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# *The* **MAST** *Journal*

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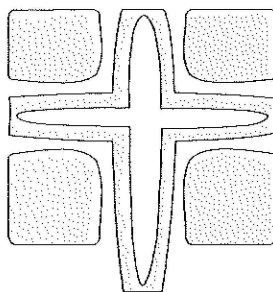
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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

Two ecclesial events inspired this issue on Reading the Scriptures. First, the Church concluded the Year of St. Paul. Second, the Apostolic Visitation, generally themed as a concern about the "quality of life" of women religious, proposed a questionnaire that asked us what kind of spirituality lies at the heart of our post-Vatican II adaptation of religious life. A short answer to this concern would be, "The same spirituality that grounded Mercy prayer life before Vatican II."

An essay by Mary Daly, R.S.M., slightly edited from the one originally published in an internal congregational anthology in 1980, shows that Mercy spirituality, based on scripture, is rooted in Catherine McAuley's instruction to her congregation in "The Spirit of the Institute." As Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., has shown in her careful scholarship through documentary comparison, Catherine didn't compose the original text on which "Spirit" is based, but adapted an earlier composition by Alonso Rodriguez which suited her concern to ground her spirituality in God's Word. Even in light of what we now know of the source text, Mary Daly's essay still demonstrates that Catherine's emphasis on reading Scripture was, from the beginning, the basis for her teaching. Her Sisters' personal spiritual advancement was inseparable from their service to those in need.

In light of the Year of St. Paul, some writers focused on Pauline theology. Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M., presents what has become standard exegetical treatment of Paul's understanding of baptism in his Letter to the Galatians, and of women's leadership in his Letter to Romans. The scholars cited in her end-notes represent mainstream Catholic scholarship which affirms that women were not silent partners in redemption, but visible, recognizable and memorable pastoral leaders. Does this mean they exercised liturgical leadership that mirrored our 21<sup>st</sup> century ministries flowing from the sacrament of ordination as conferred presently only on men? Whatever the reading of historical documents, there seems to be a tension between liturgical function in the early church, which seems to have included women, and present sacramental discipline.

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M., focuses on women's liturgical leadership in the Corinthian church. Some evangelical and fundamentalist pastors appeal to Paul for a supposedly historical precedent that he said women should not interpret the scriptures, and should not preach or speak publicly in liturgical celebrations. However, the best Catholic scholarship about citations to Paul's banning of women in Corinthians is that these passages are later interpolations of pastors a generation after Paul, trying to justify their own "push-back" practices against women in their congregations. Paul's preoccupation with women's dress code, i.e. to be veiled or not, is probably one instance of Paul getting involved in a no-win social dispute at Corinth.

Judith Schubert, R.S.M., conscious of the courage it takes to deal with official Church inquiries, proposes two women from John's gospel as models for women religious. The courageous initiative of Mary at Cana to supply what was needed for the wedding celebration and Martha's bold expression of faith in Jesus' power over life and death inspire in us a spirituality that has vigor and confidence. In a similar spirit, Mary Criscione, R.S.M., calls attention to faith in Mark's gospel, not as a set of beliefs about Jesus' power to do miracles for needy patients, but as initiative-taking in the interest of one's own healing. It's an attractive image of faith as an exchange of healing energies—the desire to be healed is met by Jesus' will to intervene.

Janet Rozzano, R.S.M., gave reflections at a Jubilee celebration that shows the close integration of reading the scriptures and the spirituality of active women religious. Who has not felt like Elijah in the midst of ministry, stranded and in need of God's help to survive? The practice of having a Sister offer the homily for the jubilees and funerals of community members reflects the spirit of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal, which emphasizes the participation of the laity and the worshipping congregation in the celebration of the Eucharist. The GIRM, even while assigning the homily at the parish Mass to the ordained priest or deacon, encourages the baptized to step into other liturgical roles to welcome the community, comment on the readings, compose and deliver the offertory petitions, and, as an option, to lead the post-communion meditation.

Thanks to editorial board members Marilee Howard and Marilyn King for reviewing this issue.

Yours,

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



# **Searching for God in Scripture<sup>1</sup>**

*Mary Daly. R.S.M.*

As the traveler paused to rest at the gate of the city, he turned to the gatekeeper and asked, "What kind of city is this? What kind of people live here?" "What did you find where you lived before? How were the people of that town?" the gatekeeper asked in turn. The traveler replied, "They were a contentious lot, always quarrelling and bickering." "Ah," said the gatekeeper, "Such are the people of this town. You will find no better here." Disappointed, the traveler continued on his way even as another stranger approached and took his place. The newcomer also addressed the gatekeeper, "How is your city? Are its inhabitants good people?" And again came the gatekeeper's question: "What did you find where you lived before? How were the inhabitants of that town?" The newcomer gave an answer. "They were a good people with generous and compassionate spirit." "Welcome," replied the gatekeeper, "Such are the people of this town. You will find the same kind here."

As Sisters of Mercy we come to the scriptures searching for God. The tale of the gatekeeper reminds us that we have already met God and that the first encounter affects our subsequent ability to recognize the presence of divinity. In these reflections, I propose that this was the experience of Catherine McAuley in her search for God in scripture, and that her approach to scripture can enrich and deepen our growth in the mystery of God.

## **Catherine McAuley's Principles for Reading Scripture**

Catherine's approach to scripture can be seen in a consideration of the instructions that she used to reflect in a document called "The Spirit of the Institute." In this instruction, Catherine appropriated a treatise by Alonso Rodriguez, S.J.<sup>2</sup> Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., has shown in her research both Catherine's reliance on Rodriguez and her own alteration of his text.<sup>3</sup> Although Catherine is not the author of the treatise "The Spirit of the Institute," it was a text that she found suited to her purpose to express the true spirit of Mercy. In

looking at it we can see what principles she was comfortable with in her reading of Scripture.

The first principle that emerges and that seems to be in harmony with the rest of her life and writings is that Scripture was addressing a practical situation. Her reflection arose in response to the Bermondsey community and its attempt to establish a contemplative form of Mercy life. She is not writing to address a devotional or academic reading of Scripture. The situation in Bermondsey forced Catherine to reflect on her original call in founding the Order of Mercy.

Catherine's call to service operates as a second principle in approaching Scripture. In her search for God, Catherine brings a long history of

The Lord who has already come  
to us, continues to speak from  
the pages of scripture and we  
recognize the familiarity of  
God's face even as God leads us  
to new aspects of the divine.

contact with suffering people. She brings the memory of her father's compassion and care for the poor. She brings the experience and conviction of her own call. Her struggle in finding the proper institutionalization of that call undoubtedly brought her further conviction and clarification. In facing this new challenge from one of her foundations, she does not recognize in the Bermondsey situation the God who has called her to found the Institute of Mercy. The reflection on scripture which she found in Rodriguez supports her understanding. As God entered her life, so she reflected on God's Word and recognized there the God who had first spoken to her.

## **Catherine's Use of Scripture Citations**

Using these two focal points, the practical problem she faced and the conviction of her own call, let us look at this document and see how Catherine searched for and recognized God speaking through Scripture. Then we shall consider the possibilities for our own search.

The document begins by recalling the twofold end of the Order of Mercy: "To devote ourselves to the accomplishment of our own salvation and to promote the salvation of others." Her contention throughout these instructions is that we cannot do one without the other. In clarifying how we ought to accomplish our own salvation Scripture is cited several times:

Attend to thyself. Recover thy neighbor according to thy power and take heed to thyself that thou fall not. What would it profit to gain the whole world and lose our own souls? (Mk 8:36)

For her, Scripture lays a foundation and is in agreement with the Bermondsey Superior's concern that the spiritual growth of the Sisters and their union with God is of prime importance. She differs, however, when the Sisters separate their spiritual growth from their service to others. Her interpretation of a verse from the psalms indicates this:

We might often repeat the words of the Psalmist saying: "Teach me goodness, discipline and knowledge." (cf. Ps. 119:66) Goodness first as particularly necessary to incline our hearts to pity for our suffering brethren, discipline next, that we may so regulate our time and actions as to serve them with zeal and prudence: and knowledge, that we may impart such instructions as will lead them to God, and keep ourselves faithful in our duty. There is no charity, says the wise man, like to this: "Take pity on thy own soul, by rendering it pleasing to God."<sup>4</sup>

Catherine could understand the words of the psalm as addressed to her Sisters and having meaning for them from the perspective of God's call to this Institute. This line of reasoning becomes more pronounced toward the end of the short treatise. Integration of service to others with growth in the "accomplishment of our own salvation" continues. The treatise uses scripture to guide her in clarifying her insights. She

acknowledges with Paul that "we go into the middle of a perverse world." (Phil 2:15)

To protect her Sisters against this perversity Catherine recalls the spiritual exercises recommended by the Rule. Scripture, as interpreted by Albert the Great, verifies her conviction that prayer will bring both knowledge of God and his grace to accompany us on our way. Catherine also cites St. John Chrysostom for an understanding of Romans: "I desire to be separated from Jesus Christ for the sake of my brethren." (Ro. 9:3) All the Doctors of the Church agree, she says, that the passage means this: and render them more valuable in His holy service."<sup>5</sup>

Catherine's immediate conclusion is that as much as her Sisters should love prayer it should never withdraw them from the works of mercy. Rather prayer should enkindle them with enthusiasm for service.

The integration of service of others and growth in the spiritual life is further expressed in a rather free combination of texts from Philippians and 2 Timothy: "You (the poor) are my joy and my crown because through you we draw down on ourselves the mercy and grace of our Lord." (Phil. 4:1 and cf. 2 Tim. 1: 1-2.) Catherine's immediate conclusion is that as much as her Sisters should love prayer it should never withdraw them from the works of mercy. Rather prayer should enkindle them with enthusiasm for service. Thus, the spiritual life is deepened by an interaction between prayer and the service of the poor and distressed. Although she does not cite the end-time parable and the King's words of welcome to those who care for the poor, how at home Catherine was with the service done to the needy in Matthew 25:31-46.

