The MAST Journal

VOL. 1, NO. 1 FALL 1990

Vocation and Membership

October 20, 1990

Dear Readers,

The Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology is pleased to inaugurate this journal, an outgrowth of last year's inserts in Mercy Life written by Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars under the title "Mercy Challenge." The purpose of the journal, which will be published three times a year in November, March and July, is to foster conversation about mission and ministry within the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Joanne Lapetito (Baltimore), Betsy McMillan (Pittsburgh), Eloise Rosenblatt (Burlingame), Maryanne Stevens (Omaha), and Julia Upton (Brooklyn) make up the editorial board. All suggestions are welcome. Correspondence regarding the journal should be sent to managing editor, Maryanne Stevens, 9411 Ohio Street, Omaha, Nebraska, 68134.

Gracious donations by the St. Louis Sisters of Mercy and the St. Louis Mercy Health Corporation will make the first year's issues free to all the regional communities. With the July, 1991 issue we will be polling readers for their response to our work and suggestions for future funding.

Now, to this inaugural issue! Vocation and membership concern all of us. Key to our conversations across the Institute is the realization that many believe they are called to a life of discipleship focused through the person of Catherine McAuley and desire to continue or begin formalized relationships. However, they don't understand their vocations in the same way we did when we "entered the convent." And neither do we. Many questions arise. Three writers stretch our understandings and beckon us to live into new paradigms of Mercy association. Maureen Crossan reminds us that vocation is foremost a response to God and presents us insights gleaned from working with single adults in our church. Mary Celeste Rouleau recalls for us Catherine McAuley's movement into a new way of living mercy and asks if we might be called to follow her in directions we have not considered. And finally, Karen Schwarz offers a starting point for more concrete dialogue by spelling out one woman's vision of an alternative way to express a relationship with the Mercy community.

It is The MAST Journal editorial board's hope that these articles provide ferment for lively conversation and debate in our homes and workplaces, on retreats and vacations! If response takes the form of letters to the editor, they will be published in future editions of the journal.

Sincerely,

Maryanne Stevens, RSM

"Vocation Crisis": A Challenge and Possibility

Maureen Crossen

Sometimes I remind myself of the ancient mariner of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's rhyme.[1] I find I am compelled to repeat an experience, a story, over and over again until it's out of my system. Lately, however, I have realized that the experience or event never really leaves my system; rather, it becomes a part of me. This is my latest reiteration.

Last May I was participating in a local vocation director's meeting. Part of our agenda was to discuss the joys and strengths, anxieties and weaknesses of our common ministry. Discussion of the anxieties became quite heavy and low. Some of us expressed feelings of being drained of energy as our precious life's choice was questioned, challenged, dissected and rejected by searching young adults. Some of us expressed anxiety over the subtle expectations our congregations and dioceses have on us to be the sole person responsible for increasing membership. And some of us lamented the passing away of a life which for us has been a source of nourishment and challenge. We were feeling like our lives were smoldering into deadly obsolescence.

My vocation is God — and to God I must be faithful.

After a silent moment, a firm, quiet voice came over the smoking bier. "If my congregation dissolved today, I still have a vocation. If somehow the church would shatter and fall apart, I still have a vocation. My vocation is God. There is nothing, no one, that can change this. My vocation is God — and to God I must be faithful." A stunned audience received John's declaration. The confidence in his words changed a bier of frustration and despair into an Easter fire of commitment and hope.

Since then I have been repeating John's words to myself and to anyone else who will listen. His prophetic words focused for me the essential element of religious life, indeed, the essential element for any whole and holy life.

Who among us would not profess these words: "My vocation is God." We repeat them many times. We proclaim them in our liturgies of reception and profession through words such as "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord," (Phil. 3:8). We offer them with such mysterious joy at the funeral of a sister: "Receive her soul and present her to God the most high," (Song of Farewell, Funeral Rite). And we sing them with the whole church around Easter fire: Christ our Light! Thanks be to God! God is our vocation. God is the one who calls us first, who promises to be with us, who is beginning and end.

The problem for us vocation directors was not the essential element of our lives. We were eager to confirm John's profession as our own. The problem was not even the beginning and the end. The problem was the in between, trying to make some sense of the ambiguity and tension of the present, particularly about membership in our congregations and dioceses.

As women of Mercy, we find ourselves, along with our sisters and brothers in religious life, involved in the questions and problems of the current "vocation crisis." This vocation crisis is popularly understood as a serious decrease in young people entering traditional vowed religious life. The obvious result of fewer, if any, new young members is the alarming increase in the median age of our communities. Today we not only contend with the "vocation crisis," but we are also reminded of what is called the "aging of religious life." Both of these factors are true. And they have serious consequences in light of questions of identity, ministry, particularly corporate ministry, and the future.

