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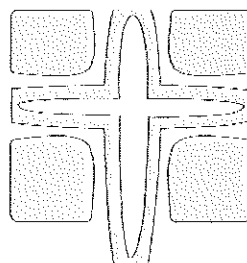
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Anita Talar, R.S.M.

The Journal of the
Mercy Association in
Scripture and Theology



Vols. 18, No. 3
2009

Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

There are several distinct sections of this issue of MAST Journal. First, is our response to suggestions from members at large a couple of years ago that we devote an issue to New Membership and the Incorporation process. Thus, we offer several articles here in response. Incorporation of new members is a topic to which Institute leadership has devoted considerable attention. One result has been the development of a comprehensive set of guidelines, standards and explanatory materials amassed and reviewed by Sisters with formation experience, Sisters with professional counseling experience, and Sisters in leadership. The result is a compendious set of documents called "For the Love of Mercy." The materials are posted on the Institute web-site. Sisters Cindy Kaye and Jeanine Tisot gave an overview of this newer approach to initial and early incorporation stages at the annual MAST meeting held in Burlingame in June, 2008. This documentation is the subject of Mary Pat Garvin's article, "For the Love of Mercy: Encouraging Conversation" in which she invites the membership at large to become familiar with it.

A principal reason for this is that the "formation" experience of the vast majority of Sisters is different from the approach, the needs and the culture of today's orientation and incorporation process for religious life. Such a recognition that "times have changed" is not confined to the U.S.A. setting. Sister Kaye Evans, Institute Formation Coordinator for Mercies in Australia, affirms the same shift of awareness in her straightforward and practical-minded essay. Women today, whether in the U.S.A. or Australia, are coming from a different society and culture than in decades past. I am especially grateful to her because production of such an essay is necessarily provisional and open-ended. A couple of invitations to other Mercy formation programs could not be met with an actual article, because programs are under revision as we were corresponding, and a consensus was being worked out. What this illustrates is that Mercies all over the globe are well aware that changes need to be made—and are in fact making them first "on the ground" and working out the process in conversation, rather than composing written policies and working from those. This surely reflects the foundation of our Institute, in which Sisters lived the life of dedication and ministry a decade before a text of the Rule was approved by Rome.

I was fortunate to be present at the celebration of Sister Ellen FitzGerald's 50th Jubilee. She delivered a homily that was refreshing for its candor about a personal experience—a vision, we might say—that presented her with a free invitation to choose religious life. Each of us has a different story of "how we came to religious life." Ellen's words invite women to trust the experience of who they are. She offers the example of her own founding moment, as concrete as the gospel story of Thomas verifying that Jesus was alive, for her perseverance as a religious.

Cynthia Serjak, known to many of us as a musician, shares a reflection on action and contemplation focused on Mark's gospel. She wonders how Jesus of Nazareth, active in ministry, understood simultaneously his deepest self to belong to God as beloved son and anointed one—the Christ. She suggests that our contemplation of Jesus in both dimensions—externally active in ministry, and conscious of God's presence and power in him—is also the "two-dimensional" frame for our own integration of the contemplative and the active.

One of the purposes of MAST is to provide a setting for serious theological work as women of the Church. One form this takes is to pay attention to ecclesial documents. At the 2008 MAST meeting, one of the sessions was dedicated to a discussion of a letter (less authoritative than an encyclical or Vatican II document, as Aline Paris noted) issued in 2004 by Joseph Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, shortly before he became Pope. It was called "A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and World." It is available on-line under this title at the Vatican's website. In this issue, Marilyn King, in

her usual accessible style, provides an entry into the over-all theme. She affirms that our critique of male clergy's definition of male-female identity—the "women's issue"—is consistent with commitments we have made in Institute chapters to address the concerns of women in the church. This writer argues that women religious need to maintain a self-consciously feminist critique of this document—even though "feminism" is rejected by the CDF-- if they are to be effective at bringing about systemic change in the church. She critiques the document's shaky and shoddy attempt to lay a biblical foundation for its assertion that "the woman's" essential identity in relation to "the man" is ultimately nuptial.

Another of the sessions at the 2008 MAST meeting provided an opportunity for theologians to be updated about trends in spiritual direction, its training programs and the candidates who seek the training. The summaries here in MAST are essentially notes from the oral presentations of two veteran spiritual directors who provided overviews of changes in this ministry connected so integrally with the core of our life as women of prayer whose lives are centered in God. Mary Ann Scofield, founding member of Spiritual Directors International, described several of these movements, including outreach to the Hispanic population, holistic approaches in the training of directors, and acknowledgment that culture impacts one's own spirituality and that of directees. She says the overall focus now is less on skill-acquisition than the transformation of the minister. Following up on her comments are those of Kathleen McAlpin, founder and director the Spiritual Direction program at Regis College in Toronto. In many respects her outline of changing trends in an academically-sponsored ministry parallels shifts in the lives of women exploring religious life: diversity of ethnicity, unevenness of theological background, impact of a technologized and sexualized society, and philosophical relativism. She has accepted a new ministry as of June, 2009, when she will become director of the Mercy novitiate in Laredo, Texas.

It is difficult to capture the energy of a discussion among many participants. One of the important topics MAST theologians wrestled with at the 2008 annual meeting was racism. To get things started, we viewed a newly released video, "Sisters of Selma," compiled of documentary footage of habited and veiled nuns marching the streets in the civil rights movement, spliced with interviews of some of those same women today. I am grateful to Katherine Doyle, Marilyn King, Patricia Talone and Kathleen McAlpin for providing a text of the anecdotes they shared in discussion. Hopefully this sort of memory-retrieval can be a model for other Institute groups as we give energy to being better agents for ending discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin and language.

Finally, we are all most grateful to Sister Anita Talar, head librarian at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, for lending us her professional expertise in constructing the Index for MAST Volumes 8-14. Sister Anita also did the previous Index, of Vols. 1-7, but this was some time ago. We are anticipating that the Index may be posted at the Institute web-site to facilitate research.

I am grateful to two members of the Editorial Board, Sisters Patricia Talone and Marilyn King, for lending their eyes in reviewing this volume.



Sincerely,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Editor, The MAST Journal

For the Love of Mercy: Encouraging Conversation

Mary Pat Garvin, R.S.M.

Catherine McAuley was a “social mystic” – a woman deeply rooted in God and sent on mission. Her life testifies that authentic prayer leads to care of the most needy and action on behalf of justice.¹ The opening lines of our *Constitutions* put it this way:

Responsive in faith to God’s mercy Catherine McAuley heeded the call of Jesus to reach out with courage and love to the needy of her time. She founded the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, to involve women as religious in the mission of the church and the world.²

Today, as daughters of Catherine we continue to freely respond “to a call to serve the needy of our time.”³

Through our religious profession “we choose a life-long direction that unites us to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus”⁴ thus becoming in our own day, in our own way, social mystics – women deeply rooted in God and sent on mission.

Returning from George’s Hill the very morning of her profession, Catherine set about managing a spreading institute and devoting much of her time and attention to those she was forming in the spirit and tradition of the new congregation.⁵ Similarly today, Mercy congregations worldwide continue Catherine’s lead and invest significant time, attention, and resources in the renewal of vocational discernment processes and the incorporation of new members...hopefully new social mystics!

In August 2007 our Institute published *For the Love of Mercy*. Flowing from the wisdom of many (i.e. women in the incorporation process, their ministers, leadership and those who have accompanied new members in a variety of ways), this document

outlines the normative process through which a woman in the United States journeys from initial contact and vocational discernment to incorporation leading to perpetual profession.

The ILT’s opening letter accompanying *For the Love of Mercy* encourages us to engage in a lively exploration of this document. The ILT’s desire is that this document becomes for us “living words filled with meaning, purpose, and inspiration.”⁶ This study will suggest various ways we as members might explore *For the Love of Mercy*, allowing it to re-energize our own lives as we welcome and accompany new members.

A Way Forward: Play and Reflective Leisure

Lively conversations about *For the Love of Mercy* will be enriched by the presence of both play and reflective leisure. Play— re-creative, re-energizing play— is a most cherished human quality.⁷

Whether creative and spontaneous, or intense and serious, play is the natural way we humans learn what cannot be taught formally. In play we engage our whole selves, not just our thinking-selves. Through play we not only find self-expression easier but we experience our very selves in a deeper, more vibrant manner.

Catherine was fond of play. Her letters, especially “her playful letter to a Tullamore postulant in which she plots a future ‘Nonsensical Club’”⁸ demonstrates Catherine’s own appreciation of play and humor in the life of the young Institute. Play makes its appearance once again in Catherine’s letter to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore in 1838:

Don’t let crosses vex or tease
Try to meet all with peace & ease
notice the faults of every Day
but often in a playful way.⁹

Catherine McAuley was a “social mystic” – a woman deeply rooted in God and sent on mission.

Whether creative and spontaneous, or intense and serious, play is the natural way we humans learn what cannot be taught formally.

Catherine grasped intuitively that play ushers in a sense of lightness in otherwise difficult moments. Through play even the most serious topics and situations can be approached with a humor that liberates one's imagination and ways of relating.

Whether creative and spontaneous, or intense and serious, play is the natural way we humans learn what cannot be taught formally.

Like play reflective leisure is re-creative and re-energizing. Hidden in plain view we read in our *Constitutions*:

The vocation of mercy calls each of us to daily personal prayer, to annual retreat and to times of solitude and reflective leisure.¹⁰

Reflective leisure is a type of Sabbath-time.¹¹ Measured not in minutes but in moments, reflective leisure invites us to cultivate receptivity to God's presence with a light-grasp. Before beginning to read *For the Love of Mercy*, consider finding a few moments for reflective leisure and embark on a brief trip down memory lane. Recalling Catherine's fondness for play, allow memories of your own early years in the congregation to float into your awareness. Note not only the stories that surface but your emotions as well. Whether we are aware of it or not our memories (both cognitive and affective) will significantly influence how we approach this document, as well as our energy and interest in exploring it with others.¹²

The vocation of mercy calls each of us to daily personal prayer, to annual retreat and to times of solitude and reflective leisure.¹⁰

Keeping in mind the importance of play and reflective leisure, let's meet "the siblings" and discover how they may accompany us in our lively exploration of *For the Love of Mercy*.

Meet "The Siblings"

Several years ago while hurrying through a favorite bookstore I stopped dead in my tracks as I eyed the book *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading* by Nancy Malone, O.S.U.¹³ Taking this thin volume in my hands I kept repeating its subtitle: *A Spirituality of Reading*. Immediately I knew I had found a kindred soul!

Throughout the book Malone reminds us of the many ways in which reading and meditation resemble one another. Both are usually done alone and in silence. Our attention is focused and our whole selves – body, mind and heart – are engaged. We are centered; our energy concentrated with no purpose other than the act itself (no multi-tasking here). We are, at that moment, only the reader, only the contemplative. Since reading Malone, I have found myself referring to reading and meditation as "the siblings"!

The ILT's invitation to engage in lively conversations around *For the Love of Mercy* begins for each of us with "the siblings." In the not too distant future invite "the siblings" for a visit. Experience, as if for the first time, how reading and meditation are one! Then proceed with caution "scary words" abound!

"Scary Words"

Kathleen Norris describes "scary words" as those words for which we hold inadequate understandings; that is, words which we radically under-understand.¹⁴ Scary words have that uncanny ability to stir within us memories and emotions of which we may not be readily aware. In turn we may reject certain words or phrases, keeping them at a distance and failing to appreciate their depth-meanings for our lives.¹⁵

Take for example the word "study" that appears thirty-nine times in *For the Love of Mercy*. For a congregation of apostolic women religious fully engaged in and passionately dedicated to the works of mercy (i.e. the works of God) the document's emphasis on study may be scary. You may begin to wonder if you missed

a communiqué that we've all become Dominicans!