Confidence in her call is expressed in seeing the Order of Mercy as a work of God. "The works of God are all perfect," she says, referring to the Order. (cf. Ps 111:2-3). If God calls someone to the Institute of Mercy, she will have the grace to

meet the attending difficulties, Catherine asserts. The text exhorts the Sisters to confidence in their call through a weaving together of Scriptural insights showing that all our working is brought to nothing without reliance on God. Catherine cites the vain attempt of some of the people at the time of the Maccabees: "Let us also make for ourselves a name."<sup>6</sup> They could not do so because they were not called by God to accomplish this end. Regarding their call, Catherine considers that God, speaking in scripture, addresses her Sisters:

Fear nothing, it is I who have called you, take courage, and be of resolution. Though I should have to walk in the midst of the shades of night, I will fear nothing because thou art with me. (Ps. 23:4)

### **Being Useful and Pursuing Salvation**

Catherine elaborates on a topic which seems to end abruptly, but without bringing it to a recognizable conclusion. In this short section, biblical passages indicate a couple of other key themes in harmony with her approach to scripture. "Jesus Christ began to do and to teach" (cf. Mk 6:6) and "Be ye imitators of Me, as I am of Jesus Christ," (I Cor. 11:1). For Catherine, even the imitation of Christ is a manner of serving our neighbor. She sees a harmony between rendering ourselves useful to others while advancing our own salvation. By growing in the likeness of Christ we exhort others to follow our example and we give substance to our words of instruction. "It was for this reason that our Blessed Savior marked the way to Heaven by His example."

Thus, we have in this document an approach to scripture which Catherine found compatible with her thought, where she was able to give expression to how she understood her vocation. In seeking to solve a practical problem, Catherine relied on more than her own insight. She sought guidance for her thinking in the writing of Alonso Rodriguez and his approach to scripture. She was grounded in her previous experience of God's call to serve the poor, sick and ignorant, and to institutionalize that service in the Order of Mercy. This spiritual history served as a reference point leading her to focus on certain passages of scripture, and to an understanding of the continuing action of God to which she was trying

to respond. As she felt her own call, she could not recognize that God was calling her Sisters to a purely contemplative life if that would withdrew them from service to those in need.

Catherine approached scripture in a deeply personal way. She did not have available to her the critical tools of biblical scholarship that we have today. The traditional interpretation of the Church and her own experience of God's call were foundational for her reading of scripture. Her call seemed validated in the Church's approval of her Institute. She thus saw the Order as a work of the Lord.

### **Application Today**

As daughters of Catherine McAuley our own approach to scripture can be enriched by hers. Modern scripture studies have opened up new approaches to the biblical message, and have moved us away from the style of using scriptural passages that was familiar to Catherine. Nevertheless, our heritage in Mercy gives us several areas of continuity with Catherine in our search for God in scripture.

She urged her Sisters to follow Christ's example of living a holy life. She laid before us, then, the search to find who Christ is and how his Spirit leads us into his life and work.

Here, we can pay attention to what was most characteristic in Catherine McAuley's approach to ministry. Her charism is a very practical one, ordered to direct service in relieving the distress of others. It was not her concern to provide a

Her (Catherine's) experience of  
God and her understanding of  
how God was leading her were  
being developed by an  
awareness of what the people  
around her needed.

theoretical understanding of ministry. It is from this practical perspective that Catherine read both spiritual authors of her day and scripture. Thus, the "goodness, discipline, knowledge" sought by the Psalmist are understood, in Catherine's view,

that the Sister of Mercy may serve others. Catherine's life gave meaning to the text even as the psalm opened up her life to God's action. For her there were not two worlds, one of the inner spiritual life nourished by scripture and the grace of God, and another, a world of service that flowed out from that life. Rather, the world of Catherine was one reality where she touched God in others and saw this reflected on the pages of scripture. An inner spiritual life with God was found precisely in the service of his poor and afflicted.

... if one is standing with the  
poor and downtrodden another  
message can be heard in  
Scripture. There, holiness is  
found in bringing about a just  
society. God is touched in the  
hungry, homeless stranger to  
whom one ministers.

As Catherine hears the message of Scripture out of her existential situation, so might we search its pages in the same manner. Standing in solidarity with "His most dear poor, to whom He is Father," we search Scripture for a clearer glimpse of the One we serve. We find differing and sometimes opposing pictures in Scripture. Some texts present the goodness and beauty of creation, the blessing of being among those called together by God to form God's people, the wisdom of civil and religious leaders. Our call as Sisters of Mercy challenges us to hear that message of Christ in scripture which may be uncomfortable for ourselves and for others. It challenges us to speak the truth in charity, to exercise a leadership in service to the oppressed because we see in them the face of Christ.

Our call to Mercy challenges us to an understanding of the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) that resonates in our lives. Mary's confidence in the

action of God in her and in the oppressed becomes our confidence that indeed God's promise is kept. Our service is our entry into this mystery of God's promise keeping.

Catherine would be at home with those aspects of liberation theology which stress orthopraxis and foster theological reflection that starts with experience. As she leads us to plumb the pages of scripture to find a deeper understanding of God's mercy, she challenges us to communicate that discovery as a message to the poor, the sick and the ignorant. The gift of our founder to us is her perception of where we should stand when we search for God in scripture, and how we are to let its message resonate in our lives.

When Catherine came to Scripture seeking the Lord, the gatekeeper asked her, "How have you found him until now?" "Among the poor and afflicted," she replied, "I found God there helping and healing them." "Come," said the gatekeeper "You will find in the Scriptures the same God speaking."



## NOTES

1. Editor's Note: This is a slight revision of an article by Mary Daly, R.S.M., which originally appeared in a collection of essays called *Sisters of Mercy... Seeking God*, compiled by Emily George, R.S.M. for the Frances Warde Study Center, June, 1980. A copy of these collected essays was forwarded to me from the Detroit Archives by Maureen McGarrigle, R.S.M.
2. Catherine's finished text is printed in Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M., ed., *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon, 1969), pp. 385-391.
3. The relationship to Alonso Rodriguez is treated in Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., "Catherine McAuley's Theological and Literary Debt to Alonso Rodriguez: The 'Spirit of the Institute' Parallels," *Journal of Recusant History* 20, (May 1990).
4. Neumann, p. 386.
5. Neumann, p. 387.
6. Editor's Note: Scripture reference unknown.

# Faith as Audacious Action

Mary Criscione, RSM

For many people today, the word “faith” means what one believes, a matter of intellectual assent or emotional claim. In the Gospel of Mark, however, “faith” is not primarily about thinking or feeling, but rather about action, and bold action at that. The friends of the paralytic, the woman with the flow of blood, the blind man Bartimaeus—all these characters demonstrate the audacious caliber of “faith” in Mark’s Gospel. Far from passive reliance or blind trust, faith in this Gospel means taking bold action, against obstacles, to wrest healing and wholeness with creative brio.

In the story of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12), the companions of the paralyzed man do not let the great crowd surrounding Jesus deter them from gaining healing for their friend. Rather than simply going away, or waiting until some following day, or making an appointment to see Jesus later at his convenience, the four mat-bearers take matters into their own hands. “They removed the roof above Jesus, and having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay” (Mk 2:4). What does Jesus see in their impertinent, outrageous intrusion? He sees faith. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (Mk 2:5).

A similar pattern can be seen in the episode of the woman with the flow of blood (Mk 5:24-34), whose twelve-year history of defeat is noted. Not only does a crowd stand between her and Jesus, but so too does the obstacle of the purity code which rendered her “unclean” and ritually contaminating (Lev 15:25-30). Undaunted by both crowd and code, the woman takes the initiative and effects her own healing from Jesus without his prior knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Upon hearing the “whole truth” from her, Jesus again recognizes as “faith” her bold reasoning and initiative, “Daughter, your faith has made you well” (Mk 5:34). The creative audacity by both the mat-bearers and the woman initiates a pattern for others to follow later in the Gospel, as more bring

their sick on mats to Jesus and others aim to touch the healing fringe of his garment (Mk 6:55-56).

Bartimaeus’ story carries forward the notion of faith as creative, persistent nerve in the face of obstacles. Again, a crowd surrounds Jesus with daunting impenetrability. But refusing to be intimidated by this situation, the blind man instead yells out all the louder in response to the commands to keep quiet (Mk 10:46-48). Jesus’ response to him echoes the earlier recognition of the woman’s action: “Your faith has made you well” (10:52). Then a now-seeing Bartimaeus, “follows Jesus on the way,” Mark’s language for genuine discipleship. In contrast to the disciples who are still blind with ambition (10:35-45) and who will fail in nerve (14:50), Bartimaeus wins not only sight but insight by virtue of his courage—to demand, to see, and to follow.

These situations of facing down impossible odds are tied in with Mark’s understanding of divine power. “All things are possible for the one who has faith” (9:23) just as. “All things are possible with God.” (10:27) Faith’s verve accesses divine dynamism. Rather than following miracles, faith makes miracles happen. Digging through a roof, making way through one’s painful history and through a daunting crowd, shouting the louder as one is told to be silent—such resilience and resistance define the meaning of faith in this Gospel: the active collusion of grit and grace. Spirited audacity conspires with God’s liberating power to make a way out of no way.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES



1. Note Matthew’s revision of Mark here: in Matthew’s telling of the story, Jesus’ prescient control is highlighted, and the woman is not healed until Jesus says so (Matthew 9:20-22).
2. “Making a way where there is no way” was first coined by the womanist theologian Dolores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993): 193.