However, we must guard against the temptation to allow these factors to direct our personal and communal identity, ministry and future. To regard the "vocation crisis" and the "aging of religious life" as the sole factors for our directions and choices places us in serious jeopardy of living an inauthentic vocation. The God of our vocation is the God of new life, the God who breaks through old laws to bring about new ways. To become too preoccupied with the current demographics in membership in traditional religious life is to forsake the opportunities with which God calls us into new possibilities for life.

In this article I would like to present some of the new possibilities of membership around us which are signs of God calling us into new life. By this, I mean some of the surprising ways in which people are asking if and how they can identify with us, share our ministry, and help build the future with us. Before presenting these, however, I think it is important to share with you two lessons I have learned as coordinator of new membership. One is a different twist to "the vocation crisis." The other is an appreciation of who we are as Sisters of Mercy.

(1) A Different Vocation Crisis

Too often we sisters accuse one another for the lack of women coming to our communities. We list all sorts of reasons; we changed too much, we've become too secular. If only the vocation director would recruit more . . . If only . . . If only . . . Enough studies have

been done in the last thirty years to argue for and against the accusations. I do not wish to argue further.

I am inclined to believe that the more serious vocation crisis lies outside of our communities. True, we have serious issues facing us. However, there is a great number of women in our society who are seriously searching for a meaning to their lives. Quite a few of the women who have inquired about vowed membership with the Pittsburgh community could give serious consideration to giving up their social and financial independence for common living. But, questions about God and the church were almost too foreign to them — too difficult for them to voice. There was no sense that God was calling them — no sense of joy in considering religious life. Prayer was too private to articulate. Asking spiritual questions struck too deeply. What was their relationship with the church? There was no sense of belonging. Rarely, if ever, had they heard any affirmation or inspiration about their lives as single women through the preaching of the Gospel. It was often difficult to address the subjects of God and the church beyond questions or a struggling silence.

Eventually, our meetings together ended. Afterwards I thought of the rich young man (Lk. 18:18-25). These women's difficulties with questions about God or the church are an observation — a different nuance to "the vocation crisis." The vocation crisis is not solely an internal matter. It is a much deeper cultural matter within society and church. How do we talk about God to young women who have little language for talking about God? The male or father-image of God has withered in their development as independent women and the feminine or mother-image of God is vague without ritual and community to enhance it.

More acute, perhaps, is the whole notion of God as the One for others, when all about them is competition and the threat of being left behind. Questions regarding the church complicate the idea of God and meaning in their lives all the more. Parish churches like to present themselves as a family, and thereby attend to the needs of families. How do single women (and men) fit in this analogy? Among many other issues for women is the way the church deals with women. It is difficult enough to etch a career, a profession, in what remains "a man's world," but having to deal with this on a spiritual level is often not worth the frustration. What has been presented here is an all-too-simplistic statement of some of the very deep, spiritual and emotional questions that women may or may not be capable of articulating in an inquiry into religious life. My point is that these are very real, very serious dilemmas for women. They are true manifestations of a vocation crisis for our church and society. The Sisters of Mercy are not responsible for them. We are, however, involved in them because we are involved in the church and society. We are further involved because of how we witness, live and serve in the church and society.

(2) Sisters of Mercy, Then and Now

Since our foundation, the sisters of Mercy have been women whose primary motivation has been service to the poor, the sick and the uneducated. Catherine McAuley handed on to us a tradition of service through the particular gifts God gave to each sister. Catherine also set a pace of knowing when to move out of step and when to maintain the step with social and ecclesial conventions.

When Catherine saw a need she responded, regardless of time or place. The "walking sisters" showed their ability to move beyond social convention. Yet, when the church authorities asked Catherine to organize the women who came to join her work as a religious community, she reluctantly complied. Her description of the community as a "grand right and left" may be more prophetic than she intended!

. . . we often find ourselves called to step beyond conventions within society and the church.

Today we often describe ourselves as being "on the cutting edge." Surely this is an apt modern interpretation of Catherine's dancing description. One of the exciting aspects of this is that this understanding of ourselves is noticed by people outside of the community. We are recognized as women who see a need and respond to it with action and hope. A spiritual director for one of our sisters once described the mercy charism as "Do it, damn it. Do it." Not only do we "do it" if a need beckons, but we love to do it! We can't fill enough newsprint with the works of mercy, corporal and spiritual, that we do as individuals and as community (and eventually as institute).