Many are surprised to discover that one of the earliest definitions of "study" is "an act of contemplation."¹⁶ "Student," perhaps a scarier word still, was defined early on as "an attentive observer."¹⁷ Is it not our desire as Sisters of Mercy to contemplate and study how to most authentically follow Jesus in his compassion for suffering peoples? Do we not wish to be attentive observers, as Catherine was, to the critical concerns of our own times?

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Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., writes passionately about the importance of study for members of religious congregations today (of course, he *is* a Dominican). Study, Radcliffe believes, "is a way to holiness, which opens our hearts and minds to each other, builds community and forms us as those who confidently proclaim the coming of the [Kindom]."¹⁸ Echoing Simone Weil, he reminds us that study is not learning to be clever but learning how to listen¹⁹ — how to listen attentively to God's presence and activity in ourselves, others, and the cosmos. In a word, the test of our study is this: Does it bring Christ to birth...is the Incarnation, the Christ-event prolonged in our day through our own lives and Mercy ministries?²⁰

This brief survey of the word "study" illustrates how our reading, praying, and lively exploration of *For the Love of Mercy* might be stifled if we fail to recognize in this document our own "scary words" — words we have radically under-understood. Take another trip down memory lane. With "the siblings" at your side ask yourself: How have I experienced study in my own life? What stories and emotions surface as I recall my own experience of study during my early years in religious life? Did my studies awaken deep wonder and curiosity about this way of life...or did I find them disconnected from my heart's desire?"

As you gather with others to explore *For the Love of Mercy*, don't forget Catherine's own fondness for play. Begin perhaps by sharing some "scary words" you noticed in the document (e.g. holiness, faith-sharing, perhaps even the word mercy).²¹ Engage in a bit of story-telling and discover how scary words can create a bit of "holy disturbance" — that uncomfortable feeling that often accompanies invitations to growth and development.

As membership, our capacity to support the vocation and incorporation processes as detailed in *For the Love of Mercy* will be strengthened to the extent that we name and claim our "scary words" recognizing how they hinder our creative and fruitful conversations about this document.

Study is not learning to be clever but learning how to listen¹⁹ — how to listen attentively to God's presence and activity in ourselves, others, and the cosmos.

Talking to Yourself

Probability has it that you just talked to yourself as you eyed the title of this section. Perhaps it went something like this. "Talking to yourself? What does she mean? I do it all the time. Tell me others do too! Hum...maybe I'll read just a bit further."

Truth is, we talk to ourselves all the time. It is the way we humans interact with the universe around us as well as the universe that lies within. Through our questions large and small we enter ever more deeply into this adventure we call Mercy.

To jump-start our conversations about *For the Love of Mercy*, the ILT, in their opening letter, invites us to consider a few questions posed by Janet Mock, C.S.J. at the 2007 Mercy Conference for New Membership meeting. Janet's questions echo a model of adult education known as "Horizon Analysis."²² The questions employed in this model are highly adaptable. For our purposes they might flow something like this:

- What attracts me, gives me energy as I ponder *For the Love of Mercy*? Why?

- What do I find myself resisting? Any connection to my “scary words”?
- What challenged me beyond my current thinking/understanding regarding our vocation and incorporation program?
- What further questions arise in me as a result of pondering this document?
- What action step(s) would I need to take in order to embrace the current process with renewed energy and enthusiasm?

Notice the “inside-out” progression of the questions. First, all growth and development whether physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or spiritual, requires energy. So, what in the document attracts your heart and gifts you with renewed energy for Mercy? Likewise, all development encounters resistance. Resistance is a natural component of life and has a right to exist. Don’t be surprised that moving beyond current thinking and understanding about our vocation and incorporation program encounters some resistance. Name and claim what you resist. How does your resistance, in light of your own experience, make sense? Finally, what further questions arise and what concrete action steps are you willing to take in order to embrace the current process with renewed energy and enthusiasm?

We know that asking the deeper questions is a most human act.²³
These are acts capable of leading us, like Catherine, deeper into the heart of God.

Questions developed in “Horizon Analysis” help us to talk our way through *For the Love of Mercy*, not mindlessly but precisely, by placing our current vocation and incorporation processes in conversation with our own lived experiences. Yet, don’t be surprised if further questions arise for consideration. We know that asking the deeper questions is a most human act.²³ These are acts capable of leading us, like Catherine, deeper into the heart of God.

Questions Deeper Still

Many are familiar with the work of Parker J. Palmer. For decades he has been inspiring teachers at every level, encouraging them to realize that the more familiar they are with their own “inner terrain,” the more surefooted their teaching – and living – will become.²⁴ For the past several years I have drawn on Palmer’s work in my own ministry with vocation and incorporation personnel. In particular I have found his book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* to speak passionately to the concerns and hopes of those who accompany new members.

Early in *The Courage to Teach* Palmer raises several questions about what constitutes effective and not merely efficient models of education. Palmer suggests that our conversations about educational reform are only as good as the questions they entertain.

Similarly, over the past several years, the ILT, those ministering in vocation and incorporation, as well as others in the Institute have been entertaining questions about our own processes of vocation discernment and incorporation. The document *For the Love of Mercy* is the fruit of nearly countless hours of conversation about what constitutes *effective* and not merely efficient ways of accompanying those discerning a call to Mercy.

Now, we as membership are invited to continue the conversation. We know that “while some perpetually professed sisters are charged with the primary responsibility for the incorporation process, *all of us* are called to share our life experience with new members.”²⁵ Perhaps Palmer’s questions, adapted to our own inquiry, will lead us even further along the road of authentic renewal and revitalization – not only of our processes of discernment and incorporation – but our very selves.

Once again with a touch of play and reflective leisure consider exploring with others these deeper questions still. Notice how they lead us into our own “inner terrain,” our own heart of Mercy.

What?

- The question we most commonly ask is the “what” question – *what* are the important elements/experiences to include within our vocation discernment and incorporation processes?

How?

- When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the “*how*” question – what “methods” are most useful when accompanying a woman through the process of discernment and incorporation?

Why?

- Occasionally, when our individual and communal reflections go a bit deeper still, we ask the “*why*” question – for what purpose and to what ends are we “doing what we do” in vocation discernment and incorporation?

Who?

- But perhaps not often enough do we ask and reflect upon the “*who*” question – who are we as Sisters of Mercy who invite women to recognize Catherine’s spirit as their own? How does the quality of our own lives, our own living as Sisters of Mercy invite others to join us in extending “God’s reign of love over human hearts”?²⁶

Frances Warde was keenly aware of the importance of the “who” question. Her own attraction to Mercy was mediated through the person of Catherine McAuley herself. In a letter of 1879 she wrote:

You never knew her. I knew her better than I have known anybody in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it meant to be a Sister of Mercy, to see the world and its people in terms of God’s love; to love everybody who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on. It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.²⁷

This letter written a full thirty-eight years after Catherine’s death poignantly reveals the life-long influence that Catherine’s person had on Frances Warde. Perhaps less readily recognized, though of equal importance, was Frances Warde’s own capacity to internalize Catherine’s vision, and consequently, as a Sister of Mercy herself, be instrumental in bringing the Mercy vision to generations that came after her.²⁸

How does the quality of our own lives, our own living as Sisters of Mercy invite others to join us in extending “God’s reign of love over human hearts”?²⁶

Today, we stand on the shoulders of Catherine, Frances Warde and all Sisters of Mercy who have gone before us. We are now responsible for mediating Catherine’s vision to a new generation of Mercy. Our playful exploration and conversation around *For the Love of Mercy* will strengthen our capacity to support our Sisters who work directly in the area of vocation and incorporation. Likewise, it will assist all of us as we welcome new members into our Institute.

Let us take to heart the request of the ILT and engage in lively discussions around *For the Love of Mercy*. With “the siblings” at our side let us place our own experience of formation in conversation with our Institute’s present process. Though at first glance the process as outlined in *For the Love of Mercy* may appear quite different from our own don’t be deceived. Like Catherine we have all been called to be social mystics – women deeply rooted in God and sent on mission for the love of mercy.

Today, we stand on the shoulders of Catherine, Frances Warde and all Sisters of Mercy who have gone before us. We are now responsible for mediating Catherine’s vision to a new generation of Mercy.

Notes

- ¹ Susan Rakoczy, IHM, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 38.
- ² Constitutions, Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, §1.
- ³ Constitutions, §2.
- ⁴ Constitutions, §21.
- ⁵ M. Joanna Regan, RSM and Isabelle Keiss, RSM, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, First Sister of Mercy* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 43.
- ⁶ *For the Love of Mercy: Institute Vocation and Formation Program for the United States*. Opening Letter from Institute Leadership Team (August 1, 2007).
- ⁷ Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. (London: Routledge Publishing, 2000) and Franco Imoda, SJ, *Human Development: Psychology and Mystery*. (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press).
- ⁸ Mary C. Sullivan, RSM, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841* (Baltimore, MD: The Catholic University of American Press, 2004), 65.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ¹⁰ Constitutions, §16.
- ¹¹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952) and Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).
- ¹² Jennifer Reed-Bouley, "Challenging Prior Knowledge: Strategies for College Teaching," in *MAST*, 16:2 (2006), 44-47.
- ¹³ Nancy Malone OSU, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).
- ¹⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).
- ¹⁵ Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, "The Vow of Consecrated Poverty and Other Scary Words," in *Horizon: The Journal of the National Religious Vocation Conference*, 28:4 (Summer, 2003), 13-16.
- ¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, eds. (Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Timothy Radcliffe, OP, *Sing A New Song: The Christian Vocation* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1999), 55.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ²¹ Scary words abound in our every day vocabulary. Do we notice them and the way they influence us on an affective level. Keenan defines "mercy" as our willingness to enter into the chaos of another. O'Malley understands "holiness" as a synonym for successful, fulfilled, well-rounded. See James F. Keenan, SJ, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), xiii and William J. O'Malley, SJ. "Accessible Holiness" in *America*, 197/3, 20-23.
- ²² *Religious Formation Conference Resource Manual*, Volume II, (Silver Spring, MD: Religious Formation Conference, 2004), 16.
- ²³ See Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 31-35.
- ²⁴ Parker J. Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 5.
- ²⁵ Constitutions, §45 (emphasis added).
- ²⁶ Constitutions, §84.
- ²⁷ Frances Warde, *Letter written to Sr. Mary Gonzaga O'Brien* Newcastle upon Tyne, England 1879. This letter was reproduced in the 150th Anniversary booklet of the Institute of Our Lady Mercy, Great Britain.
- ²⁸ Brenda Dolphin, RSM, Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, Cait O'Dwyer, RSM, "Leadership in Consecrated Life Today" in *Formation and the Person: Essays on Theory and Practice*. (Eds.) Alessandro Manenti, Stefano Guarinelli and Hans Zollner. (Paris: Peeters Press, 2007), 257-280.



Mercy Formation in Australia Today

Kaye Evans, R.S.M.

In this essay, I offer some thoughts about new directions in incorporation. I am looking at the initial years of formation beginning with vocational discernment and considering the process to final profession.

The Australian Context

Catholic history in Australia began with European settlement in 1788. Then, and for about one hundred and fifty years, the majority of Catholics were Irish or of Irish descent. They were also largely poor and uneducated. With the discovery of gold in 1851 came immigrants from other countries, as well as a new, developing prosperity.

Just prior to this “turning point,” Irish religious sisters and brothers, mostly teachers, began arriving in the colony. The first Sisters of Mercy came in 1846. After the withdrawal of government funding for Church schools in the 1870s, their numbers steadily increased. Undoubtedly, the presence and influence of religious sisters and brothers contributed significantly to the growth of a robust Catholic community. In a way, such development paralleled improvements in Catholic life and practice in Ireland after Catholic emancipation in 1829.

Since Vatican II, Catholic life has changed radically. It could be argued that many, if not most young Catholics have little or no idea what Catholic life was like in that pre-Conciliar era.