# **“Baptised into Christ”-- From Paul to Women Today<sup>1</sup>**

*Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M*

## **Introduction**

Approximately 2000 years ago the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:27-28)<sup>2</sup>

We have just finished the Year of St.Paul.<sup>3</sup> Our prophetic task is clear. It is more urgent than ever. As Catholic women we must persist in calling for ecclesial reform so that we can participate as fully in the Church as in the Pauline communities.<sup>4</sup> This task means, above all, changing the imagination of those in the Church

...we need to be alert to the signs of the Spirit, bringing newness, bringing hope, bringing a new vision here among us. Theologically, of course, the only way the Spirit can act to bring about newness is through human agency, and that means through you and me.

who have the power to stop the continuing exclusion and oppression of women caused by what I see as sinful, discriminatory structures and practices. I am arguing, in other words, that our baptism must be taken seriously, as seriously as Paul took it.

Paul reminds us today, as he reminded the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:2), that we are holy because God dwells in us through the Spirit bestowed on us in our baptism. He asks rhetorically, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16).

The Spirit can effect more that we can ever hope or imagine. As theologian Richard Lennan observes:

Although the Spirit will never invalidate what have been life-giving and authentic ‘channels

of grace’ in the past – God is not arbitrary – not every such channel is efficacious in all ages of the church; the Spirit can open new paths for the church’s faithful discipleship in the present and future: the continuity of tradition, therefore, can express itself in discontinuity.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage. (*Gaudium et Spes* § 44)

As I understand it, the Church teaches today what it hasn’t always taught, namely, that women are fully and equally made in the image of God. The church still has problems with whether or not women can image Christ. At my baptism--which called me into the Church not out of it-- I was anointed to be priest, prophet and king in the same way as all other Christians. I became a new creation, baptised into Christ.

## **Glimmers of Hope**

There are some positive signs even in discouraging times. And as the author of 1 Peter advises, “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you” (3:15).

Here are four hopeful signs:

1. When asked about the place of women in the Church, Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, said that women:  
...will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to stand in their way but, on the contrary, to rejoice when the female element achieves the fully effective place in the Church best suited to her...<sup>6</sup>
2. At the Synod in Rome of October 2008 on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” for the first time, there were more women than men among the official

"observers."<sup>7</sup> At the end of the Synod the 253 members (all bishops and leaders of men's religious orders) submitted 55 overwhelmingly approved proposals on which the Pope could base his follow-up document. The most controversial proposal was #17. Here the bishops suggested that "the ministry of lector be opened also to women so that their role as announcers of the Word may be recognised in the Christian community." Why is this so significant? Don't women already read at Mass? Yes, we do and have done since Vatican II. That is, we are allowed to perform the "function" of reader at Mass, but officially this is only a temporary measure; we cannot be *ministers* of the Word in the same way that men can.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not the Pope grants the bishops' request doesn't really matter. What is important is to recognise the monumental shift in the institutionally male imagination and the willingness by the present bishops to listen to a request for a change in the status of women.

3. In his homily during the Mass in Dublin in May 2006 to celebrate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mercy by Catherine McAuley, the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said:

You are called to re-imagine her vision in our time, to re-evaluate structures and to reconfigure yourselves in light of changing realities. Through being authentic towards her charism, you are called to change and purify the Church in our time.

4. That the Pope set in motion a whole year honouring Paul provided the Bishops throughout the world an opportunity to get to know the Apostle of the Gentiles in whose churches women played prominent roles. Paul proclaimed that we all have equal dignity before God through our baptism in Christ. As New Testament scholar Ronald Witherup observes, the real challenge is to apply the remarkable vision set forth in Galatians 3:27-28 to the Church today:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free

person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So what then does this extraordinary text mean? What might it say to us today?<sup>9</sup>

## Male and Female

New Testament scholar Carolyn Osiek points out that there are at least five different ways of interpreting these exceedingly difficult verses.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have pointed out the close link between baptism and Eucharist in the early church's theology.<sup>11</sup> One way is to understand the passage as a baptismal formula for new Christians. Because I am trying to argue for our baptism to be taken seriously, this is the interpretation I shall explore.

We need to begin with the first creation account in Genesis: "So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them" (Gen 1:27). The "male *and* female" that Paul cites in Galatians probably reflects the Genesis verse. Frank Matera also comments on the use of "and" in this pairing.<sup>12</sup> In Paul's day the creation

(Paul's) statement is about equality through Christ in God's plan of salvation. They all have equal standing in the Christian community.

narrative was understood to be a metaphor for the makeup of the human person. In that metaphor, the dividing of human being into two genders signalled the start of the internal separation of the person into rationality (symbolised by the male principle) and sensation (symbolised by the female principle). As a result, conflict would soon follow, which is what happens in the Genesis account. When Paul uses the phrase "male and female" it is in the light of this understanding of the human condition. The baptismal formula he quotes suggests that division and conflict in human nature can be overcome through baptism.

So where does that leave us? Does this mean then that sexism and all forms of discrimination are therefore ended? However, some would argue that other passages in Paul suggest that he does indeed sanction inequalities among Christians. For example, passages problematically attributed to Paul say that women should keep silent in the churches and be subordinate (1Cor 11:2-16, 14:34-36), indicate that Paul did not intend to abolish gender roles between men and women.<sup>13</sup> Nor did he intend to abolish slavery – those who were slaves when they were called to Christ should stay that way (1Cor 7: 21); and the Gentiles would always be a wild olive branch grafted onto the tree of Israel (Rom 11:24).

But as Raymond Brown points out, Paul is working out of an apocalyptic mindset.<sup>14</sup> For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus meant that all were now living in the endtime. There was little time to change present social structures. So Galatians 3:28 is not primarily a statement about social and political equality. Legally and socially, Jews and Greek, slave and free remain what they are. Rather, the statement is about equality through Christ in God's plan of salvation. They all have equal standing in the Christian community.

Paul says that the Galatians have entered into a new form of life, a life in Christ through baptism. Men and women symbolised this by putting on a white robe during the baptismal ceremony; hence Paul's reference to putting on Christ. "As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Gal. 3:27). Paul's idea of baptism means being clothed in Christ.

In Paul's society, where male was the norm and consequently a woman enjoyed privileges only through her connection to an adult male, this was a radically new departure. Baptism erased the privilege that came with gender. Men and women are equal members because they share in Christ

Baptism is the moment when Christ, like a garment, envelops the believer. The robe is an outward sign of inner transformation. Racial, class and gender discriminations have been erased because social distinctions have been reinterpreted so that they do not benefit some while disadvantaging others.

through the same baptism. Paul is saying that it is Christ who has restored the original purpose of creation-- to make humankind in God's own image, male and female. In Christ people are re-created. Christ has established a totally new reality.

So what did this mean in practice for Paul? Throughout this paper I have been arguing that our baptism needs to be taken seriously. How did women in the early Christian communities actually live out their baptism?

## Paul and Baptised Women

As Jerome Murphy O'Connor points out, Paul took it for granted that women were ministers of the church in the same way as men were.<sup>15</sup> He recognised the diverse gifts of both women and men as fruits of the Spirit:

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

We find evidence of what the women in the early Christian communities do by virtue of their baptism at the end of arguably the most important New Testament document outside the gospels, the letter to the Romans:

I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet **Prisca** and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all

the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet **Mary**, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and **Junia**, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, **Tryphaena** and **Tryphosa**. Greet the beloved **Persis**, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his **mother**—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, **Julia**, Nereus and his **sister**, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Rom 16:1-16)

### Phoebe the Deaconess

Here Paul lists twenty-six individuals, including ten women. As Brendan Byrne observes, these women bear more than half of the descriptive phrases denoting service and labour on behalf of the community and the Gospel.<sup>16</sup> Rather than examining all ten women I will describe the first two only, Phoebe and Prisca.

Phoebe is of particular significance.<sup>17</sup> As a deacon (*diakonos*) of the Church at Cenchreae in eastern Corinth she is one of the most prominent women in the early church.<sup>18</sup> She heads the list of co-workers to be welcomed and greeted by the Church in Rome to which she is being sent as an official minister, one who preaches and teaches. Paul uses the same word (*diakonos*) to describe himself (1 Cor 3:5, 2 Cor 6:4). Paul also acknowledges that Phoebe has been a *prostati* (benefactor or patron) of many, including himself (Rom 16:2). This meant that she used her resources to support the missionary work of Paul and others, perhaps paying their expenses and ensuring connections were made to other wealthy patrons. It also meant that she was able to direct operations — choosing where missionaries were to

go and what points they were to include in their message.

As a patron, her house would have been available for the community's Eucharistic celebrations and she probably presided over them.<sup>19</sup> Paul also calls Phoebe "our sister" (*adelphē*). He frequently uses the masculine equivalent of the term, i.e., "brother" when referring to Timothy, his very important missionary collaborator (cf Phlm 1; 2 Cor 1:1; and 1 Thess 3:2). Thus it is a title that bestows much respect. Phoebe's importance is also borne out by the fact that Paul recommends her to the Romans (Rom 6:2) in the same way as he recommends Timothy to the Corinthians (1 Cor 16:10). Osiek, MacDonald and Tulloch argue that it is likely that "Paul is not just commending Phoebe to a new group but is participating in some greater plan, which may have been instigated not by Paul but by Phoebe."<sup>20</sup>

### Prisca the House-Church Leader

Another prominent woman is Prisca who, like her husband Aquila, is a co-worker (*synergos*) (Rom 16:3). Paul is grateful to the missionary couple because they have risked their lives for him. In fact all the Gentile churches are grateful. Her high esteem is indicated by the fact she is

Women were able to participate fully in the early Christian communities. Decision-making did not require ordination. ... our Catholic tradition gives us the mandate to seek reform.

named first in four of the six times the couple is mentioned in Acts and the Pauline letters. Like Paul, the couple are tent-makers and would have used these skills to support their missionary activity. In Ephesus they instructed the great missionary Apollos — perhaps about a baptismal matter since Luke tells us that Apollos knew only of the baptism of John (Acts 18:25).