However, in doing these works of mercy, we often find ourselves called to step beyond conventions within society and the church. What is remarkable to many women and men who witness our works is our ability to respond to needs by stretching the tradition while remaining faithful to it. Often we may not be aware of this — but others are, and this attracts them to know us, to work with us, to identify with us.

This dynamic tradition of ours is what draws women to inquire about membership with us. Even though there are questions regarding God and church which need dialogue, this dynamic of our life is what they would like to share. Our dilemma is that the charism is second nature to most of us who grew up in

a pre-Vatican II Church. We inherited a structure around our charism — a structure that Catherine McAuley was reluctant to assume — and we find it difficult to see our vocation, to live our vocation beyond that structure, which is traditional religious life. Recall the scene of December 12, 1831: After spending a year in a monastic novitiate, Catherine professed her vows and sped home as quickly as possible to the new apostolic community of Mercy she had founded, to the women who had kept her vision and ministry alive while she conformed to ecclesial rule.

Janet Ruffing described Catherine's attempt to translate a monastic novitiate into an apostolic community as her effort to " 'live into' a new reality before (she could) articulate the spiritual dynamic that initiated (her) response in mission."[2] Today we find ourselves "living into" a new reality. From those roots in monastic religious life to Catherine and the first Sisters of Mercy living into apostolic religious life, we find ourselves "living into a new reality" when we recognize those who seek membership with us in unusual new ways. Perhaps we need to draw inspiration again from Catherine and the irrepressible immediacy with which she fled the novitiate to return to her mission.

(3) New Possibilities of Membership

At a Visioning session last spring, the facilitator, attempting to demonstrate the variety in the group, called out a list of ministry roles, teachers, nurses, artists, students, etc; finally she called "parents." A low, deep voice called "over here!" The group broke into spontaneous appreciation for his presence. The associate members with us are clear evidence of the possibility of new forms of membership. They have lived the Mercy charism into the marketplace, into family, into a variety of works and relationships that are not available to vowed members. Their presence has stretched us beyond the limits of our traditional way of identifying who we are. One of the obvious ways a group identifies itself is through language. Since opening ourselves to associate members, have we changed our language? We've gone from "Sisters and Associates" to "Women of Mercy" to "Community of Mercy" to — what names lie ahead?

Associates and Sisters of Mercy recognize that the power of God's mercy calls them to "live into new realities" of working together, praying together and being together.

Although associate membership is recognized as a membership of a new kind, by no means does it offer the only possibility for new membership. Many Mercy communities are being approached by individuals seeking closer identity with us. The women and men who inquire about membership express a variety of ways in which they see themselves within the community of Mercy. Although I am unable to speak of first-hand experience with some of these new forms of membership, I will mention some of the inquiries that have been expressed to our congregations.

One group that comes to mind immediately are former members. Many women who once lived with and worked with us consider themselves "Sisters of Mercy at heart." A litany of their works, professional and volunteer, read like a continuation of the possibilities of works of mercy which Catherine McAuley listed in her Rule. Neither the charism of mercy, nor God as our vocation, separated us one from another. For a plethora of reasons, separation resulted in a choice to no longer live the three vows that mark religious life; it brought about an inability to remain connected to a patriarchal church. Many of these women rejoice in the possibility of identifying again with the community of Mercy.

Co-workers in Mercy institutions or other work places sometimes feel the contagious charism of mercy weaving its way into their lives. Many of our co-workers "live into" the mercy charism so naturally that their articulation of who we are surpasses our mission statements and constitutions. Because the works of mercy are so vital to our identity, perhaps our co-workers reveal to us the universal call to mercy. We can put no limits on it. However, what our co-workers sometimes ask of us is the possibility of identifying themselves with us and committing themselves with us to our mission and work. Because they participate in what is most vital to us, how do we recognize them for their influence and participation in our specific mission?

Identity and relationship through mission seem to be the invitation for new forms of membership.

Another possibility for membership which is emerging comes from women who wish to share in our mission and vision, but who do not feel called to express their lives in the three vows of traditional religious life. Perhaps they feel called to mission and communal living, but prefer some financial independence, i.e., contributing to daily living, contributing to the congregation, but remaining in control of their salaries and funds. Or perhaps the mercy mission enlivens them, but they are not called to communal living. Should we deny them membership when many of us vowed members live alone? Several women and men are attracted to us because of our fourth vow, service. Is it possible to welcome new members into a way of life for which service to the poor, the sick, the uneducated is the unique charism? This is already beginning to take shape among associate members who yearn for deeper commitment with us.