Over time, particularly in the expansive years following the Second World War, Catholicism in Australia was strengthened by families from such countries as Italy, Malta, Poland, the Netherlands and Lebanon. More recently, the Church has been enriched by people

from Vietnam, the Philippines, and countries of Central America and the South Pacific.

In the 2001 national census, Catholics constituted 36.7% of the Australian population. However, along with this figure goes the reality of the steady decline in regular worship among Catholics from an estimated high of 50% in 1950 to the present rate of 16%.

In the 2001 national census, Catholics constituted 36.7% of the Australian population. However, along with this figure goes the reality of the steady decline in regular worship among Catholics from an estimated high of 50% in 1950 to the present rate of 16%. A recent survey by Mason and others was made of the spirituality of youth in Australia who represent Generation Y, those born between 1981 to 1995. The research, focused on the beliefs and practices of Australians between 13 and 29 years of age, shows that only about half this population identifies with a religion, considerably below the national average. About 30% of this age group are moving away from their Christian origins. Some have reduced their attendance at worship or stopped altogether. Others do not identify with a religious denomination or no longer believe in God.¹

Since Vatican II, Catholic life has changed radically. It could be argued that many, if not most young Catholics have little or no idea what Catholic life was like in that pre-Conciliar era. Furthermore, while the modern generation often has the benefits of national and personal prosperity—for example, education, health care, travel, material comforts-- it also struggles with the down-side of our complex society. This includes the consequences of marriage breakdown, the compara-

tively new threat of drugs, the old challenge of alcohol, soft porn in magazines, on TV and through the internet.

Mercy in Australia

It is out of this history and within this present socio-eclesial context that we continue to shape our Mercy lives in response to the God who accompanies us and calls us forward.

As with other religious congregations throughout Australia, Sisters of Mercy are ageing and our membership is declining. The decline, of course, is the unavoidable result of larger historical shifts through which we are living. Our numbers in initial formation are small, but still, women are seeking to join us. All these factors have implications for the ways in which formation is offered.

When a woman comes to explore a desire for Mercy religious life, we enter into a relationship with her and endeavour to provide an environment in which she may nurture her desire, be attentive to the Spirit, discover her capacities for personal growth, transformation and mission, and in which she can be true to herself as a religious.

Existing structures of initial formation (stages which we name as Enquiry, Candidacy, and New Membership leading to Perpetual Profession) even now are being critically examined in the light of present day experiences – both within the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia (the Institute) and in the wider society.

Membership of our Institute is not determined by individual sisters, but is comprised of seventeen autonomous Australian congregations and one autonomous region in Papua New Guinea (PNG). We also have a small community in Pakistan. Throughout the Institute, we are in a challenging phase of re-imagining our structure. At the last Institute Chapter (July 2004), we committed ourselves to engage in the processes of reconfiguring. That is, we recognised the need to work together for a renewed expression of Institute life for the sake of our shared commitment to the God of Mercy and to the people we serve. Currently all sisters are invited to participate in a range of opportunities to explore what reconfiguring will eventually mean in practical terms.

Yet, while we are still structured as separate members (that is, the 17 congregations and one autonomous unit) each member continues to have its own formation programme. However, it should be noted that for many years there has been close collaboration and sharing of formation resources among all the members. In 2002 the meeting of the Institute Plenary Council (the leadership structure of the Institute) came to the agreement that there should be an Institute Policy for Initial Formation. This policy was formulated and is now implemented throughout Australia, and in PNG and Pakistan.

At present, women coming into formation necessarily belong to their own congregation, but all the congregations and PNG have a common language and consistent programme. At the same time, all discernment takes place in a national as well as local congregational setting. Candidates are encouraged to develop their Mercy identity in the context of a local, national and world-wide sisterhood. Congregations follow a common programme, and women throughout Australia, PNG and Pakistan come together at various times for shared initiatives and events. As the Institute Policy for Initial Formation says, “Women seeking membership will be educated to understand the national and international dimensions of Mercy Religious Life. Significant Institute experiences of ministry and community will be integral to their initial formation.”

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We live in a time of immense cultural shift. Changes in the world, in our Church and in religious life have an impact on our daily lives and therefore on our approach to vocational discernment and our formation programmes. Vocation personnel, in particular, are much more aware of the diversity that exists in the candidates with whom they have contact and the challenges that this presents.

Contrasts between Candidates Then and Now

In the 1960's and 1970's most of the candidates were teenagers who, in many cases, joined the novitiate straight from school. Mostly they were from Anglo-Celtic heritage and from families steeped in Catholic culture. Many entered from city or country regions where there were large Catholic schools often run by Sisters of Mercy or another religious congregation. They were generally part of Catholic parishes where they mixed socially. They were often familiar with the culture of religious life and had relationships with a number of Sisters.

Frequently these candidates were not old enough to vote or to hold a driver's license. Most of them had never been in the paid workforce nor had they had the opportunity for travel. They had been totally reliant on their parents to supply all their physical needs. When they came to the novitiate they then became dependent on the community for meeting these needs. There were some older women, of course, who came from professional backgrounds and had managed their own affairs, but they, too, were expected to fit in with the culture and demands of novitiate. This was an era when external structures were designed to form the ideal religious.

The women who are looking at religious life now come from a very different world where they have worked, travelled, probably owned a car, and may even have owned their own homes. Some enquirers express concern about giving up the security of present career positions and about financial arrangements into the future. These concerns have to be dealt with during the time of enquiry, and certainly when they indicate that they wish to become candidates. Similarly, age difference in candidates is also another consideration. At present, across the Institute enquirers' and candidates' ages range from mid-twenties to early sixties. There are certainly particular adaptations of programmes which are informed by the differences in age and experience of the participants

Although the women presently in formation are all Catholics, they have come from a range of Christian faith experiences. Our formation has to be flexible enough to take this into account – even from an educational point of view. Many young adults may be among

the “culturally elite” in technology, but they are often unchurched and uncatechised. Sometimes they do not know much about Jesus, the Church, the faith or religious life. They are unfamiliar with many things that used to be common knowledge among Catholics.

Many young adults may be among the “culturally elite” in technology, but they are often unchurched and uncatechised. Sometimes they do not know much about Jesus, the Church, the faith or religious life.

A woman enquiring about religious life may come from a strong faith background; another may come with very little faith education, but with strong spiritual desire. The role of formation personnel is to accompany, to listen deeply and to hear each story, discerning with the woman what her particular needs are. For some, it will be the provision of basic doctrinal education, while others will have already a theology degree when they come to the community. Formation programmes must be flexible to allow for these issues to be dealt with responsibly and respectfully. Institute Policy states:

The process of formation ... ensures a basis for the understanding and integration of the spirit and practice of the vows; provides a strong biblical, theological and ecclesial foundations; caters for the other educational needs of those in initial membership with a view to both personal and spiritual development and preparation for future ministry; requires and respects the participation of each woman in the planning of an appropriate programme with formation personnel.

A Changed World and a Changed Process

While the traditional and universal formation principles and practices as outlined in our Institute Formation Policy are valid and essential, we are in a changed and

changing world, and so a creative and new look at the demands of religious life today must inform any incorporation process. A critical area to be considered in this is culture and ethnicity. In former times, while we had comparatively few Italian or Maltese women, for the most part, they had to adapt to the pervading culture of the time – which usually had very strong Irish origins. These days, cultural and ethnic realities influence how a programme is designed and implemented. Vocation directors and formators need to be attentive to the cultural expectations and beliefs of each woman who enters into a period of inquiry and be open to receiving and learning from her. This may initially require visiting the inquirer in her home, becoming acquainted with customs, mores, and family patterns. It will also have a bearing on any approach to assessment for suitability. We believe that formation has a role to play in encouraging, challenging and educating all sisters of the Institute in offering hospitality and welcome to women from diverse backgrounds, so that they not only find their place among us but also contribute meaningfully to our common future.

The fact that we have smaller numbers moving through a formation programme allows for individual needs to be met, but it also calls for creativity and resourcefulness in providing a balanced and integrated formative setting. Formative relationships are fostered through interaction within both the local and the wider Mercy “worlds” and within discussion groups comprised of religious and lay women and men. Likewise developing relationships with other sisters in formation is promoted and nurtured throughout the Institute.

In July 2008, newer members from the Institute and from New Zealand met for a week to reflect on the vows. One of the formators made this observation in “Formation Today—What an Audacity: Report of Melbourne Initial Formation Team” :

The final liturgy of this Conference highlighted the growing, rich, intercultural experience of Mercy - the procession of the Word was danced by the Papua-New Guinea sisters and sung in Pidgin, the first reading was proclaimed in Vietnamese then English,

prayers of intercession were in Urdu, Maori, Vietnamese, English, and the flow of this interchange was so very “ordinary” – again part of our history in educating and sharing Mercy with so many cultures over the years.

Our formation programmes now have much more flexibility and take into account the readiness of each woman to move through each stage. They also allow for each woman to be actively involved in her own formation. This approach encourages and fosters personal responsibility for maturing through initial and ongoing formation, preparing them to assume personal responsibility for their lives as Sisters of Mercy.

The “Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia Institute Policy for Initial Formation” states that the process of formation assists each woman “to grow in self-knowledge and self-acceptance through prayer, personal reflection, interaction with others, spiritual direction and, where appropriate, professional counselling.”

Many women are certainly seeking to share in the spiritual heritage and justice thrust of the Institute. They seek like-minded women with a passion for justice – to find a way to live this passion in an ongoing viable commitment. Our challenge is to listen deeply and offer the best of our tradition – holding the story and practice of Mercy as we welcome and are informed by the experiences of these women who come to us.

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Voices of Women Seekers

Sometimes women make e-mail contact with vocation directors. One stated:

I grew up in a Catholic, but largely non-practising family. ... In high school I fell away

from most of my religious connections. .. but have since recovered these. I see myself in the future as working in some area of poverty relief/environmental not-for-profit. So being a Sister will change the lifestyle I live, but may not actually change my 'career' direction.

Another commented:

In looking at your website, I was pleased that environmental issues and working for justice are important in your life and work. These seem to touch my own desires.

The following email was from an older woman who had actually gone to a Mercy school and it was that connection which seemed to tap into her own heart for justice:

I am a volunteer (in a remote place). Surfing the Mercy site and reading all about the projects and Mercy works that are happening not just in Australia but throughout the world, inspires me, particularly as I feel in need of inspiration in this place!. I feel such a bond to the women who have been an important part of my life since I was 11 and heading off to ...Secondary School. I have a strong interest in joining the Mercy congregation and being part of that community of women with its spirit of social justice, unconditional love and amazing spirituality.

Community is one thing that many women these days are looking for, and community is an essential part of religious life. There is a need for communities which are welcoming and able to share the ideals of their lives with women discerning religious life, allowing themselves to be challenged by the demands of authenticity, and willing to accept them.

However, it may not be possible or desirable to introduce the woman into mainstream community life with its long-standing relational patterns and tensions.

There is a need for communities which are welcoming and able to share the ideals of

their lives with women discerning religious life, allowing themselves to be challenged by the demands of authenticity, and willing to accept them.

The changes that have taken place over the last thirty or forty years have made demands on all sisters. Certainly, not everyone has embraced change at the same pace or to the same extent. We still have members living out of older models even though the externals are different. There are many and varying degrees of responsibility that individuals are prepared to take and this can sometimes still be a tension within our communities.

As Timothy Radcliffe remarks, "If community is what draws the young to religious life, it is the difficulty of community that makes so many give up. We aspire to communion and yet it is so painful to live."

We are still exploring what community means – for these newer members and for ourselves! In that regard, one candidate writes:

I am considered a young vocation these days, at 23 years....I haven't found the "older culture" hard. Most I have met have been very willing to embrace new ways of thinking. Some are not so radically active, but I can understand that they have worked hard and now need leisure to retire and rest. But I wish for simpler living, more radical poverty, which I haven't experienced so far. My circumstances have actually improved, not simplified on moving into the community.