Prisca and Aquila have a church in their house in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome (1 Cor

16:19; Rom 16:5). Several women were heads of house-churches where the early Christians gathered for Eucharist and preached the good news. According to Acts (17:4, 12) women were among the wealthy and prominent converts and would have had a significant role in founding, sustaining and promoting such house-churches.<sup>21</sup> For example, Paul greets Apphia as "our sister" who with Philemon and Archippus was a leader of a house-church in Colossae (Phlm 2). There is a church in the house of Nympha of Laodicea (Col 4:15), while a prayer meeting took place in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). The business woman Lydia offered her house to the Christian mission (Acts 16:14). As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, there is nothing to suggest that women were excluded from the leadership of these house-churches and from presiding at their eucharistic celebrations.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Even with this very brief look at two of the women named by Paul at the end of his letter to the Romans there is much evidence to suggest that being "baptised into Christ" for them meant something different from what it means for us today. We must continue the struggle for our baptism to be taken seriously. Paul is still saying to us:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:27-28)

And he assures us:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)



## NOTES

1. Address to the WATAC New South Wales Conference, Function Centre, Canterbury Park, Sydney, 2 May 2009. This address is a variant of the one given to the Catholic Bishops and Congregational Leaders of Aotearoa New Zealand, at Waikanae, 6 March 2006. A version of the 2006
2. Pope Benedict chose this quote in his first General Audience (Feb 2, 2008) at the start of the Year of Paul.
3. The Year of the Priest began 19 June 2009. No topic can provide a more telling contrast. Paul's decision-making power came through his baptism which he lived out fully. Even though he describes his preaching as a "priestly" work – a sacrificial offering (Rom 15:16)-- Paul was never ordained.
4. In a carefully argued chapter in support of women's ordination, the Old Testament scholar Carroll Stuhlmueller suggested that the interaction of religion and culture in Old Testament times, which resulted in Israel adopting leadership institutions from outside, such as judge, king, prophet, elder, priest and sage, can direct the Church today. He says, "At this hour when women have proven their effective leadership in many parts of the secular sphere, the Church is obliged by biblical precedent to open leadership roles to them and to await the wonder and the surprise of such a move." See "Culture, Leadership and Symbolism in the Old Testament" in *Women and Priesthood: Future Directions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978): 29.
5. Richard Lennan, "Christian Identity and Tradition," Paper presented at the CLCANZ, Waikanae, 23-24 February 2009.
6. 19 August 2006, *The Tablet*.
7. Thousands of women throughout the world had campaigned to ensure that the voice of the other half of the Church was heard. While they were not allowed to vote, the observers could attend all synod sessions, take part in the working groups. They also had an opportunity to address the entire synod assembly. Pope Benedict also allowed six women biblical scholars to be among the 41 resource people available to the synod members.
8. Under current Canon Law §230), the ministry of lector (i.e., reader) is technically open to males only. "Lay men" can be installed "in the ministries of lector and acolyte," while "lay persons" (including women) can "fulfill the function of lector" by "temporary deputation." This is mainly

for historical reasons. Prior to 1972 the office of lector was one of several minor orders leading to priestly ordination. However, Pope Paul VI abolished these orders but retained lector and acolyte as ministries and opened them to laity. The catch was that he insisted they be for men only. Some of the 45 bishops who voted against the current proposal feared that opening the ministry of lector to women (and not just the function, as it is now) could eventually lead to opening other higher ministries.

9. See Ronald D. Witherup, "Paul and Women," *The Pastoral Review*, 4.6 (2008): 13.
10. Carolyn Osiek, "The Study of Women in the Early Church," *The Bible Today*, 43.5, (2003): 192.
11. Étienne Nodet and Justin Taylor, who teach at the École Biblique in Jerusalem, explore the origins of Christianity's two basic rites, Baptism and Eucharist which they link together. They argue that Christianity emerged from among the Essenes and that contact with the Gentiles brought about a profound transformation. See *The Origins of Christianity*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).
12. See Frank Matera, *Galatians*, (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1992):146. He points out two other examples in the Pauline material that contain the first two groupings of Galatians 3:28 (Jew and Greek, slave and free), but not the third, i.e., male and female: 1) In a later letter Paul writes, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit"(1 Cor 12:13). 2) Although probably not written by Paul we read in the letter to the Colossians (later still), 'In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col 3:11) However, Matera suggests that two other Galatians texts help to explain 3:28: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5:6) and "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything" (Gal 6:15). In these texts Paul points out that it is not outward marks that distinguish a person before God but rather faith. Distinctions of race, class and sex have been dissolved by the new creation that has taken place in Christ.
13. Jerome Murphy O'Connor in *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996) is certain that Paul did not write verses 34-35, but argues that they were added by a later pen to bring them into line with the non-Pauline 1 Timothy 2:11-14. See also Barbara Reid, "Women and Paul" in *America* (10 Nov. 2008):3, who provides a brief summary of various proposals for dealing with the verses 34-36 e.g., to see them as a dialogue in which verses 34-35 are the voice of the Corinthian men while verse 36 is Paul's response.
14. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997, p. 480.
15. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul, A Critical Life*, 289.
16. Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1996): 450-451.
17. See Carolyn Osiek, M.Y. MacDonald and J.H. Tullock, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006): 216. The authors discuss the various schools of thought concerning whether or not Phoebe was a frontrunner for Paul's plan to evangelise Spain.
18. Only here in the New Testament is an individual called a *diakonos* of a particular Church. Barbara Reid, "Women and Paul, *America* (10 November 2008): 1. She suggests that it is best translated as "minister" or "servant" but the term can also entail financial ministry.
19. Reid, *Ibid.*, 2
20. Osiek, MacDonald and Tullock, op. cit. 216.
21. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Women in the Pauline Churches," in J.M. Soskice and D Lipton, eds., *Oxford Readings in Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 209.
22. Schüssler-Fiorenza, op. cit. See also Byrne, p.451, who suggests that Junia and her husband Andronicus also had a church in their house. Junia is not just an apostle but prominent or outstanding among them (Rom 16:7).

# **The Role of Women in the Corinthian Church**

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*Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.*

A recent article in the *National Catholic Reporter* carried the story of Father Roy Bourgeois' excommunication because he concelebrated mass at the ordination of a woman.<sup>1</sup> Bourgeois argues the Church's position contradicts the research of scripture scholars and cites the Pontifical Biblical Commission as his proof.<sup>2</sup> His argument once again raised the question for me about the role of women in the early Church.

Since Paul's writings are among the earliest texts, I decided to reread his letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses three problems within the assembly: propriety in worship, behavior at the Lord's Supper and the hierarchy of gifts (1 Cor 11-14). Prior to analyzing each issue, I believe a brief introduction to the world of Paul is necessary.

## **The Cultural World of Paul**

To understand Paul's teachings, one must be aware of the culture in which he stood. Paul lived in a world that intermingled cultures and religious traditions. He was born in Tarsus, a Hellenistic Center, and was a Roman citizen.<sup>3</sup>

In the Roman era, polytheism was the dominant theology. Paul, on the other hand, believed in one God, but was familiar with the pagan deities. He saw himself as a Jew and considered Jesus to be the promised Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

## **An Analysis of the Corinthian Assembly**

Corinth was a Roman commercial center marked with pagan deities and a degree of moral decay.<sup>5</sup> That same deterioration was visible in the Corinthian Church. In chapters 11-14, Paul discusses these abuses. The first abuse centers around propriety in worship.

### **Propriety in Worship**

Within the Imperial Era, women were able to dine in public with their husbands and were

mistresses of their households.<sup>6</sup> Since the Corinthians met in private homes, women became Assembly leaders. Paul affirmed this practice (Rom 16; Phil 4: 2-4; 1 Cor 11: 5-6).<sup>7</sup> The problem was not women presiders in Corinth but appropriate dress.

Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head...it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved (1 Cor 11: 4-6).

The Hellenistic tradition encouraged the wearing of a head covering in public for women, but not for men. Greek women covered their heads as a sign of their femininity, while Jewish

Within the Imperial Era, women were able to dine in public with their husbands and were mistresses of their households.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Corinthians met in private homes, women became Assembly leaders. Paul affirmed this practice.

women observed the custom as a symbol of fidelity to one's husband. Moreover, an uncovered head conveyed an adulteress (Dt 22: 22-23) and/or one who wished to transcend her sexuality. The latter custom was practiced by the followers of Isis.<sup>8</sup>

The Isis Cult was prevalent in Corinth. During a worship service, women would uncover their heads twice.<sup>9</sup> Paul discouraged this practice in the assembly. He emphasized the equality of women presiders, but insisted on their maintaining a visible difference (1 Cor 11: 3-4). Paul believed

observing this custom would restore harmony to the community.

### **Behavior at the Lord's Supper**

A second abuse within the Corinthian Assembly was inappropriate behavior at table. The Corinthians gathered at the home of a wealthy member to share a meal. The common meal was intended to foster a greater sense of community. However, the opposite was occurring.<sup>10</sup>

When you come together as a Church, I hear that there are divisions among you... When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk (1 Cor 11: 20-2).

The Corinthians staggered their arrival times. The rich came early and were seated in a small dining room. They may have brought their own food or were served a special meal by the hostess. Nevertheless, they ate and drank freely.<sup>11</sup>

...the purpose of the celebration is fellowship and the remembrance of Christ. Therefore, she should serve a similar meal to all the guests in order to build up the Body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> The use of the image of the Body of Christ links the Lord's Supper with the exercise of one's gifts.

The workers arrived later and were seated in the atrium. Since they came from work, they probably did not bring their own food. The workers either went hungry or were served a less desirable meal. In both instances, the meal was creating disharmony within the congregation.