This is to mention only a few of the possibilities for new membership which are emerging among us. With each possibility many questions and concerns concurrently arise. It seems to be the tendency among Mercy communities to allow the questions and concerns to unfold with each person who inquires into new membership. In other words, the community and the individual attempt to "live into a new reality" before a description or prescription of the new form of membership is defined — if we can ever depend on definition again. Identity and relationship through mission seem to be the invitation for new forms of membership. However, questions and concerns cannot be easily dismissed.

. . . we have been charged with the sacred, practical charism of mercy.

Changes and transitions in membership cause tension. Questions of identity are critical. It is difficult to move from one form of self understanding to a new way of seeing oneself. On a community level this is more acute because we are not even settled on what it means to be "Sisters of Mercy." With this question unsettled locally, we now brace ourselves to become an institute of the Americas. This challenges us to break our territorial definitions — not to mention the cultural ones — as a predominantly Irish-American group in the United States — in order to join with sisters in Central and South America.

Besides having these internal tensions, we are confronted with the ancient dilemma of welcoming the stranger among us. The transitions we faced with associate members continue; now we talk of other forms of membership. What of our future as women formed in the church's traditional religious life? Is there any value left to this way of life? Will these new members really be capable of living the charism of mercy? Is this what Catherine intended? Will these new members cause a drain on the energy of vocation and formation personnel? Will they drain our financial resources? How will the charism of mercy and the community continue in the future? Questions of anxiety and excitement abound.

New forms of membership are changing us, raising questions of identity and the future. But we have been charged with the sacred, practical charism of mercy. "A charism is not a thing which is possessed by some and passed on to others. It is an energy, a dynamic, a power which cannot be contained or possessed. It becomes real and actual only when it is acted on, believed in and shared."[3]

In spite of the signs of crisis in our community, fewer women coming from our traditional way of life and more sisters approaching retirement and beyond, and in spite of the overall spiritual vocation crisis that exists in our culture, many women and men desire to identify with us and the charism of mercy. Our inviting response is critical, lest we become like the ancient mariner and ruin the possibilities before us. The ancient mariner cursed his crew mates and himself because he killed the albatross which perched on the ship's mast. Arriving at a time of inclement weather, the bird was a sign that the storm was changing and a calmer, more navigable sea lay ahead. The mariner put to death the sign of hope. His fate was despair and death until he recognized the wisdom of seeing God in all forms of life around him. Once he awakened to that wisdom his life changed, as did the world around him. Experiencing a living death to new life, he was compelled to tell his story with urgency to strangers. Signs of hope and possibilities surround us. Better to receive them with hospitality and struggle through the tension than to curse ourselves to fate.

We know two things for certain. One is that our vocation is God. With all the joy, hope and unknowing that come with faith, we have committed ourselves to God. The other certainty is that we live in a time of accelerating change. The changes are challenging and frightening. But, like Catherine, "we have one source of consolation in all our tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place — centered in God for whom alone we go forward or stay back."

Footnotes

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, ed. Oscar Williams, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 269-288.

2. Janet Ruffing, S.M., "Mercy Futures: An opportunity to re-interpret Mercy charism in light of feminist spirituality," paper delivered to the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, in Detroit, June 13, 1988, p. 4.

3. Mary Jo Leddy, "Beyond the Liberal Model," *Way Supplement* 65: 40-53, Summer, 1989, p. 52.

A New Paradigm for Mercy

Mary Celeste Rouleau

Catherine McAuley was something of an enigma in the early 19th century church. She did not fit into the prevailing category which rigidly separated "nuns", even of the emerging apostolic orders, as women totally apart from "the world". Her continued involvement with laity[1] even after she became a religious caused some opposition and even scandal. Yet her fidelity to the charism she was discerning step by step assured her that this new way of life was truly graced by God.

When we look at the story of her original grace from the perspective and experience of late 20th century interpreters, we may arrive at some fresh insights. Realizing that this reflection must be a shared one, and that my voice is one among what needs to be many, I would nevertheless like to propose two steps. First, we can examine Catherine's story in those aspects which reveal her relationships as a religious with the many non-religious she and her sisters involved in the ministries of mercy. Then we can ponder our present experience in the light of this narrative.