All of us, and particularly those who are involved with initial formation, live with questions around how the vows are expressed and lived today, what is essential to Mercy life, the centrality of God's mission, and how we care wisely for creation in our living and ministry. Formation today calls on our imagination. It is an invitation which asks us to accept the open-ended nature of the journey ahead.

We hope that our Institute will continue to be enlivened by new members who, in the way of Catherine, believe that Mercy is the principal path marked out for those longing to follow Christ.

The theology of the vowed life is still evolving and is constantly finding new expressions. As we seek to re-imagine this vowed life we are living, we contribute to its future shape, meaning and practice. As our Institute Policy encourages us:

We are convinced that, because of our faith in Jesus, the incarnate God of Mercy, and our life-long commitment to his radical values, we have a unique and transformative contribution to make to our changing world and Church. In this light, we hope that our Institute will continue to be enlivened by new members who, in the way of Catherine, believe that Mercy is the principal path marked out for those longing to follow Christ.

For further information about the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, visit its website at www.mercy.org.au

Notes

- ¹ Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*. (Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007).
- ² Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., *Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation*. (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate, 1999): 224.



Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2009

Celebration of Golden Jubilee

Ellen Fitzgerald, R.S.M.

First Reading, Acts 4: 32 – 35

(The community of believers was of one heart and mind).

Second Reading, I John 5: 1 – 6

(Love God, love the children of God. Your faith will conquer all).

Gospel, John 20: 19 – 31

(Blessed are you who have not seen, but have believed).

First of all, I want to welcome all my guests and all our regular Sunday congregation. I'm very honored to have so many of you present at this Mass to join me in jubilee, in thanking God for this past half-century. These fifty years have brought many experiences, some that I wouldn't have chosen for myself and some that came as wonderful, surprising gifts. Looking back, I can see that all of them are woven into what became my life, a life I'm profoundly grateful for.

And isn't that what the readings we just heard are about? Experiences--human experiences that opened windows and doors into something greater. We often don't do well with other people telling us who we are and what we're about. We need our own experience to teach us, convince us, and enlighten us.

That's what happens in the Gospel. Thomas was having a hard time with this impossible Resurrection thing. But Jesus knew that Thomas needed his own experience, and gave it to him. "Come here, Thomas, touch me, see my wounds, know for yourself that I'm alive and real and risen from the dead."

And those early Christians in the first reading—they didn't just suddenly decide out of nowhere that it would be a great idea to share their resources and live together in peace. No, they experienced something that changed

them and made them act in new ways, give up control of their own property, and form a community that was "of one heart and mind" with each other. The passage tells us what that powerful, transforming experience was-- "the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," the reality of new life, an experience of the divine.

A couple of thousand years later, we might wish we'd been there to see it for ourselves. But Jesus did say that we, who try to believe even though we haven't seen (or so we think), are the more blest ones. Actually, isn't it true that we all have seen? Then why is it so hard to believe? We all have experiences of God, by whatever name we identify that experience. The reading from John's letter seems to say that if we wonder about God, we need to look at our neighbors and the world around us. Do we try to love and appreciate them? Then we do know and love the Divine. Do we seek what's authentic and true? Truth IS the Spirit of God. In any experience where we know the reality of something greater than ourselves, we can find God.

Thomas was having a hard time with this impossible Resurrection thing.

I'd like to share one of my great life experiences, one that's at the root of why I'm here to celebrate this jubilee.

I was in high school and this was the night of the Saint Ignatius Junior Prom, which I attended. Our group had a great time. I got home early the next morning when my family were all asleep. I was very quietly trying to hang up my prom dress in the dark, so as not to wake up my little sister, when suddenly I was on some other level of consciousness. Something very deep opened inside me, like two long passageways made from arches of air, which I somehow understood led to two different versions of my future life.

If I chose the passage on one side I'd follow the normal pattern of marriage and family, and that would be a good Christian life. If I chose the other side I'd enter a religious order and God would be the love of my life. That would also be good, though not in itself a better way than the first. I saw that I was perfectly free to choose between two good lives.

However, I also understood that if I chose religious life I'd be choosing to become who I was most truly meant to be. And if I chose something else, even something good in itself, it would be dishonest for me personally because I'd always have to pretend that I hadn't been offered my own authentic self. So in that moment I said Yes to what I experienced as the living God inviting me to be Ellen, the way Thomas was invited by Jesus to be Thomas.

And that has never changed. No matter how difficult things were sometimes, I could never deny that transforming experience. It was a gift I still cherish, an experience of the God who has always sustained me.

The scholar Joseph Campbell used to say, "Follow your bliss." Follow the experiences that bring the deepest gratitude, peace, and joy, not necessarily the most comfort. Follow the Easter experience of resurrection, of life renewed and transformed through deaths of various sorts. Follow what you know leads you beyond yourself and more deeply into yourself, because God is there.

For we all have experiences just as real and profound as Thomas the Apostle's was. Jesus said to him, "Come here and touch me, know me," and Thomas's experience led him to recognize and name God. So will our experiences--if we only let them.

The scholar Joseph Campbell used to say, "Follow your bliss." Follow the experiences that bring the deepest gratitude, peace, and joy, not necessarily the most comfort. Follow the Easter experience of resurrection, of life renewed and transformed through deaths of various sorts. Follow what you know leads you beyond yourself and more deeply into yourself, because God is there.



In Christ Jesus: A Reflection about Action and Contemplation

Cynthia Serjak, R.S.M.

Our quest to understand ever more clearly and deeply the relationship of action and contemplation both nourishes and challenges us as Sisters of Mercy. It nourishes us because we are still hungry to understand how those early women did it – how they opened ministry after amazing ministry, yet found the time to cultivate a deep and sustaining religious life. It challenges us because it reminds us that we too are meant to return from our work day busyness to re-enter the mystical corridors of our hearts.

Recent reflections have brought me to consider whether our quest might be assisted by some consideration of the relationship of action and contemplation held for us in the very name of the Word made flesh: Christ Jesus. In our consideration we can explore the intimate relationship revealed in this name: the Christ is born into history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Incarnation of one who contemplates the eternal Godhead in the flesh of one who experiences the activity of an earthly life is a model for us in our search to achieve a balance in our own lives.¹

When we look at the Jesus of the gospels, we see a strongly active person, alert, practical, perceptive, attentive, wise. At the same time his coming “from above,” his paschal journey and his promise to return to finalize what is unfinished takes us out of hometown Nazareth and into the realms of cosmic glory. It is the contemplation of this “Christ” reality that must have fed the Jesus whose feet were constantly stained with soil and dust from the road. It was a grasp of this glory, this sense of himself as the “Anointed One,” that must have informed the way in which he taught, healed, preached and organized his disciples. And it was this dimension in which he was immersed in those mountaintop prayer times.

To test what insights this reflection might have to offer us, let us look at three gospel passages and see how the two names come together into one integrated whole in this “Jesus the Christ.” The first story is from the beginning of Jesus’ public life; the second from his active ministerial life; and the third from his speaking about the end time. For ease of reference all are taken from the account of Mark, who offers the earliest account of the story of Jesus the Christ, without the accumulation of years of reflection. The text is direct and terse.

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The Christ Revealed in Jesus: Mark 1. 9-11

In a short two verses Mark tells the whole story of the baptism of Jesus. In the first verse he writes that “All the Judean countryside and the people of Jerusalem...in great numbers” were coming to John to be baptized.² At that point Jesus is just one of many ready to give his life over in response to the call to prepare the way. However, in verse 1:10, Mark says that when Jesus came out of the water he saw the sky open, the Spirit descend and then he heard a voice say, “You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests...” Jesus is now revealed as beloved son, the favored one. Mark seems to hold this news only for Jesus. Mark says, “he heard,” but Luke says a voice

from heaven was “heard to say,” (Lk 3:21), leaving open the possibility that those nearby heard it also. In either case, this moment of clarity, this startling experience of election, sends Jesus into the desert where he must have struggled mightily to understand what it would mean to be beloved.

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His response might parallel our own. When we have an extraordinary moment of clarity in the midst of a busy day of ministry, we begin looking for time to reflect on it, a desert time to let it sink in and to see what it means for us both internally (who God is asking us to be?) and externally (what God is hoping that we do?). Perhaps in those desert days Jesus went over and over in his mind the Messianic prophecies he surely knew by heart. The one that resonated in him, that enabled him to let the Anointing shine through him, that made it possible for him to go home and boldly speak in the synagogue, was Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” The Baptism and time in the desert transforms our reading of Jesus living in history and becoming understood as the Christ, living in the eternal reality of the Triune God.

We could also note that his prolonged contemplative time was a fasting time. Fasting has to do with emptying oneself so that the real hunger can surface, and one is able to focus energy on what is most important. Fasting is an aid to moving into a deeper dimension, the contemplative side of our lives. The fruits of such contemplation help us to see the daily in terms of the eternal. Jesus’ contemplation of the effect of his own hunger helps him in the dialogue with the devil, but also shapes his understanding of the importance of fasting as a way to stay in touch with the deepest movements of life.

Two possible insights emerge for us:

- 1) We do not know when the divine will be revealed in our lives, but the depth of our response needs to match the strength of the divine intervention. In response to the announcement of being Beloved Son, Jesus gives a significant amount of contemplative time to thinking about this favored status and to prepare himself for ministry.
- 2) Entering into contemplation means being willing to set aside the activities of our daily lives, even the comfort of food, to give ourselves over to a different dimension.

Jesus With Us as the Christ: Mark 9. 38-41

A second passage that might be helpful to us is one in which Jesus speaks of “the Christ” in relation to our activity in the world. In 9:41, Jesus says that anyone who “gives you a drink because you belong to Christ will not, I assure you, go without his reward.” Note that he doesn’t speak of belonging to Jesus but to Christ. Given that this follows another challenging statement in 9: 40 (“Anyone who is not against us is with us.”³) we can ponder what Jesus means to say about the center of our belonging. Do we belong to Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee or to Jesus the Christ whose presence extends beyond any geographical boundaries, to anyone who is “with us?” To belong to Jesus means to follow in the path of his life as recorded in the gospels. To belong to Christ expands our horizon to those who may be included in the “with us” that is the reign of God.⁴ Surely this deserves time for contemplation along the following lines:

**We do not know when the divine
will be revealed in our lives, but
the depth of our response needs
to match the strength of the
divine intervention.**

- 1) What does my belonging to the Christ mean for me? How does it ask me to think about the world? Which version of this verse do I act upon in my daily life?
- 2) Can anyone be rightly excluded from my world view?

Do we belong to Jesus of Nazareth of
Galilee or to Jesus the Christ whose
presence extends beyond any
geographical boundaries, to anyone
who is "with us?"

Christ Sustaining Jesus: Mark 14. 22-25

In this third passage Jesus speaks about not drinking the fruit of the vine again "until the day when I drink it new in the reign of God." Jesus of Nazareth is sharing a meal with his friends. Jesus the Christ is celebrating the paschal mystery which he is about to live out through his passion, death and resurrection. It is not that there are two different persons or that the parts of his person are polarized. Rather, in the view of the evangelist, there is one rich reality woven into a lifetime of action and contemplation. That weaving seems to come to fullness as he enters Jerusalem, fully embracing his identity as the anointed one, "the Christ" and acting and speaking from that reality. Now, in this last supper, the intimacy of contemplation and action is revealed. The mysterious gift of the Body and Blood is manifested in the human reality of sharing food. The willingness to accept "the cup" is wedded with a complaint later in the garden that his friends fall asleep at this crucial moment when he is accepting the cup (Mk 14:37). The acceptance of death as transformation emerges through the human pain of abandonment. Only the contemplation of his greater reality as beloved and favored could enable the man Jesus to live these last moments in such a profound sense of self as the Christ. Once again we are drawn into contemplation:

- 1) What does it mean to receive in our very active body the Body of Christ, a contemplation of his whole self, and all those he brings with him?
- 2) How can we see the dailiness of food, its purchase and preparation, in light of the challenge to give our own bodies and blood as food to others? Can we embrace the cup entirely while not negating our body's real need for healthy attention?