Given the situation, Paul instructs the hostess to wait until all the guests arrive before eating and reminds her that the purpose of the celebration is fellowship and the remembrance of Christ. Therefore, she should serve a similar meal to all the guests in order to build up the Body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> The use of the image of the Body of

Christ links the Lord's Supper with the exercise of one's gifts.

### **The Hierarchy of Gifts**

The discussion around the spiritual gifts raised a third problem for Paul. The community believed some of the gifts were more important than others. Once again, Paul reminds the Corinthians that there are a variety of gifts, services and activities within the Church, and God activates all of them in everyone (1 Cor 12: 4-8). Each person is expected to use his or her gifts to benefit the community because each is a member of the Body of Christ.

After arguing that all of the spiritual gifts are important, Paul turns his attention to the gift of tongues. The Corinthians placed a high priority on speaking in tongues. Paul says:

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts and especially that you may prophesy. For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them... On the other hand, those who prophecy speak to other people... and build up the Church... For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn (1 Cor 14: 1-5, 31).

In this passage, Paul shifts the importance away from the gift of tongues and toward prophecy. Unlike the gift of tongues, everyone can prophesy. However, a few lines down in the letter, the writer says: "Women should be silent in Church" (1 Cor 14: 34). The latter statement seems to contradict Paul's philosophy (Gal 3: 27-8; 1 Cor 11: 2-16).

Charles Talbert, a scripture scholar, believes this statement was a later interpolation.<sup>13</sup> He argues the insertion is similar to the concept found in 1 Tim 2: 11-2 which was the work of a second century writer. For Talbert, Priscilla and Aquila were co-leaders of the Corinthian Community in the first century (Acts 18: 24-8).<sup>14</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The Pauline Churches were influenced by the Greco-Roman culture. In the Imperial Era, women were permitted to dine with their husbands in public and were mistresses of their households. As a result, women served as presiders in the Corinthian Church (1 Cor 11: 5-6). The shift

away from this tradition emerged in the second century (1 Tim 2: 11-12).<sup>15</sup>

In both centuries, the cultural tradition seems to dictate the role of women presiders. The pendulum is once again shifting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Vatican II encouraged Christians to reclaim their heritage. The documents remind us that all Christians are called to participate in the Eucharistic Liturgy.<sup>16</sup>

Paul's discourse on appropriate dress for the presiders tells us that men and women served in this role.<sup>17</sup> This tradition may be what contemporary scripture scholars are trying to reclaim.<sup>18</sup> However, this position is not accepted by all Christians. The challenge remains today for all of us. Do we follow the first or second century tradition in light of our 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture?



## NOTES

- 1 See Joan Chittister, "Taking A Stand for Roy Bourgeois." *National Catholic Reporter* (January 9, 2009).
- 2 See Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Report," *Origins* 6 (1976), 92-96.
- 3 John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (New York: Oxford Press, 1983), 8-13.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 5 Donald Fleming, *Going Places with Paul* (Australia: n.p., 1985), 42.
- 6 Wendy Cotter, "Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Counter-Cultural or Conventional?" *NT* 36 (October, 1994): 362.
- 7 Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1979), 106.
- 8 Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 67-9.
- 9 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 227-8; Talbert, 67-8.
- 10 George Montague, *The Living Thought of Saint Paul* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), 115.
- 11 Talbert, 74-5.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 71-72.
- 16 Paul Bishop, "Constitutions on Sacred Liturgy" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 144.
- 17 William Thompson, *Paul and His Message For Life's Journey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 147-8.
- 18 The Catholic Theological Society of America challenged the statement made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that only men could be priests at their annual meeting in 1997. See: <http://catholicculture.org/culture/library/view>.

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# **The Homiletic Voice of Women and the 2002 General Instruction on the Roman Missal<sup>1</sup>**

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Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

## **Introduction:**

### **The Icon of Mary Mother of God, Proclaimer of Scripture**

I bought an icon of Mary preaching to an assembly of bishops, kings and holy believers in Jerusalem at the gift store of the Little Sisters of the Poor located in the Old City along the Via Dolorosa. Some priests of the Orthodox tradition have told me that it is a representation of the Bogolubskaya Icon of the Mother of God. Its original was painted in 1157 and is venerated in the Russian Orthodox tradition. This is one version of many interpretations. Mary as Mother of God does not hold the child Jesus in her arms. Instead, she holds before her a page of scripture, and proclaims the sacred teaching by holding up the scroll for all to see. But she is not merely reading it. Rather, she is teaching from it. The listeners can read it for themselves, but the point is to receive her live delivery.

Her presence is mediated through this unfurled parchment, a scroll which is held above believers' heads, as the source of their prayer and reflection. As the community of faith sees the scripture, they also see her embodied as its proclaimer. The single focus for the faith of the mostly male assembly is Mary standing fully upright, her whole womanly body revealed. She sits on no throne. She speaks from no podium. She arises from no prie-dieu. No angel speaks to her, as in Annunciation scenes. She wears no crown and asserts no symbol of male authority. She is present on earth, within touching distance of her hearers, not on a pedestal. Here she stands fully revealed as a real-life woman who is speaking about the scripture to those who are physically near her.

She is the authoritative proclaimer of what holy people believe to be true about God's revelation. The posture of the twelve figures (including one woman) is one of active listening and reverence. Kings, bishops, ascetics, patron saints and ordinary people of faith show reverence

and respect for the proclaiming woman. Their upraised arms are bent in a gesture of welcome and allegiance toward her, as if summoning all the onlookers to give her loving attention. Up at the right, the adult Christ, looking onto earth from the heavens, endorses Mary's authority as proclaimer

The most recent edition of the Church's official General Instruction on the Roman Missal encourages women to speak up and speak out in a variety of ways for the edification of the community of faith as introducers, commentators, lectors, psalmists and cantors.

of the holy scriptures in a gesture of blessing her, and guiding the congregation toward her.

Proclamation of the scriptures and interpreting the church's teaching are not limited to ordained priests and deacons. In my experience, it is women in parishes who have been exercising the work of the Spirit in encouraging and promoting the gifts of the laity. It is the role of pastors to call forth the gifts of all the believing community. So women have been exercising a pastoral function.

## **Application to the Church Today**

When a woman proclaims the gospel or interprets the scripture, she is not thereby opposing official church teaching and proposing herself as a candidate for ordination.

This talk is not a covert, sneaky attempt to get women ordained through the back door by giving them speaking roles at Mass. No, what I am doing is utterly different. I am simply calling your attention as a theologian to what the church officially teaches about the role the Church describes for laity at Mass, including women. I



**The Bogolubskaya Icon of the Mother of God**

am purposefully emphasizing roles where the community hears the voice of women. not merely observes their physical, silent service as Eucharistic ministers, musicians, altar servers, sacristans and members of the Altar Society.

This talk, in a way, can be interpreted as a commentary on the Martha and Mary story in Luke 10:38-42. Martha performs acts of service and speaks to Jesus. All those present hear what she has to say. Mary, as well, engages in the ministry of the word by speaking and having conversation with Jesus. Both Martha and Mary have speaking roles in the account, Martha as the sister who prepares the meal, and Mary as the sister who attends to conversation with Jesus. Mary's role, as a hearer and interpreter of sacred teaching, is specifically protected. "She has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." Jesus openly converses with Martha, thus correcting any norm that she should render only silent service in the "household of the faith." Even though Mary has not said anything publicly, her role is not to remain silent either. Jesus' conversation with Mary authorizes her to speak about what she has learned from Jesus as "the better part." Jesus is not presented as the Master who silences women, whether their ministry is Martha's apostolic service or Mary's contemplative study. Both have words to share with the community of faith.

## What is the Homiletic Voice of Women?

I distinguish the homiletic voice of women from the homily given by a priest after the gospel. The directions for who gives the homily is stated in the General Instruction on the Roman Missal (GIRM). GIRM is the protocol or set of guidelines to be followed in saying Mass in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. There, in § 59 it states that the homily after the reading of the gospel is to be proclaimed by a priest or a deacon, that is, a man. We are all aware of exceptions, for example when a pastor invites a woman to give reflections at his parish, or a woman campus minister or female religious studies major gives the homily at a college Mass

held in the dorm, or a woman religious gives the homily at a congregational jubilee or funeral. But the homily given after the gospel, as a general rule, is a presidential role.

We are aware that there are strict constructionists of official documents, and broad constructionists--but that is a discussion which will take us off message. The point I am focused on is this: Note the roles that the General Instruction encourages women to take in the Mass. These roles are more than simply making announcements, and reading the words printed in the Lectionary. These are occasions when women can speak about the spiritual message of the scriptures, and invite the community to meditate on God's word.

## Description of Roles in the General Instruction

Since...a variety of options is provided for the different parts of the Mass, it is necessary for the deacon, the lectors, the psalmist, the cantor, the commentator, and the choir to be completely sure before the celebration which text each is responsible for, and that nothing is to be improvised. Harmonious planning and carrying out of the rites will greatly assist in disposing the faithful to participate in the Eucharist. (GIRM § 352)

Thus, the speaking roles which can be exercised by the laywomen during celebration of the Mass include: lector, psalmist, cantor, and commentator.

## Roles in GIRM Which Can be Exercised by Unordained Laywomen

### 1. Introduction to the Mass

GIRM § 52 says, "*The priest, deacon or lay minister may very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day.*"

The introduction we usually hear is from the music director, and goes something like this: "Today is the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Our celebrant today Fr. Malley. Please stand and greet the people around you."

An alternative, in which a woman is conscious of her homiletic voice could be,

"Today, the readings speak about the joy of Israel which awaits God's redemption after its exile, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit's gifts we share as believers, and the abundance of Jesus' miracle of wine at Cana. Let us greet each other, happy to be in each other's presence today."