Catherine's Story

During her early womanhood, Catherine McAuley ministered to the poor, visited the sick and taught the truths of the faith in and from whatever household she found herself. Then in 1827 she gambled all her considerable inheritance on a vision, without yet seeing clearly all that God was calling her to. The warmth of her personality and the ardent zeal of her compassion attracted other women, who recognized in themselves a divine calling to share in the vision and ministry of this enlightened leader. As one of her early biographers wrote,

> *It is one of the divine marks of a mission like Miss McAuley's, that others readily receive its impulse. The virtues of the foundress, particularly her "mercy", was quite contagious, and thus priests as well as people were drawn more and more to its practice.*[2]

So she and her first companions, gifted with the charism of mercy as a way of focusing their discipleship of Jesus, gathered in the newly built "Kitty's Folly", the house on Baggot Street in Dublin, to respond to the crying needs of their immediate surroundings: poverty, illness, ignorance, and all the accompanying woes of an Irish city not yet emerged from the oppression of the Penal Laws.

One of her companions wrote of the first intention of Catherine:

> *She was convinced almighty God required her to make some lasting efforts for the relief of the suffering and the instruction of the ignorant, and she thought of establishing a society of pious secular ladies who would devote themselves to their service, with liberty to return to their worldly life when they no longer felt inclined to discharge such duties.*[3]

Her vision of the future mission of mercy now began to enlarge to include two elements beyond her personal dedication. First, she wanted lasting efforts that could be counted on, so that there would be a faithful, abiding presence of mercy to the needy continuing beyond her own lifetime. Then, she was gradually realizing the need for a stable community who would work with her towards this end.

By 1829, several of the ladies who assisted her, including Catherine's nieces, desired to reside on the premises, and in their life together began to observe times of silence and common prayer, and to wear more simple dress, giving the Institute of Mercy more the appearance of a convent than Catherine had ever anticipated. The archbishop stated that the idea of a conventual establishment starting up of itself in this manner had never entered his mind. The new community was in an anomalous position; it was not a convent, it had no rule approved by Rome, its residents had no vows. On the other hand, it was not really a secular house either. Had Catherine been born after Pope Pius XII's decree on the Secular Institutes, this group might indeed have been one of their number.

. . . service of the poor, sick, and ignorant . . .

But the social and cultural circumstances of early 19th century Ireland dictated the limitations of how her vision would be incarnated. Much opposition surrounded the newly formed group because of the ambiguity of their position in the church. So in 1829, Catherine and her fulltime companions met to discern the next step in their journey. The mission was clear: the "service of the poor, sick, and ignorant" of their day. The concrete form in which that mission would find its continuity into the future was not clear. They saw two alternatives: to disband entirely and give up the works, or to accept the archbishop's offer of creating a new religious congregation. Giving up God's call was not in Catherine's agenda at all. But the other option was a problem. Although she was " . . . gifted with much piety, and was always a most zealous Catholic, she had imbibed certain Protestant prejudices, which she retained for a very long period."[4] Thus she was the last to accede to the idea of a formal

religious community.

The next step, a crucial one, was choice of a rule. According to the accounts in the early memoirs, the women rejected the notion of becoming Third Order Carmelites, Dominicans, or Franciscans, because being under the surveillance of a men's community would have been an inconvenience to their freedom for the works of mercy. In addition, some of the monastic practices were incompatible with this newer mode of religious life. The Presentation Rule, considerably modified, suited the particular needs of the charism which they were discerning.

A New Paradigm of Religious Life

The Sisters of Mercy were not, of course, the very first of the "walking nuns" in the 19th century church.[5] But in the Dublin of their day, the novelty of uncloistered women moving among the hovels of the poor, spending hours in the rancid, overcrowded workhouses and in the public hospitals, was a shocking departure from "what nuns ought to be." They should stay in their cloister, apart from "the world", and be carefully supervised in the details of their life by clerical religious and ecclesiastical superiors. But Catherine's sisters were very much in the world, among the people, identifying with the poor who trusted them, not centralized in government and thus free to respond to local needs as discerned by the local community. The spirit of mercy, as gift in each individual and as charism of the community, enlivened and impelled them in their choice of structure.

What was happening in the formation of the new congregation, when the concrete embodiment of the spirit did not quite fit the old model of traditional religious life for women? Since Catherine clearly knew her calling, she did not use the current model to organize her works of mercy. Yet very reluctantly at first, she did accept that structure, but without cloister, for the sake of continuity of the works already begun, as the only viable alternative to abandoning the whole endeavor.

Seeing the face of Jesus Christ in the ten thousand faces of the poor kept Catherine from being paralyzed . . .