Contemplation of our own infinite reality gives depth to how we make choices every day. The path of our own growth is one of knitting together the revelation

of two aspects of our identity: the active, serving, vulnerable, limited person, joined with the contemplative, receptive, courageous, unlimited one. Praying "in Christ Jesus" might be helpful as we move along this path of integration which has been modeled for us by Christ Jesus. As it was true for Jesus, we spend time in both realities, not to separate them, but to draw them closer and closer together. We can contemplate how in the moment of death the two might finally meet completely, never to be separated again.

What does it mean to receive in our
very active body the Body of Christ,
a contemplation of his whole self,
and all those he brings with him?
How can we see the dailiness of food,
its purchase and preparation, in light
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bodies and blood as food to others?

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Ellen Murray, RSM for conversations which helped to shape the content of this article.
- ² All Scripture quotes are taken from *The New American Bible*.
- ³ The gospel writers differ in this text. Mark allows for some diversity in commitment – as long as you are not *against* Christ you are with him, whereas Matthew 12.30 and Luke 11.23 ask for clarity in commitment: if you are not clearly *with* Christ then you must be *against* him.
- ⁴ Editor's note: The passage is evidence of different compositional moments in Mark's gospel—that of capturing what witnesses remember Jesus saying, and later reflection by the Markan community that Jesus was the anointed one, the Christ. The term "because you belong to Christ" is the voice of the early Church expressing its faith that believers belonged to Jesus, the Anointed One, the Christ.
- ⁵ This is most evident in John's gospel, starting with Chapter 13.

A Woman's Point of View on a Man's Point of View

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

Well, the Letter wasn't written to me, so I guess I shouldn't be terribly concerned about the Pope approving a Letter from a Cardinal to the Bishops of the Church—except the Letter was about the “collaboration of men and women in the church and the world.”¹ I didn't even know about this Letter until I was asked to prepare some comments on it for the 2008 MAST meeting. I chose to begin my response by recalling some of my own personal experience of collaboration between men and women in the church and the world.

My Personal Experience

A recent TV commercial was punctuated by the mantra, “I didn't know.” What I didn't know early in my life was that there was a problem in the area of men with women. In fact, I did think that women were superior to men in many things. I grew up in family of widows in which the women were both the breadwinners and the housekeepers. I was top in my class in a co-ed college with a major in math and physical science, fields in which men were supposedly dominant.

It wasn't until my theological studies that I began to notice that something was askew in the relationship between men and women in the church, especially with the clergy. I was the first woman studying for a degree in theology in a seminary, immediately following Vatican II. It didn't take long for me to realize the seminarians weren't talking to me. In fact, it took two years before one of the seminarians finally told me that they were instructed to avoid me—because I was a temptation! Even after changing the venue of my studies to a consortium of seminaries, I always had to eat alone and was never invited to a liturgical or social event. It was not a happy time.

It wasn't until my theological studies that I began to notice that something was askew in the relationship between men and women in the church, especially with the clergy.

After I completed my doctorate in theology, I was invited to teach Christology at a local seminary. So the situation seemed to be changing for the good. The shunning was over—I thought. After a year on the seminary faculty a directive was issued from somewhere that women couldn't teach any of the core seminary courses. I was relegated to teach only “electives.”

I decided to leave the seminary world and switch to adult faith formation in parishes. Here I encountered the absolute authority of the office of pastor. Although there were parish councils, in line with the spirit of Vatican II collegiality, the pastor always had the final say in any parish decision. This brand of authority hit me one day when the pastor of a parish I worked in for six years suddenly with no notice or consultation or recourse dismissed me.

After some months of being out of work, I found a position in the archdiocese and continued to minister in the parochial venue. Recently I have had the good fortune of working with fine staffs and pastoral priests.

I find many blessings in this work. I love working with “the person in the pew” accompanying them and helping them when I can in their growth in faith.

However, this position has also put me in touch with negative experiences many people encounter in the church. For example, I can only cringe as I accompany

people having to submit to the marriage laws of the church regarding annulments. One woman in this process asked, "How many times do I have to be punished for the behavior of my first husband?" I also find it difficult to be in the position, as a representative of the church, of upholding some regulations of the church to which I don't ascribe.

These are some of the personal experiences I bring to my critique of the document on "The Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World." Admittedly, my experiences affect the analysis that follows.

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My Critique

To begin on a positive note, the document does give attention to the issue of collaboration. It was written to give "an impetus for dialogue ... and a common commitment to the development of ever more authentic relationships." It names the issue: "active collaboration between the sexes precisely in the recognition of the difference between man and woman." In other words, how do men and women work together, though different in gender?

Following the structure of good Catholic scholarship, the document begins with the testimony of Scripture on the issue. It presents basic elements of the biblical vision of the human person in Genesis texts of creation:

- male and female are created in the image of God as a "uni-duality";
- original sin distorted the relation between humans and God, with the resulting distortion in relationships between man and woman;
- this broken relationship was healed through the covenant, imaged in the bond of bride and bridegroom;
- this bond is fully realized in the Kingdom

Nonetheless, I have several points of concern about the document.

The first few words raised a flag for me. The Church is described as an "expert in humanity...." Isn't this a bit triumphalistic? The first few paragraphs describe "new approaches to women's issues" are just as troublesome. The stated purpose of the document is to "seek to correct the [feminist] perspective which views men as enemies to be overcome." There is nothing about a need to correct men's perspective of women. Reluctant "permission" is given to women to be both in the home and in the workplace, but nothing said of the man's obligation to also contribute to the home and family. The qualities of women that are praised are all passive--listening, welcoming, faithfulness....

Further, the interpretation of some Scriptural metaphors seems inconsistent. If God is the groom, then the church is the bride, both men and women. Does it not follow, then, that it is the human person, male or female, that is "married" to God? If this is the case, then the reasoning behind the document's reiteration of the theological basis for excluding women from the priesthood does not hold. The document bases this position on the tenet that "Women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom." Does this mean that men are left out of the bride/bridegroom relationship?

The stated purpose of the document is to "seek to correct the [feminist] perspective which views men as enemies to be overcome."

There is nothing about a need to correct men's perspective of women.

The qualities of women that are praised are all passive--listening, welcoming, faithfulness....

The document goes on to say that women's contribution to society is "linked to women's physical capacity to give life...." So, if it were granted that the

differences between male and female are to be considered in the church as the document states, wouldn't it follow that the sacramental life of the church be presided over by a woman? She who gives birth should baptize, she who feeds the family should preside at Eucharist, she who takes care of the sick at home should anoint the sick in the church.

In another place, the document says that Paul's declaration that in Christ "there is neither male nor female" does not say the distinction between man and woman has been erased. Only the sinful divisions have been overcome. So does that imply there is no distinction between slave and free?

Also, there are some things missing in the document. No reference to the de facto repression of women in church and society is mentioned. Nor is any reference given of the positive contribution of feminist theology to the understanding of ecclesiology.

It seems to me that, in the current make-up of the magisterium, a document on the collaboration between men and women can never be written because women cannot collaborate with the male magisterium in the publication of such a document. Men decide what is the truth about women. At least, that is this woman's point of view about the male magisterium's point of view.

How Do We Respond?

I begin, as did the document, with the teaching of our Scriptures. What do the Gospels tell us about the collaboration between Jesus and women? A few examples come to mind.

- A commonly unrecognized advance on the part of women's place in the world is Jesus' teaching on adultery—both man and woman can commit it!
- On a more positive note, Jesus engages in a dialogue with the woman at the well, a conversation that concludes by her testimony to her townspeople that Jesus is the Savior of the world.
- Mary Magdalene was selected by the risen Lord to be the first apostle--and it had nothing to do with motherhood.

Those are some examples of what Jesus did then. What would Jesus do now? This, of course means, what re-

sponsibility do the members of the Body of Christ have today in the matter of true collaboration between men and women in the church and the world?

In an article, Cletus Wessels, O.P., poses the question, "How did an egalitarian Jesus community end up as a church divided into two separate groups...?"² He goes on to examine the dynamics which brought about this transformation. He reasons that if we know why and how this happened, the church may begin a counter-transformation.

What is our response to the situation? How can we strengthen the mission of Christ, which is to bring about the true collaboration between men and women in the church of Christ? It is no secret that some steps have already been taken by those questioning the position of the magisterium with regard to women. There have been some attempts to engage in dialogue with those who hold opposing views. Some vocalize their opinions and feelings in conversation, print, or teaching. Some try to work around the situation. Some stay but are angry and cynical. Some have simply left the church.

Famous members of our church have written of their own struggles with their relationship with the "official" church. Thomas Merton reveals his own difficulties in a reply letter to a priest who was having a hard time with the church.

Merton begins by saying:

There is so much that is sick and false in our institutions. Submission is canonized and all opposition is suspect. There is machinery that grinds everyone to powder. Then, as you say, the effect is that when we finally open our mouths we are so wrought up that we explode, and that, too, is held against us.

He then offers some suggested responses/actions:

- If the situation is hopeless, ordinarily there is no point in direct confrontation. Do what you have to do and "let them figure it out afterwards."
- Things are never as hopeless as they seem when you are in crisis. Stick to your principles, stand up for your rights, be patient and often "your turn will come."

- Seek company with like-minded people and work together with them on the issue.
- "In ordinary conversation with people who are suffering, the best thing is to be quite frank about abuses and injustices and not to defend what is moribund and indefensible. Try to be as realistic about it as possible, and help as much as you can, without raising hopes of an impossible solution."

Dorothy Day once observed, that the Christian must live in a state of "permanent dissatisfaction with the church."⁴

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has responded to the situation in each of their chapters:

- "...the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas are impelled to commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with...women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society...."⁵
- "...we, as Institute, shall engage in processes of theological reflection:
to probe our understanding of ourselves as vowed women in the Church, including struggles with our ecclesial identity and with issues of ...gender; ...
- to discern what God's Spirit is freeing us to do for the church and for all women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society."⁶
- "Sustaining dialogue with representatives of the Church, we will take responsibility for our ecclesial identity by working for justice for women in the Church..."⁷
- We will "...continue to embrace our particular concern for women"⁸

What great works are we being
called to perform in clarifying and
making just the collaboration
of men and women in the
church and the world?

Conclusion

How have we done? Do we agree that much more prayer, action and dialogue needs to take place?

Jesus once said, "Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do and will do greater ones than these because I am going to the Father." (Jn. 14.12)

Jesus has gone to the Father. What great works are we being called to perform in clarifying and making just the collaboration of men and women in the church and the world?

NOTES

- ¹ *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, Rome: Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, 2004.
- ² "A Restructured Church: The Demise of Clergy and Laity," *The American Catholic* (January/ February, 2003).
- ³ *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux): 333.
- ⁴ *America* (May 5, 2008): 26.
- ⁵ Direction Statement, 1991.
- ⁶ Institute Chapter Initiatives, 1995.
- ⁷ Sisters of Mercy Action Plan, 1999-2005
- ⁸ Critical Concerns, 2005 Chapter Acts



Response to "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World"

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Introduction: Reasons to Study the Document

When the panel had a conference call to plan our various approaches, Aline Paris, R.S.M., asked, "Why are we taking such an old document that was published in 2004?" I was a little taken aback at her finding 2004 "so old," but Aline is a very modern woman who teaches at College of St. Mary in Omaha. I came up with several reasons:

First, we take an old 2004 document because this is the present thinking in the Vatican about women, which is simultaneously old thinking. Like any Vatican document, it prides itself on reflecting the constancy of the church's traditional teaching. So it cites previous church documents. And it goes back to the Book of Genesis. So in that sense it is old, ancient thinking, and Aline is right. It is "such an old document."