## 2. Commentary on the Readings

GIRM § 57 says, *"In the readings, the table of God's word is prepared for the faithful, and the riches of the Bible are opened to them."* Further, *"By tradition, the function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential. The reading...should be proclaimed by a lector (ordinarily not a deacon or priest)."*

The role of commentator is distinguished from that of lector. The purpose of commentary, like the homily is to offer spiritual nourishment to the community. GIRM § 352 identifies the role of commentator as a particular, distinct spoken ministry. And GIRM § 105 says, *"The commentator, who provides the faithful, where appropriate, with brief explanations and commentaries with the purpose of introducing them to the celebration and preparing them to understand it better. The commentator's remarks must be meticulously prepared and clear though brief. In performing this function, the commentator stands in an appropriate place facing the faithful, but not at the ambo."*

*"The function of proclaiming the readings is ministerial, not presidential..."* A lector's role is actually multi-dimensional in three ways. First, the role of a lector is to *read* the readings. Second, the ministry of the lector to *proclaim* the reading as the mystery of redemption and salvation and offering the congregation spiritual nourishment. (GIRM § 55). If the "the riches of the Bible are opened to the community," then this implies logically that third, the ministry of lector is to provide some kind of commentary beyond merely reading the text of what is written in the lectionary.

Jesus is not presented as the Master who silences women, whether their ministry is Martha's apostolic service or Mary's contemplative study. Both have words to share with the community of faith.

In my parish, the lector has adopted the habit of reading a historical note that is provided by a commercial commentary service. However, this historical note, while useful, reads like a footnote in a Scripture commentary. It is not homiletic, not really proclamation, and while it provides head knowledge, it is not always spiritually meaningful.

The fact that it is printed means that there is liturgical space for a live woman commentator to say something homiletic, to offer from her own reflection on the passage something inspirational, calling attention to a line in the reading that speaks about who God is, and what we might hope God will do for us. As GIRM § 101 says, the lay person who proclaims the scripture reading should

be well suited and carefully prepared "so that the faithful by listening to the reading from the sacred text may develop in their hearts a warm and living love for sacred scripture."

This is not meant to be long, just three or four sentences. I believe the historical note could be

printed in the bulletin, but a homiletic, spiritual, reflective comment could be offered by the commentator herself in her own words. It needs to be kept short, so as to be supportive of what the reading is, not a distraction from it.

## 3. The Prayer of the Faithful

GIRM § 69 says, *"In the Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in a certain way to the Word of God which they have welcomed in faith and...offer prayers to God for the salvation of all..."*

We know the difference between canned, automatic, sawdust prayers of petition for the Pope, the President, civic leaders, peace in the world, the poor, the sick and the dead. The General Instruction says the Prayers of the Faithful are to arise out of the scriptures they have heard at the Mass. This ordinarily requires someone to compose the petitions in light of the liturgical readings for this Mass, and out of the concerns of this particular community. As GIRM

§ 71 says, *"Intentions should be...composed freely but prudently, and be succinct, and they should express the prayer of the entire community."*

#### 4. Leading the Post- Communion Meditation on the Psalm Verse

GIRM § 87 says, *"If there is no singing, the Communion antiphon found in the Missal may be recited either by the faithful, or by some of them, or by a lector."*

GIRM § 88 says, *"When the distribution of Communion is finished, as circumstances suggest, the priest and faithful spend some time praying privately... If desired, a psalm or other canticle of praise or a hymn may also be sung by the entire congregation."*

The time after Communion is flexible and adaptable. We know that it is used for announcements, for a visiting missionary to make an appeal for funds, or for a reflection by a woman so that what she says is clearly not a homily.

The General Instruction also allows that a layperson in the role of lector prayerfully read the psalm verse that is the Communion antiphon, and say a few words that will set the mood for "the priest and faithful to spend some time praying privately."

### Precedents in the New Testament for Women as Proclaimers of Scripture

In the early church, there are significant references to women who spoke homiletically, as well as difficulties they faced.

Paul affirmed the teaching and leadership authority of Phoebe, with special encouragement and explanation: "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is deaconess (*diakonia*) of the church at Cenchrae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worth of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need for you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well." (Ro. 16:1-4)

Male exegetes have translated *diakonia* as the reference to Phoebe being a minister among other ministers of the church at Cenchrae. She is to be honored because she was a generous donor to

Paul's mission. Women scholars of the New Testament recognize *diakonia* as an official leadership role, a recognized pastoral office in the community. Further, the consensus among these women academics is that Phoebe was a woman recognized for her learning and sophistication as a theologian. She is the one entrusted to read, comment and explain what Paul meant in the most complex and formal of his theological compositions, the Epistle to the Romans.

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, the Samaritan woman is a proclaimer of the message about Jesus, through her own experience as a woman (Jn 4:4-42). After her conversation with Jesus at the well, she becomes a missionary to her community, telling a story about her own life. She

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makes a disclosure of her own transformation which compels and summons men and women to faith in Jesus, the man at the well. "Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me everything I have done.'" (Jn 4:39)

While the NT records this early and later evidence of women as those who spoke homiletically, it also records there was resistance to women sharing their insights.

For example, the Parable of Ten Virgins (Matt. 25:1-10) pits the wise women in the community against the foolish women. The ones who are enlightened bring lamps with oil in them to wait for the bridegroom, but the foolish ones don't have any oil with them, symbolizing their lack of enlightenment. We know how odd and distasteful the scene is. Enlightened women who

speak approved thoughts get brought in to the wedding feast, but the ones whose ideas are not approved get shut out. One group of women is rewarded by the male redactor for shutting another group of women out of the approved circle based on what has been pre-determined as the "wise" or "foolish" thoughts women have.

The parable is evidence that women were speaking and proclaiming the Word, but that pastors may not have approved of the practice of

Through their ministries and pastoral positions in the community of faith, women have promoted the gifts of laity. In doing so, they have followed the normative tradition of the Church found in the New Testament.

women as commentators, lectors and proclaimers. In archways over medieval cathedrals, the foolish virgins are shown talking and gossiping, and the wise virgins are those who walk in procession silently like cloistered nuns in prayerful, silent meditation.

Further evidence that women were assuming teaching roles can be drawn from one pastor's attempt to stop a practice that had been going on: "A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed." (I Tim 2:11-13).

The pastor who lived a generation after Paul tried to adopt his mentor's pastoral persona, but his anti-woman sentiment is completely opposed to Paul's support of Phoebe, for example. It is also contrary to the vision of John in making the Samaritan Woman the archetypal embodiment of missionary and proclaimer the gospel. What this

deutero-Pauline pastor tries to do is shut down the voice of women in his congregation--contrary to Paul himself, and contrary to the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel. The intensity of his opposition reflects the fact that women must have made an impression on the congregation through their reading, interpreting and commenting. Instead of feeling happy in their gifts, and wanting to promote their insights, he tried to silence their voices altogether, despite the fact that they had been proclaiming the scriptures in a compelling and inspiring way that awed the men as well as the women.

## Conclusion

I remain grateful for the courage and integrity of the women in pastoral ministry who invite others to speak about their spiritual lives, and to teach the tradition of our faith. Like the icon of Mary the Mother of God and Proclaimer, these women have been faithful to scripture, and faithful to the intent of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal. The Church teaches that the community of believers should participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, fully and actively, exercising many ministerial roles.

Through their ministries and pastoral positions in the community of faith, women have promoted the gifts of laity. In doing so, they have followed the normative tradition of the Church found in the New Testament. Blessings on the Phoebes and the Samaritan Women present here. You give inspiration and joy to men and women of faith as you lift up your voices in the midst of the congregation.



## NOTES

1. Plenary address given at the Second Northern California Lay Convocation at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, September 6, 2008

# Jubilee Reflection – August 9, 2009

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*Janet Rozzano, R.S.M.*

## Readings for 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 9, 2009)

1 Kings 19: 4 – 8

Ephesians 4: 30 – 5: 2

John 6: 41 – 51

My sister Jubilarians, in your name I welcome all who are here with us today—sisters, associates, family members, friends and co-workers in Mercy. We are indeed on holy ground, as our opening hymn says. This is the place where we entered the convent, where we first pronounced our vows, and from here we went forth to do the works of mercy. We are on this holy ground again today to celebrate fifty, sixty, or seventy years of vowed life and service in so many works of mercy. What a marvelous achievement to remain faithful to a life commitment for so many years! How can we find the words to share with you, our guests, what this commitment is all about? What are the common threads woven into our diverse experiences of so many years in Mercy? Traditionally, we look to the readings of our Mass to shed some light on the meaning and significance of a celebration like this. Today's readings for this 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time are beautiful—Jesus, the Bread of Life, Elijah fed by an angel, and Paul exhorting the Ephesians on the virtues of life in the Spirit. My challenge is to help us see a connection between these readings and our Jubilarians.

Let's look first at the gospel—Jesus, the living Bread, the Bread of life. These images are so familiar to us that we may not appreciate how astounding and unbelievable they were to Jesus' first disciples. Today's gospel has them murmuring and questioning, unsure they could even accept such words. Yet these images, at

The great mystery is that God in Jesus will always be there for us, will be our food, our bread for the journey, the very sustenance of our lives. We in turn are to love God with our whole hearts, to enter into the life and spirit of Jesus, and to serve Christ in one another, especially the poor and needy.

once simple but also utterly profound, are one way of saying what we committed ourselves to so many years ago, and more importantly, what God commits or promises to us. For myself, and probably for our other Jubilarians, I can say that back in my early twenties, still young and inexperienced, this all seemed very clear and lovely, even easy, but then it was still mostly theoretical and untried.