It is important to add that once she had accepted that structure, from within it she also found, appreciated, and fully embraced the values of vowed commitment, of community prayer and life, and of ecclesiastical approval which in the context of her times allowed the works to spread so rapidly. These privileged means were permeated and informed by the mission of mercy, always their primary goal.

But even within that structure of religious life, Catherine never lost the vital energy which animated all her thought and action. She didn't allow the older model to dominate her attitudes about what should or should not be done. Even within that framework, so appropriate for its own purposes, a different spirit was creating a new way of being in her world. It was breaking through boundaries, shocking some with its risk and daring, transcending rigid lines of separation. Seeing the face of Jesus Christ in the ten thousand faces of the poor kept Catherine from being paralyzed by assumptions which did not belong to this special new gift of the Spirit for her times.

Relations with Non-religious

One of the major elements of the new uncloistered little community which scandalized some and blessed many others was their close relationship with the laity. All her life Catherine and her sisters were bound to those whose friendship, prayer, and works were an integral part of their ministries of mercy. One of her biographers wrote of the attraction which Catherine's personality had for young women:

> *It was the same with young ladies on the outside. She was a sort of Pied Piper of Hamelin. They gathered to her, they foregathered with her; they went to live with her in the big new barrack; they left off their fine clothes and put on a plain dress; they said prayers with zealous exactitude at fixed hours; but they made no vows, and some of them finally became holy wives and mothers.*[6]

Around the original foundation at Baggot Street in Dublin gathered a number of these ardent followers who participated in the works of mercy but with no intent of formally entering the religious community. There were the two charming socialite daughters of the great patriot and political leader, Daniel O'Connell, and the Misses Costello of Merion Square. Both these families, wrote one of Catherine's first associates, " . . . distinguished for their talents and accomplishments, assisted her in every way; taught in the school and sometimes in the workroom."[7] "The Costigans, Miss O'B. Butler and several others used to come and instruct in the schools."[8] The author of the Dublin memoir continues:

> *We had some real friends; among the earliest I may mention James and John O'Farrell . . . Next to Mr. Cavanagh (community lawyer), the most useful friend she had was Sr. M. diPazzi's brother, Mr. Bernard Delaney. She always liked him very much and had great confidence in his business talents and discretion, and he fully justified it. He spared no pains to serve us and if things are right with us now, as I believe they are, much of it is due to his activity and liberality also.*[9]

Every Mercy foundation has its own story of how the lay people, women and men, gathered around Catherine and her sisters to share in various ways the service and spirit of mercy. In some places, it was through the generosity of a wealthy lay woman that they were able to make a start. Reception and profession ceremonies were occasions for great gatherings of the people, opportunity for Catherine to spread the word about the needs of the poor and to recruit assistance for those who were interested.[10]

One annalist wrote with great admiration of " . . . the way in which she established for herself a kind of right for herself and her associates (both the sisters and the other women who worked with them) to visit the public hospitals of the city (of Dublin) as since that period they have been in the constant habit of doing."[11]

. . . everywhere Catherine and her sisters went, they drew around them a circle of women and some men who participated enthusiastically in the mission . . .

Sketchy though these examples are, they give some flavor of this fact: everywhere Catherine and her sisters went, they drew around them a circle of women and some men who participated enthusiastically in the mission of mercy. So when Sisters of Mercy go back into our origins to examine them in the light of what Catherine was doing, we see something happening that was very different from the activities of nuns in a formal conventual setting. She was directly involving other lay people according to their competence, grace interests, and willingness, in the spirit and actions of mercy.

Another kind of example of Catherine McAuley's assumption that the laity were integral to her mission is worth mentioning. A relatively little-known work of hers (even among Sisters of Mercy) is her treatise entitled "A Cottage Controversy".[12] In this short apologetic or catechetical tract, Catherine couches her teachings for the poor sick, "who require something amusing as well as instructive," in a delightful narrative of six conversations between two women. One is a wealthy Protestant lady of kind and gracious disposition; the other, the young Catholic wife of a poor tenant worker. With great ardor the women discuss basic teachings of the Catholic faith centered in the person of Christ. The Catholic woman of the story evidently voices Catherine's own convictions about the teachings of the church as challenged by the Protestant environment. The author considered a poor lay woman to be a most fitting herald of the Good News to the poor.

Catherine trusted that the spirit of mercy was alive in Frances Warde and the other sisters whom she sent out on mission, and that they would be able to discern how to respond to the particular needs of the people in their place and time. This principle operates in mercy today. Its biblical base is in the Acts of the Apostles, when after Jesus had given the Holy Spirit and had risen from their midst, the apostles gathered in Jerusalem to decide what to do about the gentiles who wanted to be Christians.[13] Jesus had not told them the answer; but he had given them the Holy Spirit as their life, according to which they judged their actions. So too we believe in that same Spirit, in the gift of mercy charism, as informing our decisions for action in the works of mercy.