The second reason we take this old 2004 document is that it is not enough to present our own thinking about ourselves as women religious to the church, and expect that this will be welcomed, heard and understood. We need to understand the thought structures that are in place as male filters, male frames of reference and pre-existing conditions of the socially patriarchalized male mind.¹ The Collaboration document is not really about teaching men an appreciation for feminine values, or reminding them that the church officially teaches they should love women and respect their dignity. The document is an illustration of how churchmen think women should behave toward men, and the self-understanding they think women should have in their relations toward men. It's a set of directives to women about the thoughts they should have about themselves.

Thus, this is not a document instructing men how they are to collaborate with women, or how they are to change their behavior. But it's a mirror, not in which we

might recognize ourselves or be seduced by holy language, but in which we will glimpse the psyche of the church. Why do many feel alienated from the institutional church and treated badly by clerics? My sense is that we cannot strategize for change of practice until we take hold of the way they've tied their sailor's knots in the first place.

In China, which is notorious for producing counterfeit copies of American and European products, production begins with "reverse engineering." Chinese counterfeiters obtain a copy of a western machine, then painstakingly take it apart to see what it is made of. When they master the original process, they gain an economic advantage. So might we profit by an analogous process.

We look at the theme of
"Collaboration" and ask, "Does this
theme promote a viable model for
cooperation between men and
women in the church?" The short
answer is No. But we must
understand and analyze why such
beautiful sentiments change
nothing, and in fact preserve
the status quo.

Third, Catherine McAuley had a special concern for women, so when we give some time to examine how the Church thinks about women we are in tune with our foundress' focus. Our Direction Statement says that we are committed to work for the dignity and equality of women in church and society. This requires our ongoing attention as theologians, and the attention be-

comes a foundation for our work to bring about systemic change. We look at the theme of "Collaboration" and ask, "Does this theme promote a viable model for co-operation between men and women in the church?" The short answer is No. But we must understand and analyze why such beautiful sentiments change nothing, and in fact preserve the status quo. We must look at the religious ideology that perpetuates resistance to the progress of women.

It is not enough to present our own
thinking about ourselves as women
religious to the church, and expect
that this will be welcomed, heard
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patriarchalized male mind.

Feminist Analysis of the Document

I am attempting to use feminist analysis as a methodology, as opposed to just reading the document at face value, or presuming that since I am a woman, I automatically read it as a feminist. To explain what feminist analysis is, I offer a poem by a 20th century Iranian, Islamic feminist, Forugh Farrokhzad. She writes about the process by which she moved from an idealized view of nuptial bliss to a disillusioned view of her own marriage.

"The Ring" by Forugh Farrokhzad

Laughing, the girl asked, What is
the meaning of this gold ring
the meaning of this band
that grabs my finger so tightly,

the secret meaning of this band
so lustrous and aglow?
The man, dumbfounded, replied,

It's the ring of good fortune, the ring of life.

Everyone said: *Mubarak*, blessing.

She said: Alas,

I feel uneasy with what you say it means.

Years passed and one night
a downcast woman glanced at her gold band
and saw in its lustrous glow
days wasted...wasted,
waiting for her husband's fidelity.

Distraught, she sighed: *Vaye! Vaye!*

This band--

so lustrous and aglow--

is the clamp of bondage, of slavery.²

The poem treats a woman's disillusionment with marriage and her nuptial role. She starts out hopefully, looking at her ring "lustrous and aglow." She asks for dialogue with her husband about what marriage means. Her husband answers, dumbfounded that he must reflect and come up with his own thoughts. So he speaks in platitudes--it's "the ring of good fortune, the ring of life." Everyone around the young bride celebrates this wonderful union, calling a blessing on it. But in the midst of the platitudes and the public discourse about marriage's benefits, she feels uneasy with "what you say it means." Years pass. She now trusts not platitudes, blessings, but her personal experience of nuptial life. She is miserable. She is not happy about being a spouse or her description as a nuptial partner. She has waited for love from her husband--for fidelity--but she has waited in vain, and wasted her life. She realizes that marriage is bondage, and that being a wife is nothing but being her unfaithful husband's slave. The instinct of unease --"I feel uneasy with what you say it means,"--she had early in her life is the foundation for her fuller consciousness later in life.

The *Collaboration* document is preoccupied with defining the relationship of woman to man as "nuptial." Feminist interpretation begins with an honest assessment of your own experience of the idea and experience

of "nuptiality," as distinct from "what everyone says" or what the authorities say. It involves suspicion. "I feel uneasy with what you say it means." So I was uneasy with the promising phrase in the title of this document, *Collaboration of Men and Women*. I heard that word before, in the U.S. Bishop's attempt at writing a document about women, *Partners in Redemption*, in 1988. It was largely regarded as a failure on the fourth attempt. I don't feel like a partner with men in the church. After you read this document, do you feel encouraged that men in the church will now be more willing to collaborate with you, welcome you as a co-worker, pay you what your services are worth, and express their regret for their professional side-lining of you in the past?

**The instinct of unease--I feel uneasy
with what you say it means,"
she had early in her life is the
foundation for her fuller
consciousness later in life.**

Feminist interpretation is not just hearing the voice of a woman when you used to hear a man speaking. Feminist interpretation does not take place just because a woman engages in dialogue about an issue or expresses her opinion in the middle of a discussion dominated by men. Nor does feminist interpretation take place when a woman talks about famous, influential women, nor when she supports some women's political stances, such as women in the military, or Hillary Clinton for President.

Feminist interpretation starts with, "I feel uneasy with what you say it means," whether that discourse comes from the words of men or women. Feminist interpretation is a testing of assertions, an analysis of arguments, an identification of frames of thought, and examination of assumptions that men have about women.

This kind of analysis is also an examination of the internalized oppression out of which women speak about themselves. Internalized oppression is the name given to women's unconscious absorption and spouting of men's rules for them, men's definition of what womanhood--or nun-hood-- means --as though these defini-

tions and rules were women's own idea. Release from internalized oppression also begins with a feeling of unease. I hear the words I am saying, but I realize my experience doesn't match my words. I distinguish what I hear in myself, from the conditioning that is natural and spontaneous for me to speak from. I feel uneasy with what you say it means--and I address myself, my own self as "you."

I ask too, as we look at this description of *Collaboration of Men and Women*, Are we listening to beautiful quotations and blessings from scripture that promise men's fidelity to us, or are we looking at a script that ensures our continued subordination in the church? The surest path to freedom is to claim the texts as our own, and to resist the face-value acceptance of what men say the texts mean. "Women, too, for their part, need to follow the path of conversion and recognize the unique values and great capacity for loving others which their femininity bears." (§ 16).

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of assertions, an analysis of
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This conclusion, a subtext of *Collaboration*, reflects the first paragraph of a document written ten years previously, *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace: A Pastoral Reflection on Women in the Church and in Society in 1994*. Here, the U.S. Bishops opened by referring to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) which had just been issued by Pope John Paul II. The main purpose of *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace* was to assure women that they still had a "necessary and irreplaceable" role in the Church, despite the teaching that ordination was restricted to men. And that they should calm down and let themselves be appeased by the church's reassurance that it appreciated women's leadership, that it rejected sexism and affirmed their fundamental equality with men, that it noted the diversity of their gifts in ministry, and that women reflected the true face of the church.

After you read this document, do you feel encouraged that men in the church will now be more willing to collaborate with you, welcome you as a co-worker, pay you what your services are worth, and express their regret for their professional side-lining of you in the past?

Part I.: The Question

The principal concern in Part I of *Collaboration* is to protect traditional marriage and its religious definition by men from anthropological, economic, legal and historical analyses of the marriage relationship articulated by women. A presupposition controls the argument: Marriage in the minds of clerics is a social structure that transcends collaborative discourse, historical moment, geographical location and cultural setting. Marriage between a man and a woman is a timeless structure, as is the physical nature of the man and the physical nature of the woman.

Part I is thus a frontal attack on the last seventy years of American and European feminist thought. It gives a negative assessment of modern feminist theory. It insists that biblical exegesis, not women's own sense of herself, or social analysis, is the starting place for identifying woman's nature and the basis for the dignity and respect men have for them.

Collaboration of Men and Women is about men's prescription for women about how women are to be in collaboration with them. The biblical citations do not challenge men to examine their own attitudes toward women. The argument is aimed at getting women to burn the books they read in Women's Studies programs, and bring them back to a simpler, biblical view of male and female, as articulated by clerics.

The main thrust of this section as in collaboration as a whole, is a directive *not* to use feminist analysis. Not only is American feminism untrustworthy. International law, too, is an alien basis on which to construct a theory of women's dignity. By their fruits you will know them,

seems the premise. When women use these methods, says *Collaboration*, they find themselves in conflict with men. Modern feminist thought should be discouraged because it pits women against men and itself creates an adversarial relation. Women themselves are to blame for the conflict, since they depart from a view that men and women are basically united in their common humanity. Women use the term "gender" to avoid the basic fact of physical differences based on sex. Theories that male and female are social constructions are destructive lines of thought. Political, anthropological, psychological and sociological examinations of gender create categories that deviate from a religious and biblical view of sexuality. These feminist theories endanger the cohesion of the family, the two-parent structure of mother and father, and "make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality." (§ 3) There are many other bad effects of feminist thought. It alienates women from scripture. Women then tend to reduce "the importance and relevance the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature in its male form." (§ 3).

Further, the CDF points out the error of women's ways, and insists that reflection on women's social roles leads to great confusion about sexuality. Women, says *Collaboration*, want to be free from biological conditioning, but this isn't possible. They want to create themselves to be persons according to their own ideas, but this results in individualism and selfishness. Feminist thought fosters a view that the person of woman is autonomous and exists in her own right. These are, says the CDF, corruptions of what it means to be human.

The overall argument by the CDF here is that women's thoughts about themselves are untrustworthy and out of step with the official teaching of the church about their nature and identity as women. This position creates a sort of "Sophie's choice" for women of faith. The CDF proposes that if a woman loves the church, she will adopt the church's frame for her self-understanding as a woman of faith. She will interpret what she experiences as a woman according to the biblical frame. On the other hand, if she deeply values herself, and trusts what she hears her own spirit saying, and trusts her sense of solidarity with other women, she will

end up choosing her experience as a frame for interpreting the truth of the church. The Sophie's choice is this: To save one, you must reject the other, and the one you *should* reject is your own experience of being a woman. The stalemate created by this message is probably one reason women religious have been so reluctant and so ambivalent about employing feminist analysis and calling it that.

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Part II: Basic Elements of the Biblical Vision of the Human Person

I want to treat four examples of the way biblical texts are used in this section. The first is the selective reading of the Genesis creation story. Second is the leap over all the texts in the Hebrew Scripture that deal with real-life women and instead, selecting metaphorical references to women's identity as fundamentally a spouse. Third is the de-historicization of the New Testament in which the exegete avoids the treatment of women who are not spousal (most of them). The fourth is the devotionalizing and depersonalizing of Mary as symbol of humanity, symbol of women, and symbol of the Church.

Selective, Idiosyncratic Reading of Genesis 1-3

The purpose of the text-selection from Genesis 1-3 generally is to underline the key theme that humanity is a union of male and female, and the union depends on complementarity, the fact that women are physically, sexually different from men. In the distinction and difference there is commonality and unity as human beings goes the theory. God created Adam, then Eve as his

helpmate. But they are equal as human beings, despite the structures of sin which introduce violence into the relationship. The writer of this section cites the first creation account in which there are no physical details about the creation of male and female in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).