By way of a more practical explanation of this ideal, the story of Elijah in the first reading takes the essence of Jesus' words and sets them squarely in the context of one real person's life. We meet Elijah at a moment of great crisis in his life. He is feeling alone, afraid, and abandoned by God. He is confused and desperate, pursued by enemies, a strong man so overwhelmed that death seems the only option. But notice how the story unfolds. God says nothing, doesn't chide or scold or threaten, but quietly intervenes and saves Elijah through an angel who simply feeds him: "Get up and eat or the journey will be too long for you." And what a powerful meal that was, enabling Elijah to walk for forty days, straight to the mountain of God.

My sister Jubilarians, over the past fifty, sixty, or seventy years, how many times have we too felt desperate, discouraged, fearful or in some way unequal to the challenges of our lives? How many times have we set out, uncertain about where we were even going, let alone how to get

there? And yet, how many angels have been there for us, feeding us in simple and practical ways, strengthening and guiding us through the years? Who are the angels who have given us bread for our journey? Some, I'm sure, are sitting right here—friends, family members, co-workers. Some of our angels have spent almost a lifetime with us, while others may have fed us only briefly and then slipped out of our lives. Some angels are not live persons but rather events, sudden insights, a consoling moment of prayer, an encounter with beauty. Little by little over the years, we've come

### Who are the angels who have given us bread for our journey?

to trust that God's promise is reliable, that God does come to us—in the “daily bread” of Eucharist, certainly, but also in prayer and ministry, in laughter and tears, in success and failure, and in a thousand other mysterious, surprising, unexpected ways.

And finally, we consider St. Paul's words in the second reading about the virtues of life in the Spirit. As I reflected on these words, I was reminded of many words of our foundress, Catherine McAuley. Like Paul, Catherine called her sisters to kindness, compassion, forgiveness of one another, and to a life of love in imitation of Jesus' total gift of himself to us. Listen to some of her words. She writes, “Christ tells us to love as he loves—can we then place any bound on our mutual affection?” In another place she says, “There are things the poor prize more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing. Among these are the kind word, the gentle compassionate look, and the patient hearing of their sorrows.” Here are some lines from her verse about Mercy: “Sweet Mercy! Loving, patient, kind—not easily provoked, she soon forgives: feels love for all, and by a look relieves.” Lastly, Catherine had this to

say about rules: “Remember if there are a thousand regulations to be observed, the most important is charity.” All such beautiful and inspiring virtues—the work of our lifetime to even begin to realize! And yet, my sister Jubilarians, when I think about our lives I see those very virtues and many others shining forth in each of us. These virtues are, in St. Paul's words, the pleasing fragrance that arises from a life lived in self-giving love. No, we aren't perfect; each of us has stumbled along the way and made mistakes; we've struggled with our own personal demons; we haven't always trusted, loved, or risked as we could. We've lived through changes in our world, nation and community we never dreamed of when we came to Mercy. And even now, we wonder about the future of religious life and how our way of life and ministries will evolve in the years ahead. Yet out of all of this there arises that sweet aroma, the undeniable good we have done even in the midst of weakness.

### “Remember if there are a thousand regulations to be observed, the most important is charity.”

And so, on this day of jubilee, we stop and savor our blessings. We give thanks for a faithful God who has been the Bread of Life for our journey on bright days and in darkness. We give thanks for angels of every sort who have sustained and nourished us along the way. We give thanks for the times when we, in our turn, have been bread for others on their journey. We give thanks for this holy ground and all that has brought us to this moment, for indeed, all of us together, Jubilarians and guests alike, each in our unique way, are part of that pleasing fragrance, the sweet aroma of God's merciful presence in our world!



# Two Courageous Foremothers as Role Models in the Gospel of John

*Judith Schubert, R.S.M.*

This past year has brought both surprises and challenges from Rome's unexpected Apostolic Visitation for Women Religious in North America. Sisters across the nation have become alarmed by this sudden inquest for various reasons, not the least of which included the procedural handling of the investigation as well the "secretness" surrounding the entire procedure. Scholarly leaders in their fields such as Sandra Schneiders and Joan Chittister responded to the investigation with many valuable points to offer hope about the entire procedure. In unforeseen moments like these, how do we, as Sisters of Mercy, respond as community with the grace and dignity of our foundress, Catherine? How do we follow her example of divine guidance and merciful strength?

To reply wisely to this recent development from Rome, maybe we, as Sisters of Mercy, need to look, not only to the wisdom of Catherine as leader, but also seek one of her strongest sources of inspiration and guidance, namely the biblical text. Within the pages of scripture, we uncover many women who find themselves in uncharted circumstances. In several of these stories, our biblical foremothers demonstrated a deep fortitude and courage during such unexpected moments in their own lives. Perhaps we need to re-examine some of their stories to acquire needed inspiration for this moment of visitation.

## Background

Before addressing two inspirational women in the Gospels, we need to recall the environment of ancient Jewish women in the Roman occupied nation of Palestine during the first century C.E..

This past year has brought both surprises and challenges from Rome's unexpected Apostolic Visitation for Women Religious in North America. In unforeseen moments like these, how do we, as Sisters of Mercy, respond as community with the grace and dignity of our foundress, Catherine?

By the time of Jesus the Greek, Roman and Hebrew cultures all imposed various traditional practices on women. Often these patriarchal societies both justified and perpetuated the subordination of women. These ancient societies frequently expected women to remain in the private place of the home rather than venture out into the world of the public sphere. For the most part men reserved this public space for themselves. From a juridical point of view Deut 19:15-17 informs us that a woman had no value as a witness. Often these ancient societies envisioned women as insignificant and weak.

The gospels emerged in the first century when such attitudes against women prevailed. Consequently, the actions and words of Jesus within the gospels frequently ran "counter-culture" to such exclusiveness against, and subordination of women. In general Jesus rejected traditional ideas of gender, status and social boundaries. He included women in his teaching and allowed them a life outside the realm of patriarchal expectation, where it seems that the only allowable life of a daughter would be to go from being the property of her father to the property of her husband. Yet, Jesus stretched the boundaries for women when his disciples included women, some of whom did not appear to be married.

Moreover, Jesus presented no distinctions in his teaching between women and men. One of the most important advances that Jesus made came in his direct dialogues with women about theological and life issues. Remember, that women in Palestine would not have had theological discussions with men, let alone be treated as

students or disciples. Yet in the Gospel of John, Jesus discusses theological topics with them. Such dialogue unsettled his male disciples, as we see in texts like John 4:7-26, where Jesus dialogues at length with a woman stranger, who would have been considered by Jews to be both unclean and an enemy.

As we ponder the four gospels it becomes evident that the Gospel of John offers many texts that express Jesus' open and radical stance towards women. Some of these stories about women have become well known to us, such as the Samaritan Woman at the Well in John 4, who represents the only person in the entire fourth gospel to preach in the name of Jesus during his ministry. Another more familiar account appears in John 20 with the intimate encounter between Mary of Magdala and the risen Jesus. In this Johanine resurrection account, unique in that Jesus appears to a single person, Mary becomes the first Apostle of the risen Lord because she stands as the first and only one commissioned to take his message of the resurrection to the other disciples. The Gospel of John also has less well known stories that focus on women. Let us ponder two of these stories about wisdom figures who also serve as models of leadership and courage: The Mother of Jesus in the Wedding Feast of Cana in John 2:1-12; Martha of Bethany in John 11:21-27. In both stories the wisdom and leadership of women becomes evident.

### **The Role of the "Mother of Jesus" at the Wedding Feast of Cana (John 2:1-12)**

Throughout the centuries, despite diverse religious beliefs or local traditions, people knew that a wedding meant a time of grand celebration. The covenant between the bride and bridegroom united the couple, and the two families as well. Therefore, the couple vowed fidelity to one another in the midst of family, friends and village.

To appreciate the influential role of the Mother of Jesus in this Cana scene, it will be useful to address two important points: the cultural traditions of a Jewish wedding in first century Palestine and the relationship between mother and son. During the marriage festivities women and

men did not share the same space. Male guests were served in a more public space and would receive privileged positions at the table. On the other hand, women would have been accommodated in another space.

The code of "honor and shame" permeated the entire wedding ceremony and the festivity surrounding it. The parties who contracted the marriage, as well as the heads of households who made monetary agreements to host the celebration that followed, did so to defend the family's honor. To fall short of these expectations would bring shame upon the family. Loss of honor disgraced the entire family both in social status and reputation.<sup>1</sup>

While faith in her son reflects a valuable quality of discipleship, we cannot overlook the qualities of leadership, courage, initiative and deep compassion which Mary radiates in this scene.

The second point concerns the bond between a mother and her son in this ancient society. As we know from reading the matriarchal stories in the book of Genesis, a wife's greatest gift to her husband and family would be to give birth to a boy. From that moment, a mother surrounds her son with love and attention. In many ways this relationship reflects the two important issues of honor and power. Eventually, as the male child grows into adulthood, he becomes more powerful and receives honor within the community. In this way he has the ability to defend his mother both within her house as well outside in public. Thus, in later years the mother's love for her son would protect her. Bruce Malina compares the closeness and intensity of such a relationship between mother and son to the affectionate bond of married couples in North America today.<sup>2</sup> Both these points help the reader to grasp the full impact of the actions of Mary in this wedding scenario.

Within the context of this cultural background, Mary's actions and request to her son become clearer, along with the miracle (sign) that result from such a request. Both her movements and words reflect the deep bond that she has with

Jesus. Furthermore, they highlight her influential role in a time of crisis, which produces the first miracle (sign) in the Gospel of John. Now, within this Cana narrative in John 2 let us focus on the behavior of Mary, who in the fourth Gospel, has been named by her title, "Mother of Jesus."

When commenting on this narrative in the past, many scholars have viewed the role of Mary in this passage solely as one of fidelity. While faith in her son reflects a valuable quality of discipleship, we cannot overlook the qualities of leadership, courage, initiative and deep compassion which Mary radiates in this scene. These qualities must not be obscured because they make the scene alive and achieve the desired outcome of the story, namely, a continuation of the wedding celebration for the newlyweds and their families.