The church teaches that tradition is a dynamic empowering reality. In Vatican II's *Constitution on Divine Revelation,* there is a profound section on the development of doctrine which may help us in reflecting on our Mercy tradition.

> *In its teaching, life and worship, the church perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes. The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and the words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate (from within) sense of spiritual realities which they experience . . . .*[14]

So in the prayer of our heart, from within, we experience the reality of this gift of mercy. And as we treasure it and contemplate its implication, it grows, develops in and through and around us, a tradition empowering for merciful action.

Today: A New Paradigm?

Almost thirty years ago, Thomas Kuhn wrote a landmark work which proposed an idea, now become so commonplace, that may aptly be applied here.[15] As a science historian, Kuhn posed questions about what was happening in the mind of a scientist when a new discovery was taking place. The common thread through centuries of western discovery was what he called a "paradigm shift." A paradigm is an imaginative, symbolic framework of thought which serves as a scheme for organizing and integrating our understandings of the world around us. In each instance of a new discovery, a new paradigm was born, which included the old as partial truth, but broke through limits of the old to a larger and more inclusive perspective. Usually it came as a sudden intuition into truth rather than as conclusion of syllogistic reasoning. And the content of

the idea arose as a result of letting go of traditional ways of thought, prejudices and assumptions, and playfully creating a new framework within which new ideas were free to develop.

Cardinal Suenens of Belgium, addressing the Vatican Council 25 years ago, said this of the church: "To St. Paul, the church of the living Christ does not appear as some kind of administrative organization, but as a living web of gifts, of charisms, of ministries." It has taken a generation for us to think "people of God" instead of "pope, bishops, clergy" as church; yet we are still working, for the most part, within the imagery and vocabulary of that hierarchical paradigm.

Are we today, like Catherine in her day, now moving into a new paradigm of mercy?

I believe that Catherine McAuley, graced by God, truly initiated a new paradigm of religious life for women of mercy in her day. She saw herself privileged to serve Jesus in His suffering members, as He Himself had ministered to them. Are we today, like Catherine in her day, now moving into a new paradigm of mercy?

I would like to suggest that there are two different ways to think about this question. One is to consider the development of groups of Mercy Associates and the proposal of a more closely related "alternative membership" as the beginning of something very new. Obviously, the formality of it is new. But the other way is to wonder whether in our day we might be reclaiming the model which Catherine originated for us, reincarnating that closer relationship with our lay peers who are also drawn to mercy.

A New Paradigm

In the first mode, revitalization for us demands a paradigm shift, a risky change in our way of thinking about religious life. We're like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* after the tornado, when she said to her little dog, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas any more." Maybe we too need a kind of symbolic tornado to waken this awareness. We don't like to anticipate uncertainty, and let go of the securities of the past.

Those who are planners among us want to be very clear on how to discern and move forward with the many positive changes already in place after Vatican II. At the same time some in the community are clinging to the tried and true way, and the community itself is aging. But clarity of vision depends on our letting go, almost like Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" into the darkness of the abyss.

I think two factors are moving us very positively toward a real paradigm change. First, there is the obvious fact that our culture is so very different from the social context of early 19th century Ireland, although the same basic human needs cry out for mercy. Then too, our present time clearly shows us that men and women who do not profess religious vows desire both to minister after the fashion of Catherine McAuley, and to receive the moral support of the congregation she founded, without maintaining a common lifestyle or divesting themselves of marriage possibilities or of ownership of property. As Maryanne Stevens points out in a significant article on this topic,

> *Can we as disciples of the great founders and foundresses in the church, make a distinction between vocation to a particular lifestyle or life structure, and the vocation to a particular charism and mission within the church — that is, a deep identity with the spirit and gifts of a particular person who focuses our discipleship of Jesus?*[16]

Perhaps this may be a little less obvious to some, but nevertheless it is a growing reality: the new experience from "outside" the formal religious life structure, that the charism and mission of mercy in our day is authentically being given to many others who want to be with us in prayer, in ministry, in gospel friendship, enlivened by this vision and inspired by that amazing woman who sparked it off.

. . . we have to make decisions Catherine never faced but for which she has empowered us . . .