But in his treatment of the second creation account (Gen 2:7-9, 15-24) the writer doesn't mention the graphic details of the difference between the origin of man and woman--that man comes from the dust, and woman is created from his rib. Perhaps these concrete, mythological details interfere with the argument the writer is trying to make: Woman is the helpmate who will be the vital helper of the man, and man celebrates her as "flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone." She remains wordless at her encounter with the man, for whatever reason we women might impute to her. Perhaps the third creation account, which is really the birth of woman from the man, creates too many problems for the writer in asserting the equality of man and woman in their common humanity and in their spousal relationship.

Anyone who has taken an introductory course in the Old Testament may notice the writer's avoidance of interpretive problems, as though evocation of Genesis is enough to propose the religious ideal for what marriage should be, how a wife is the man's life's companion, his wife, his spouse, and his helpmate. The interpretation is quite one-sided. It's a man's description of the way a woman is to be a wife to the man. There is no reference to women's perspective on marriage.

There is, as would be expected, a failure in the document to condemn men's acts of physical violence against women. Instead, this tragic fact of women's marital life around the globe is blamed on the culture, not on any values perpetuated by religion or a reading of Genesis about man's coming first in creation.

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enough to propose the religious ideal for what marriage should be, how a wife is the man's life's companion, his wife, his spouse, and his helpmate. The interpretation is quite one-sided. It's a man's description of the way a woman is to be a wife to the man. There is no reference to women's perspective on marriage.

"Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of 'uni-duality,' which only sin and 'the structures of sin' inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual" (§ 8). Sin is never what is the man's own doing. Rather, sin is a failure shared by both man and woman. (§ 11) "The power of the resurrection makes possible the victory of faithfulness over weakness, over injuries, and over the couple's sins. In the grace of Christ which renews their hearts, man and woman become capable of being freed from sin and of knowing the joy of mutual giving." I wonder if women who are seeking annulments on the basis of domestic violence, alcoholism, or infidelity of their husbands will find this analysis of mutuality of sinfulness convincing.

Avoiding Texts About Non-Spousal Women in Hebrew Scripture

The second distortion of the biblical texts is the leap over all the texts in the Hebrew Scripture that deal with real-life women and instead selecting metaphorical references to women's identity as fundamentally a spouse. There is, as we say in Hollywood, an airbrushing of all the inconvenient texts about real-life spouses. No reference to the problematic marital relationship between Abraham and Sarah. There is no complicated marital relationship of Jacob to Leah and Rachel at the same time. There is no Deborah, wife of Lapidoth, who used to be a spouse before she led the troops as a prophet and warrior. There is no Ruth, who is a widow who follows

her mother in law wherever she goes, but later takes the initiative with Boaz the reluctant bachelor. There is no Judith, who used to be a spouse, but takes on the unwifely role of Mata Hari, and beheads Holofernes. There is no Jael, unpartnered, who pretends spousal care, lures an enemy general to her tent and drives a tent-peg through his throat...or temple, depending on the translation.

Thus, in this document the "spousal character of the body" is proposed as an abstraction, but completely divorced from the reality that women throughout the biblical narrative often act independently of their spousal or marital identity.

Avoiding Women's Autonomous Identity in the Gospels

The third distortion of the biblical record is de-historicization of the New Testament by avoiding treatment of women who are not spousal, but rather autonomous in the gospels as healed women, disciples and leaders in the early church. Most women in the New Testament are not married, and they approach Jesus as single, unpartnered persons. Consider the Samaritan woman who is decidedly de-spoused, after six experiences which didn't work out. Yet she is the model for women apostles and preachers. Consider the Canaanite woman, no husband in sight to plead for his daughter's health. Consider Mary Magdalene, known by her home town, not her husband's last name.

The reader must understand that the purpose of the document is not really to describe collaboration of men and women, but to press a religious definition of female identity as bride of the bridegroom, female spouse of the male spouse, physical representative of femininity which is distinct from masculinity but nevertheless fully human. Nevertheless, there is a redeeming passage in the document which anticipates that the ideal is not spouse-hood, but person-hood. "Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom seeks to be the prophecy of this form of future existence of male and female. For those who live it, it is an anticipation of the reality of a life which, while remaining that of a man and a woman, will no longer be subject to the present limitations of the marriage relationship." (§ 12)

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Devotionalizing and Depersonalizing Mary

The fourth distortion of the biblical texts involves devotionalizing Mary as a symbol of humanity, symbol of women, and symbol of the Church. This is most clearly seen in Part IV: The Importance of Feminine Values in the Life of the Church, where Mary is effectively separated exegetically from Joseph and exists as a woman on her own.

The writer comments on Ephesians 5 by describing the symbolic equivalence between the relationship of male and female, and humanity's relationship to God. This equivalence also corresponds to the relationship between the male Christ and the female Church. And finally the writer reminds women that this is the reason they cannot be ordained to priesthood, because they are symbols of the Church as the Bride, but not of Christ as the Bridegroom.

We take note that men have written this document as an instruction, not to men about their duty to be faithful or collaborative with women. Rather, this document is a clerical instruction directed primarily toward women who ultimately, like Mary, should cultivate the same dispositions of "listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting." (§ 17). These are virtues described as particularly feminine--and reflect the socialization of women by the church to adopt a posture of submission to their husbands, and peaceful acceptance of the authority of clergy over them. Even though a disclaimer is made that all the baptized are to act like Mary, the particular virtues linked with Mary are "female" in character, not male. Mary's relationship to Joseph as

spouse in the Infancy Narratives of Luke and Matthew is not the subject of this document. Rather, her relationship to God is the point. She is the Bride of God the Bridegroom.

The final message to women about their ecclesial identity is finally laid out. In taking up the posture of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, women will recognize "how the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men does not hamper in any way women's access to the heart of Christian life. Women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom." (§ 16).

Conclusion

I argue, fundamentally, for the retrieval, revival and employment of a vigorous feminist analysis of church documents and biblical texts. We need to move out of a present spirit of intellectual submission and disengagement, as though these documents have nothing significant to say to us. The Church's discourse about women is important for us to analyze if we are to be effective in bringing about systemic change.

But we need to find an alternative style of discussion besides responding to every issue as though it is faith sharing, and every official statement as though it is a basis for *lectio divina*. To treat theological assertions and proposals of biblical interpretation as though they provide a basis for faith-sharing is to shut down our critical faculties, suppress our judgments, and disempower ourselves as thinking women. Such a self-directive--treat every utterance as faith-sharing---can perpetuate women's internalized oppression. We then cannot discern what should be argued with and challenged. We are called as theologians to engage in the tougher intellectual work of thinking, judging, arguing, intervening, proposing alternatives, and engaging in the sort of intelligent debate, pressing the church to hear the new knowledge that comes from us as women.

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NEGATIVE AGES

Moving into negative ages
can cause confusion
in the pro-life and pro-choice camps

Let me explain

When I
was minus six
on 6/25/25, my atoms
were scattered around Seattle
or more accurately, around the Universe

Some of them were probably energy
with the destiny
of growing into me

So how old am I really?

You might respond
"But where
was the life
when did the loving relationship
come in?"

Right there
from the beginning

If there was a beginning

Patricia Ryan, R.S.M.
February, 2006

NOTES

- ¹ In October, 2007, I presented a paper at the Thomas Merton Center in Palo Alto, which argued that patriarchy in the church is not an invention of the Catholic clerical structure. Rather, patriarchy first, is the set of rules men make for other men in society; second patriarchy is the set of rules men make for women, which reflects the subordination system within male society; and third, patriarchy in the church is the form this subordination takes when it is described by men as authorized by God as part of his design for humanity and for the Catholic church.
- ² Forugh Farrokhzad, *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*. Trans. Sholeh Wolpe. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007.

Some Trends in the Formation of Spiritual Directors—Has Training Changed?

Mary Ann Scofield, R.S.M.

What I have noted over the last few decades are several shifts in the way we train spiritual directors, and who are the persons seeking such training:

There is a movement of spiritual direction training focused on the white, English-language population to a variety of cultures. We see a movement from programs located in one culture to re-location in other cultures and inclusion of them. We ask how can we make this gift available to others? For example, Mercy Center in Burlingame took a spiritual director formation program to the San Francisco Mission district, which is primarily Hispanic, and most of these are immigrants to the U.S. Headed by Sister Mary Ann Clifford, R.S.M., this program is conducted in Spanish and the team all speak Spanish. This year she began a similar program in Oakland, California. We started with twenty people who work with the poor and marginalized. Many were happy to have some formation. They aren't doing spiritual direction in a formal sense, but being contemplative listeners with family and friends. Spirituality is new to them, both for the documented and undocumented. To emigrate to the States, they had moved into a world of white privilege and had forgotten their own culture.

Training of directors now involves a personal interior transformation that includes awareness of social justice issues. We want to encourage these directors to spend time "at the edge" with people who are less privileged. Thus, one of the changes in the overall orientation of our program is from an individualistic formation program to one that includes conscious integration of social justice.

Another shift we see is from people's traditional participation in church life to retrieving a sense of their own cultural churches. They often have been alienated from their own churches. We ask ourselves how to integrate operative theologies into their previously disenfranchised church experience. Now they have a more

prophetic view and can make moves to bring about more change. We find some tensions which pit a person's subjective sense of spirituality against formal religion, a religious experience which can feel outdated, abusive, or alien. The challenge is to help people integrate their personal experience into church life today. Thus, we see a movement from a more traditional participation in formal church life to a more integrated, personal way to understand one's faith.

Training of directors now involves a personal interior transformation that includes awareness of social justice issues. We want to encourage these directors to spend time "at the edge" with people who are less privileged. Thus, one of the changes in the overall orientation of our program is from an individualistic formation program to one that includes conscious integration of social justice.

An additional shift has resulted in our training program taking a more intentional focus on culture and the recognition of how one's culture affects directors and the process of direction. For example, we ask participants to reflect on what are the characteristics of our own culture, and how this affects the way we work as directors and how we interact with directees, for example those who are Philippino or Chinese. We ask directees, "What's the spirituality of your culture—your prayers, devotions, traditions, and style that are typical of your church?"

There is also a movement from exclusive focus on Catholic and Christian formation programs to inclusion of all faith traditions. Here, we observe a shift from denominational tradition to inter-denominational experience. We have a growing number of applicants for our program from other faiths, and inter-faith traditions. Here, wounds need to be tended. Also, many people have a very limited understanding of theology. Our programs now include a class called "Personal Transformation in Mission." One question we ask concerns our own tradition: How can we honor other traditions, while keeping ours separate?

An important movement involves a more holistic formation, with conscious attention paid to the integration of body, mind and spirit as a unity. We involve therapists and body work practitioners. What resources does the director have in working with energy that comes up in facilitating the spiritual growth of a directee? How is the God experience part of this holistic approach?

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Finally, our programs have moved from an emphasis on learning of new skills for direction to a focus on the transformation of the director as director. We accompany others the way we accompany ourselves. More attention is now paid to help directors pay attention to their own personal transformation.

Some Trends in the Formation of Spiritual Directors at Regis College in Toronto, Canada

Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

I have been reflecting on the experiences of persons being trained for the ministry of spiritual direction. There are several changes and trends I have noted over the years in our graduate program.

There is shift from participants being middle-age clerics and vowed religious women to pre-retired and retired lay professionals.

The first is the movement from mainstream ecumenical traditions to interfaith and "blended" faith traditions. For example, participants in our program used to be identified as Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, United Church, Evangelical Anglican and High Anglican. Today persons identify themselves more diversely, such as Native and Christian, Ecological and

Christian, Jewish and Zen, Buddhist and Christian, or Unitarian and Jewish.