The dialogue in verses 3-5 underlines the

Thus, Mary's influential role as leader and mediator highlights the entire narrative. Her skillful and compassionate direction of Jesus' actions causes a "re-creation" in the lives of all the families in the story.

major role that the "Mother of Jesus" plays in the wedding mishap. Whether or not this story symbolizes messianic fullness or represents a multi-layered miracle story,<sup>3</sup> it enhances Mary's leadership position. She takes the lead and brings the dilemma of the married couple and their families to the attention of her son.

In verse 3 the narrator introduces the disconcerting circumstances of the moment, namely, that no wine remains for the continuation of the celebration. Since in first century Palestine the wedding of a virginal bride lasted seven days, empty wine jugs would bring dishonor to both families and, consequently, diminish their social status within the community. As soon as Mary discovers the plight, she seeks out her son with the message, "They have no wine." This direct remark reflects her immense sensitivity as a mother whose son has become her protector. It

also demonstrates her close friendship with those who will be shamed. Clearly, at this moment Mary shines as a sensitive and compassionate leader, one who listens to the situation and tries to rectify it.

Lastly, Mary's influence over the entire episode becomes evident when she instructs the servants to "do whatever he tells you" (v. 5). In essence, Mary's presence and words lead to the miracle that restores honor to the families. In a very real sense she has changed the mind of Jesus by encouraging his participation in the plight of the families. Thus, Mary's influential role as leader and mediator highlights the entire narrative. Her skillful and compassionate direction of Jesus' actions causes a "re-creation" in the lives of all the families in the story.

### **Martha of Bethany (Jn 11:21-27)**

John 11:1-44 serves as the climax of Jesus' ministry. Here Jesus performs his final sign, namely, the restoration of life to the dead Lazarus. Although the story centers on Jesus as he restores life to Lazarus, his sister, Martha, remains an integral part of the drama. For example, she and her sister Mary, inform Jesus about their brother's critical illness (11:3). She comforts her mourning neighbors by offering solace to them. Furthermore, she converses with Jesus about the death of her brother and the significance of life. This verbal exchange with Jesus in 11:21-27 represents one of the most important dialogues of the entire gospel.

By the time that Jesus arrives in Bethany, the hometown of Martha and her siblings, her brother Lazarus has already died and been entombed four days (11:17). Jesus' entrance into the village sparks this dialogue. When Martha hears that Jesus is approaching, she runs out on the road to meet him (11:20). This action reflects her deep friendship with Jesus. It also demonstrates her gracious hospitality of heart because she bears no ill will that Jesus had not come sooner and did not heal her brother before he died. Rather, she goes out to welcome her close friend. She speaks openly about the death of her brother with the greeting, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that

God will give you whatever you ask of him" (11:21-22). Clearly, Martha accepts the fate of her brother and has a deep belief in the person of Jesus. In this scene her fidelity outweighs her grief.

Martha's honesty allows Jesus to comfort her with the words that your "brother will rise again" (11:23). She responds with a secure belief in both the person of Jesus and a hope for such a future resurrection (11:24). In theological terms future resurrection has been labeled "future eschatology." Her openness to Jesus causes him to offer Martha a new and deeper reality as he proclaims, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25). In one sweeping "I am" saying, Jesus moves the conversation from future eschatology to the realm of realized eschatology. He does so by offering the hope for resurrection as a present reality through him as "resurrection and life."

This sudden and profound self-revelation demonstrates Jesus' deep trust in Martha. Her receptivity to the unknown surprises in life makes her an authentic leader and person of deep faith.

This sudden and profound self-revelation demonstrates Jesus' deep trust in Martha. Her receptivity to the unknown surprises in life makes her an authentic leader and person of deep faith. As Jesus asks whether she believes his proclamation, she responds immediately, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:27). Martha authenticates her personal belief in life offered by Jesus replies with a three part theological testimony, which displays her complete confidence in Jesus. It also echoes the repeated theme of the fourth gospel, namely, that faith leads to true life.

Martha's insightful Christological proclamation in John 11:27 parallels Peter's confession of faith in Matthew 16:16. In these Matthean verses Peter responds to Jesus' self-identity question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Peter replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." As you may notice, Martha's and Peter's replies to Jesus appear to be almost identical.

As a result of this profound acknowledgement in Matthew's gospel, Jesus commissions Peter to a leadership role in the future apostolic era. So, too, in John 11, should not the same leadership be ascribed to Martha? Robert Karris suggests that Martha's "confession of faith (is) the foundation of the Johannine community ... the confession of faith of a woman (is) the foundation of John's Church."<sup>4</sup> On the same point, Sandra Schneiders remarks that "if this confession given during the life of Jesus (and recorded in Matthew's Gospel), grounds the promise of the primacy of Peter, it is not less significant as foundation of community leadership when given by a woman?"<sup>5</sup>

The parallel between the confession of Peter in Matthew 16:16 and the confession of Martha in John 11:27 implies that Martha exercised a leadership role in the Johannine community. Moreover, Jesus' self-revelation to her verifies the conclusion that he regards her as faithful friend and leader. In effect, John 11: 21-27 portrays Martha as playing an integral part in the return of her brother's life because she dialogues with Jesus, acknowledges his extraordinary self-revelation and collaborates with him to bring new life to her brother, the neighbors and herself.

## Conclusion

What then, do we learn from these two great women of wisdom? How can their behavior influence us as Sisters of Mercy in the ecclesial atmosphere? While the Mother of Jesus, and Martha display individual leadership characteristics, they also have similar gifts. In John 2 and 11 both women exhibit the following characteristics: they remain receptive so that Jesus speaks freely to them; they anticipate help from him; they take the lead at the moment of crises; they expect an improvement from their present crisis not knowing what form it may take; and, they remain faithful disciples of Jesus.

Most significantly, the women show courage in both Johannine stories. Bravery surfaces as one of their greatest strengths because they don't appear to fear the unknown. As we all know, fear

has the ability to kill visionary dreams and leaves its victims paralyzed. On the other hand, bravery

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in the face of adversity gives us strength during stress filled moments. More importantly, bravery in the present leads us to new visions for the future. By their initiative-taking with Jesus, the Mother of Jesus and Martha alter the outcome of crisis situations. For instance, the creative leadership of Mary soon transformed the potential disaster and shame of the married couple into a celebration of great joy. In John 11 Martha's open dialogue with Jesus paved the way for her brother Lazarus being returned to life.

Both the Mother of Jesus and Martha serve as heroines, even though their leadership has been ignored by commentators. Nevertheless, these women offer hope for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when we experience lack of ecclesial support. As we reflect on these two brave biblical foremothers, let us find strength in their wisdom and face the Church' visitation with courage.



## NOTES

1. Bruce Malina; Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 61.

2. Bruce Malina, "Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: A Guide for U.S. Consumers," *BTB* 19 (1989), 135.
3. In the past scholars such as Raymond Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1990), 163, describes the narrative as a composite parable added to a miracle story; Charles Talber, *Reading John*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 85, views this story as an expansion of a miracle story with added dialogue.
4. R. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 87.
5. S. Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," *BTB* 12:2 (1982), 41.

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## Discussion Questions: Reading Scripture

**Daly)** "Thus, the spiritual life is deepened by an interaction between prayer and the service of the poor and distressed."

In your practical experience, how has this been true? Is your prayer a resource, a respite, an inspiration for petitioning God, a time for reflecting on what you are doing? How does your ministry contribute to your prayer life?

**(Criscione)** "Faith's verve accesses divine dynamism."

Some authors have suggested that the present situation for women religious is like the "dark night of the soul" as described by St. John of the Cross. Is "faith's verve" compatible with the passive endurance implied by the "dark night"? Or might "faith's verve" mean something different in light of the healing stories in Mark where people take initiative?

**(Julian)** The argument in this essay is that Paul, who was never ordained, took his baptism seriously, that baptism "erased the privilege that came with gender," and that women in early Christian communities lived out their baptism in many forms of leadership. As you review Paul's letters, what are the kinds of Church leadership that flow from baptism?

**(Kerrigan)** Historically, women seemed to serve as presiders at liturgical events in the early Church. What are the forms of women's leadership that the Catholic Church endorses today? Do you know women who are pastors and liturgical presiders in other faith traditions and Christian denominations? What conversations have you had with women rabbis, and women pastors in the Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian churches?

**(Rosenblatt)** GIRM outlines several times unordained women, serving as lectors and commentators, can speak reflectively during the Eucharist: at the welcoming of the assembly, before the readings, at the offertory petitions, and at the post-Communion meditation. Could these occasions be used more widely by women, since the Church endorses these roles? What training would be useful? Do you know pastors who would welcome more active participation by women?

**(Rozzano)** As we remember the story of Elijah being attended by an angel, we are invited to reflect on people who have helped us over our decades of commitment. "...how many angels have been there for us, feeding us in simple and practical ways, strengthening and guiding us through the years?" Who have been your angels?

**(Schubert)** In facing the Apostolic Visitation and Investigation, we can look "not only to the wisdom of Catherine as leader, but also seek one of her strongest sources of inspiration and guidance, namely, the biblical text." What was brave about Mary at Cana and Martha at Bethany? What are the ways Mercies have shown courage?

## Contributors

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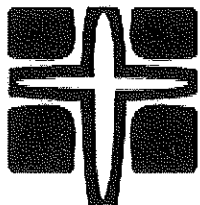
**MAST**, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities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

**MAST** has been meeting annually since then, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its **annual meeting in Philadelphia, at St. Raphaela Center June 18-20, 2010**. Members act as theologians in the Church and carry on theological work in their respective disciplines and ministries. They also seek to be of service to the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

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Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's executive director.



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