis: Pacific islands Perspective, Gender Development in Oceania Region" and Sophie McGrath, "Response to Social Analysis papers from an Australian Perspective."
- 13 Wainwright, "Mercy Embodied," footnote 6.
- 14 See for example, Wainwright, "Mercy Embodied" for profound new insights into Jesus as the Wisdom and Compassion of God, and Ruffing, "Spiritual Implications," for her enriching work on the Holy Spirit.
- 15 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p. 5.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 4-6.
- 17 Ibid., p.6.
- 18 Johnson refers to the testimony in Scripture and later tradition re the incomprehensibility of God, to the centrality of the teaching on analogy within the Roman Catholic tradition, to the need for many names of God, to the apophatic tradition within Christianity. See *ibid.*, pp. 104-120.
- 19 See for example, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Patricia A. Fox, *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier The Liturgical Press, 2001).
- 20 Sarah Coakley, "Persons' in the 'Social' doctrine of the Trinity: a Critique of Current Analytic Discussion," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall SJ, Gerald O'Collins SJ., (eds.) *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1999), p. 125.
- 21 Ibid., p. 142.
- 22 Sarah Coakley, "Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity," in Sarah Coakley & David A. Pailin (eds.), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1993), p. 47.
- 23 Margaret Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *Theological Studies* 36, (1975) p. 643.
- 24 Terence McNally, Libretto of the opera *Dead Man Walking*, 2000, commissioned by the San Francisco Opera. Music Jake Heggie. Italics mine.
- 25 Bonnie Brennan, "History of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland in terms of the Ministry of Spirituality," p.1.
- 26 Mercy Global Concern, Mercy E-news October 1st 2007.
- 27 "A Light at the Door," *Encounter*, ABC Radio National, September 23, 2007.
- 28 Gottemoeller, "New Ecclesial Movements," p. 9.
- 29 Gottemoeller, "New Ecclesial Movements," p. 10.
- 30 See Marie Chin, R.S.M., *UISG Bulletin*, Number 116, 2001, p.68.

*On reading "Hymn of the Universe" by Teilhard de Chardin:  
"In all things there is a Within, co-extensive with their Without."*

### **Center-fold**

Womanizing,  
Victimizing,  
Guns, gangs—  
Layers of darkness.

Community,  
Conservation,  
Sunrise—  
Waves of brightness.

Like a rose,  
Each and all,  
Center-fold—  
Opening out.

So, it is:  
Everything  
Has its  
Within.

Possibly,  
Within is  
Its  
Everything.

*Regine Fanning, R.S.M.*

## ENOUGH

No longer, can we call  
these ancient oak trees  
ours

The days of staking claims  
and building fences  
are over

Even the Grand Canyon  
is not large enough  
to call our own

There is one home  
A cloud covered  
blue green globe - huge  
with enough desert  
bays, mountains and ocean  
to sustain us all

It not only houses us  
but daily feeds our blood and lungs  
From it comes our skin, nails, teeth  
the tears we shed  
when placing our loved ones  
back in its welcoming soil

Our cohabitants predate us  
We have learned enough  
about work from ants  
and play from otters  
The salmon taught us to swim  
and the osprey to fly  
We have nearly mastered  
the spiders web  
It is time for love

With growth and loveliness  
Earth turns each day  
so we can face light and darkness  
know death and life  
and carry the Divine spark  
that inspires everything

"O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new  
late have we loved Thee."

—Patricia Ryan, *R.S.M.*

# Reflections on Merging as West Mid-West

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*Rosemary Sullivan, R.S.M.*

One of the blessing poems by the late Irish author John O'Donohue ends with the following words:

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

Let us, for a very few minutes, reflect on the sacredness and giftedness of the days of our past. Today we stand in wonder—in awe—of the strong and courageous days of our pioneer sisters, of the days that followed as a young community of women moved forward with wisdom and foresight.

Some of us here remember the days of our growth and expansion and the respect we earned.

Most of us remember past days that were fragile for us—days of loss—the suffering and death of not only many elderly sisters but also some who were far too young, days when we faced the shifting of our ministries and some very difficult endings, days of tension around the many levels of renewal, days when we send a lessening of our

perceived prestige, and days of obvious decline of new members.

There were surely days when our times together brought real joy, days when we truly recognized the gifts among us, days when we sensed a growing willingness to be open to the wonder of change.

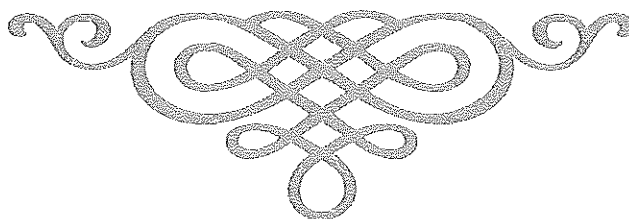
Each of us stands in wonder of her own past days—the struggle to know, understand and accept who we were and are—days of clarity and days of uncertainty,

Days when we felt very much alone, and days when we knew we had strong support.

As persons and as community we can stand in awe of our past days together and acknowledge who and what we have become.

On the first day of July a new dimension will be added to our lives.

May what we have experienced in the past, what we have learned, what we have loved and lost move us to greet each new dawn with a deeper and finer sense of wonder.