Second, there is shift from participants being middle-age clerics and vowed religious women to pre-retired and retired lay professionals. Some come with deep faith; some are seekers; some have a long experience of spiritual direction in their lives. Many have well-developed administrative skills as leaders in their communities of faith. For both women and men, the role of spiritual director may be an alternative to ministry as the ordained permanent diaconate, which exists as a possibility in the Catholic Church only for men.

Third, there is a change of profile from M.A. and M.Div. students with a firm foundation in their own faith tradition. These students in the past have included men and women, religious and lay persons, and their age ranges from young to middle-aged. More recently, we are enrolling young, passionate evangelical seekers

and young urban professionals. This latter group seems to have little previous experience in a particular faith tradition—call it “thin”—but a “thick” desire for clarity and community. Those from the Catholic tradition seem to be young and conservative, with little education in the faith, but strongly influenced by World Youth Days and the charismatic presence of Pope John Paul II.

Fourth, we used to identify one ongoing tension as the distinction of spiritual direction from counseling and therapy. Now, a distinction needs to be drawn between spiritual direction and life-coaching. Spiritual direction is distinct from the other forms of interaction because its focus is the mystery of God in one’s life, and one’s faith experience.

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Fifth, participants today, in contrast to past years, struggle with the traditional concept of discernment, and the practice of discerning the movement of the good Spirit and effect of the evil spirit. Today’s students speak of spontaneity, serendipity and synchronicity. In addition, our post-modern culture tends to relativize rather than differentiate human experience, suggested in phrases such as “whatever,” “all is good,” “anything goes,” and “whatever you think.”

Sixth, I note some cultural differences around relationships among students who come from various countries. Some place a high value on elders, and are attentive to their aged and dying members. Some participants come from cultures which treat children with abusive discipline. Some come from communities with close ties to neighbors. Some cultures are compatible with a feminine image of God, and some are tolerant of world religions. The point is that cultural experiences have an influence on a participant’s image of God, relationship with God, and practice of prayer, so the art of spiritual direction cannot be taught apart from consciousness of where students are coming from.

Seventh, the discourse around sexual identity has become over the years more significant in the training of spiritual directors. There are issues of homosexual, bisexual and transgendered identity. Directors must anticipate dealing with spiritual seekers who are affected by sex and pornography on the internet, and by a quest for a spiritual life undertaken amidst a hook-up, promiscuous culture.

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Training for spiritual directors must include a dialogue with recovery programs and continuing education around the impact of societal stress on people today. Stress shows up in various forms of addiction-- to alcohol, sex, drugs, computer activity, and work. Food disorders are another signal of society’s pressures.

Some seekers of spiritual direction struggle with learning disabilities yet desire to make progress in their relationship with God. There are many kinds of disabilities in cognitive thinking and some are related to prior experiences of relational or sexual abuse. Some problems arise because of homelessness.

The program at Regis College seeks to address these shifts in the experience of persons who enroll in our program, as well as anticipate the life-situation of those who will be seeking spiritual direction. We recognize the importance of providing continuing theological education for directors after they have completed their initial program, addressing the impact of different cultural contexts on participants, and emphasizing the value that each director be engaged in supervision.

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Racism: Viewing the Video “Sisters of Selma: Bearing Witness for Change”

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

At the annual meeting of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, we try to engage in theological reflection on current issues. The 2005 Chapter re-focused members' attention on the social problem of racism, and there was acknowledgement that the Institute had yet to take firm steps to address this issue as an internal dynamic that is different from multi-culturalism. Theologians at MAST had the opportunity to view a video compiled in 2007 from documentary footage of the civil rights movement in the 1960's, which featured nuns in habits joining the public protests over racial segregation. The video, originally aired on PBS, was available for purchase on the internet. It focused on the participation of Catholic Sisters in the civil rights march to Selma, Alabama, to demand that voting rights be extended to Blacks in fact, as federal law already provided on the books. Between sections of documentary footage were interviews with some of the same sisters today, forty years later.

After we viewed the video, we considered several questions:

1. Countering Racism at the Local Level:

The march in Selma concerned the right of blacks to exercise their right to vote in the South, on the books for decades, but in fact denied blacks by local requirements of being interviewed and passing a civics exam. In countering racism, is it more effective if the action is taken at the local level to reverse a particular form of discrimination?

2. Effect of Vatican II: What was the effect of Vatican II on the Sisters of Mercy in your own region? As you experienced that effect? Did going out of the habit have as one result getting you into civil rights?

3. Anecdotal History of Treatment of Minority Groups:

What are your memories of the treatment of a) persons of ethnicity in community-sponsored schools and hospitals; b) the treatment of Sisters of ethnicity in your early years in the community? Did this differ by region of the country?

4. Racial Justice and Human Rights: What were the motives for whites to put themselves at physical risk at Selma? What did the marchers feel were the human rights at stake, and their own rights and principles, even if they were white?

5. Role of Bishops: What effect did the conflicting directives of bishops have on Sisters' engagement in the civil rights movement? Do present social justice concerns involve the same or different questions than the civil rights movement of the 1960's?

The discussion which followed the video tended to focus on the third question, about the racial tension at the regional level that Sisters themselves were aware of, even if they hadn't been involved in the Selma march or the civil rights movement in the South. Some of those reflections are summarized here.

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

There still is segregation. Here, as elsewhere, in the Louisville archdiocese, we have a priest shortage and are consequently having to close parishes. Still, there are seven “black” parishes in the archdiocese. One of these parishes is only a few blocks from the parish where I work. Yet no African Americans ever come to my parish. They have told me there are too many painful memories connected with it; for example, having to sit in a section in the back of the church that the

parishioners dubbed "the bull pen" or being told to come to communion last.

A more subtle, but common form of racism is the habit of seeing or describing persons who are African Americans at first by their color. For example, "Oh, look, there's a black," or "There was a black librarian at the desk." The first characteristic of the person noticed is their color if it is black. This same criterion is not applied in describing a white person.

Collaboration among four parishes in the area has been tried, but with little success. The parishioners from the black parish had said that the whites did not understand their way of doing things. White parishioners of the other parishes said among themselves, "They can't keep a schedule. We invite them. We try to have a mission for four parishes, but the blacks don't want to come to ours."

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Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

It's easy to think of those experiences as in the South. In California, racism is alive but often takes a different form. I remember when an African American couple wanted to open a gathering place for kids to dance and congregate. It was going to be near a Catholic high school. The city leaders became concerned and mounted a campaign to deny a permit to the family. It was the stereotype of African America kids and drugs or violence that did it.

When I was principal of a high school, the more multi-cultural it became, the more white flight we ex-

perienced. In eight years, it went from 70% Caucasian, to just the reverse. Some parents' underlying belief was that with minorities you couldn't have academic excellence. One long- resident family told me. "We aren't going to send our youngest daughter to you. You have too many of "those" people." It didn't matter what curriculum we had. It was racism, even if not identified as such.

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Patricia Talone, R.S.M.

Wearing the habit, even the "modernized" habit, we were so visible. I made final vows in 1968, ten days after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. That June, just weeks after Robert Kennedy's assassination, I went to North Carolina for the summer to work in a rural parish. My experience with "activism," such as it was, had consisted of demonstrating against the war in Vietnam. Looking back, I realize I was quite naive.

I spent ten weeks in Newton Grove, North Carolina, teaching bible-study, taking the parish census, and visiting the sick and elderly in the parish. The parish we worked in had been de-segregated by the bishop of Raleigh in 1965. Prior to that, there had been a white church and a black church. After the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the bishop had me come to the parish to close the black church and to welcome everyone into the larger of the two churches. At that time, some persons, not parishioners, gathered and hurled eggs and curses at him. Three years later, there still was tension. We sisters had to decide where to sit our first Sunday in the parish, so we split up and sat all over. I chose to sit on

the left-hand side in the side pews. It was not until lunch, when the pastor commended me, that I realized I was sitting in the black section. I hadn't even noticed.

On the July 4th weekend, all of us went to the beach for an outing. It seems silly now, for we spent the day in bathing suits, but put the habit on to drive back home. Because it was late, and we were tired, I went to get a coke from the machine for the driver. Before I had gotten the second coke, he shouted to me, "Get in the car, right now!" Another car, a sedan, had driven into the service station and pulled up parallel to our car. As I jumped into the back seat of our car, I saw four men in the sedan—three men with white hoods. The barrel of a rifle was pointed in our direction. We threw a twenty-dollar bill at the owner of the store, didn't wait for change, and took off. The sedan followed us to the end of the county line. Leaving the county, we saw a sign, "You are just leaving Klan country." When we got back, the pastor, who had traveled in a separate car, was absolutely beside himself. He was convinced we could have been killed.

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Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

This film reminded me of comparable things that happened in Richmond, Virginia. The black Catholic church was asked to close for the sake of integration. Most of the young people would not go into the white churches, while the older generation went to the back pews of the white churches. Many in the next generation of young Catholic blacks were lost. However, as they became new parents they remembered, with affection, the Church and school where they grew up.

They wanted their children to have a similar experience. As young parents, they moved from being unchurched to becoming active members of our parish, a changing ethnic community. In the Catholic school of this parish, where I was principal, the community demographic changed over five years from 10% black to 90% black. Some of this increase was due to the desire of unchurched young Catholic parents to have their children baptized and attend a Catholic school -- similar to their own childhood memories. It was also due to the welcoming parish church where unchurched parents and students were invited to participate in the RCIA. It was helpful that they were then able to send children to school with Catholic tuition.

As this racial change was happening, an economic reality was also happening. The school was becoming less able to afford costs of programs and salaries for teachers. Although I worked very hard over the years to keep the school open in a declining neighborhood, the year after I left, the school was closed and merged with a Catholic school in a more affluent area.

Many points were the same then as in the film, but we were in modified habits at that time.

It also reminds me of the time during these years that the FBI came to our Motherhouse after a few of our sisters were pictured in the local newspaper protesting the Vietnam War. Oral history has it that the FBI expected these sisters to be turned over to them but to their surprise, they were told to spend their time on more serious criminal concerns and invited to leave and not to return again. It was noted that when they left the Motherhouse, they were like 8th grade boys leaving the principal's office. However, the following year, two of these sisters were sent out of state and asked to keep their pictures out of the papers if they chose to protest.

Conclusion

Anecdotal accounts from Mercies in different parts of the country indicate that racial discrimination is not confined to the South, and wasn't eradicated by the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the bus ride of Rosa Parks, or the success in registering African Americans to vote. Nor is racism reversed by continuing efforts of Sisters to be inclusive of racial mi-

norities in their ministries. Addressing continued forms of racism in society and church remains essential to the commitment of the Sisters of Mercy, as we identified one of our critical concerns at the 2005 Chapter: To deepen our response to the unrecognized and unreconciled racism past and present within our communities.

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GARDENIA

It was inspiring

We breathed in and out
slowing the pace
to match yours
in those final hours

One stroked your arm
suspecting that touch
had already crossed over
so it was really for us

Another massaged the shoulder
that had so recently
born a heavier cross
than anyone perceived

We sang a hymn
then walked away
each carrying our own
small piece of you

Later when we remembered
and shared the stories
putting the pieces back together
we were filled with awe

Patricia Ryan, R.S.M.
July, 2006

THE MAST JOURNAL, begun in 1990, is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Sisters Eloise Rosenblatt, Editor (West Midwest), Marilee Howard, Managing Editor (West Midwest), Patricia Talone (Mid-Atlantic), Marilyn King (West Midwest), Aline Paris (Northeast), Kathleen McAlpin (Mid-Atlantic), Marie Michele Donnelly (Mid-Atlantic), and Sharon Kerrigan (West Midwest).

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Manuscript submissions to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., at 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129, e-mail eloros@sbcglobal.net.

Layout and printing by St. Joseph's Press, La Grange Park, Illinois 60526 Phone 708.579.8935 e-mail sjp@csjlagrange.org



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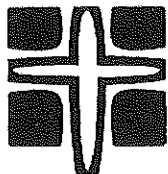
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