## Contributors

**Elizabeth M. Davis, R.S.M.**, is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland (Canada), a doctoral student in Scripture at the University of Toronto, and a part-time faculty member at the Toronto School of Theology. She has taught high school, has served as chief executive officer of St. Clare's Mercy Hospital and the Regional Health Authority in St. John's, Newfoundland, and presently serves on several national health boards in Canada.

**Margaret Farley, R.S.M.**, is Gilbert L. Stark Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics at Yale University Divinity School. Her publications focus on issues in historical Christian ethics, Roman Catholic ethics, medical ethics, sexual ethics, and ethics and spirituality. She is codirector of the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister, which addresses the mutual empowerment of women responding to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. She is past president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Society of Christian Ethics.

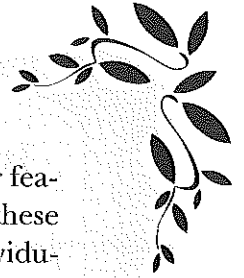
**Patricia Fox, R.S.M.**, is from Adelaide, South Australia and has been involved in secondary and tertiary education and in formation, spiritual direction, and retreat work. She has held leadership positions within the Mercy Institute and the Archdiocese of Adelaide. More recently Pat has completed doctoral studies in systematic theology with a focus on the Trinity and feminist theologies and is presently directing a ministry formation program within her local archdiocese.

**Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.**, is currently the senior vice president for Mission Integration at Catholic Healthcare Partners, a multistate health system. She previously served as the first president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. She earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, with a focus on ecclesiology.

**Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.**, taught literature and writing courses at the Rochester Institute of Technology for thirty-five years. She is now professor emerita and dean emerita of RIT. She is the author of *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* and editor of *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818–1841*. She lectures on Catherine McAuley, directs Mercy retreats, and supports poor families in the neighborhood of her community.

**Elaine Wainwright, R.S.M.**, is a member of the Brisbane Congregation of the Australian Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. Her passion lies in enabling communities of faith to engage with their sacred story in the scriptures in ways that are transformative of their lives, and she does this through teaching, research and publication, workshops and preaching. Currently she is professor of theology and head of the School of Theology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

# Discussion Questions



**(Davis)** Under the heading of “Postmodernity,” Davis summarizes twelve elements or features that answer the question, “What does postmodern mean?” Which two or three of these do you think have the greatest impact on the present culture of religious life: 1) on individuals and on the life’s communal expression, 2) on Sisters’ ministerial choices and 3) on the relationship of women religious with the institutional church?

**(Farley)** Taking the theme of “anticipatory forgiveness,” how do you understand its application in your personal, ministerial, or social situation? Farley emphasizes that this does not mean “premature reconciliation” or a covering over of evil that “allows it to continue unchallenged and unchanged.” Rather, she says, it means “waiting until the time that the enemy may yet become the friend.” Who or what represents “the enemy” who may not yet have acknowledged the injury and who may not yet be able “to recognize and accept the forgiving embrace”? What does anticipatory forgiveness do for the one who offers forgiveness?

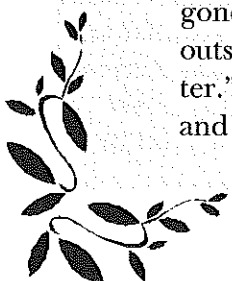
**(Fox)** The image of God that one holds in one’s deepest feelings is crucial to a mature spirituality. Fox thus asserts that “the spiritual works of mercy, or ministry of spirituality is so important.” Fox asks whether a person has discovered God as “*Love beyond All Telling, as Compassion Poured Out.*” If not, she says, theological truth “can revert quickly to the previous default position—to the safe place of one’s childhood or adolescence . . . and God-He resumes his throne.” What alternative images of God have meaning in your own spiritual life, and what enlightenment about God have you discovered in the lives of your coworkers?

**(Gottemoeller)** After drawing a contrast between the declining numbers of vowed religious life, and the rapid numerical growth of several Catholic lay movements, Gottemoeller lays out three learnings from these lay movements that she thinks would benefit religious life: 1) a clear and distinctive spirituality that unifies a group rather than individualism; 2) the importance of affirming ecclesial identity and relationships; and 3) the centrality of an identifiable, corporate mission. Which, for you, is key to a renewal of Mercy life, or most meaningful to those we serve?

**(Sullivan)** “These Mercy researchers saw the following two problems as flowing from these and other trends: ‘extreme poverty and maldistribution of resources among the world’s most vulnerable ‘have-nots’ and ‘inadequate, even debilitating ignorance of basic human, spiritual, and religious understandings, even . . . among Catholics.’”

How does your ministry address either or both of these problems? Are these problems related?

**(Wainwright)** The story of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to heal her sick daughter appears in Matt 15:21–28. “It is a borderland story and it is not completely clear who is in whose territory as Jesus and the Canaanite woman meet. One has come out and one has gone to or into . . . The woman represents in the story the female-headed household of the outsider or the other, the one who crosses cultural boundaries to seek healing for her daughter.” How does this gospel story speak to Mercy Sisters’ concerns about countering racism and working for just immigration policies?



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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 23<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting in **Omaha at College of St. Mary June 19–21, 2009.**

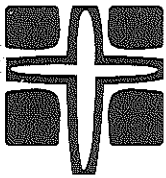
Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

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](mailto:mhoward@mercysisters.org).

If you would like to be on the mailing list, write: Marilyn King, R.S.M., Executive Director, The Laura, 1995 Sam Browning Road, Lebanon, KY 40033 or e-mail [mheleneking@alltel.net](mailto:mheleneking@alltel.net).

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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