The second mode of reflecting on whether we today are initiating something "new" is to look again at Catherine's story. She was a concrete embodiment of the Mercy archetype, which in her enlightenment she came more and more deeply to understand. Her vision of mercy was a gift, a charism through which she responded to the needs around her. Others who knew her and her sisters followed that same vision, and each incarnated mercy in her unique way. As Catherine literally became mercy, so each of us is called to become mercy. The energy of that archetype, alive in us through the creative Spirit, has to be individuated in new places and times, wherever it is embodied.[17]

So we, Sisters of Mercy, are not really initiating a new paradigm, but rather reincarnating mercy anew in our day. We are challenged to let go of our encrusted assumptions, images, and symbols, and to undergo true metanoia. Today, we have to make decisions

Catherine never faced but for which she has empowered us with the seeds of mercy. We have more opportunities for influencing not only systemic changes for justice, but also for effecting a social transformation of consciousness. Women in our time have a power and an awareness not possible in Catherine's culture.

Yet wasn't she a kind of early feminist, influencing those in authority, drawing together bishops, clergy, lay leaders in political positions, coworkers, the lay people who gathered around every convent to help a little, then found themselves much more enthusiastically involved than they at first intended to be?

If we are afraid . . . we need to discern our reasons for that.

Catherine truly challenges us to be revealers of God's mercy, in compassion and fidelity, in her spirit and with her vision. We have to be convinced of the need for a paradigm shift from the pre-Vatican assumptions of religious life for women. We have to be images, icons, of the archetype that is mercy. Then we can discern the meaning of sharing a charism with those whose calling may be to the same spirit in differing lifestyles.

For Sisters of Mercy, this will be a profound rediscovering of the meaning of the vows, especially as related to mercy: of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service as permanent sacred commitment of our goods, our sexuality, our personal decisions within the context of an ecclesial community of mercy. Such a task cries to be done, and by Mercy theologians. If we are afraid of it, we need to discern our reasons for that. Could a clearer articulation of our calling as vowed members of the community be anything but a good, both for us and for the laity with whom we are so closely associated?

Then we shall have to redefine how we use the language in which we speak of "membership". For language is essentially part of the structural paradigm of a culture. But the meaning of language changes with use, and takes on new meanings as we struggle to express new experiences. These experiences both require and cause a fresh framework of thought. What does it mean for us to use the term "member" in a broader context? Under the old paradigm (and indeed in canonical terminology) it would refer only to vowed members, and thus to inequality of participation in the charism. Is it possible that reflecting on where the charism is appearing now may help us to rethink who are our mercy-gifted companions? Much dialogue, sincerely undertaken in faith and graced good will, needs to take place in order to generate the growth in understanding of new meanings. Even as this is being accomplished, we must also be patient with the fact that official ecclesiastical language will not be changed by us, and thus we need to make the added effort at coding/decoding when communicating with those who have not participated in our new understandings.

We, all of us enspirited by mercy, must together dream our future, reincarnate the archetype and the myth of mercy. Creativity will arise in us if we share our discernment of the gifts of the Spirit, of mercy as an inner reality impelling us to re-embody it in varied ways and new forms which will respond to the needs of our world.

Several contemporary writers, in addition to Maryanne Stevens cited earlier, have reflected on the phenomenon of lay participation in a founding religious charism. A Christian Brother writes, "What is being demanded today is that the bond between lay and religious be rooted in a common spirituality of mission modified by that unique focusing of a congregation's special founding charism."[18] Sandra Schneiders, one of our best women theologians, writes of a religious charism not as an "essence" but rather as a "movement," engaging a group of people animated by a common concern, sharing a spirit and ministerial commitment, but admitting of degrees of participation according to differing states of life.[19]

Conclusion

If we begin to rethink what it means to be one who is inspired by the Spirit, under the leadership of Venerable Catherine McAuley, to focus our gospel discipleship around the gift of mercy, then we shall see more clearly the marvelous outpouring of this charism all around us. We shall savor this experience, reflect on how our insight into tradition grows with the "intimate sense of the spiritual realities (we) experience." We want to allow the creative energy that mercy generates and is, to impel us to a future of sharing in the mind, heart, spirit and vision of Catherine McAuley. If we really believe in the communion of saints, let us ask Catherine to help us discern together how we can reincarnate the charism of mercy today.[20]

Footnotes

1. The term "laity" is used here in contrast to vowed religious. Obviously, in the technical sense, all women religious are also laity, that is, non-ordained.

2. Sister M. Vincent Hartnett, *Popular Life of Catharine McAuley.* (First Dublin edition 1863.) Edited by Sisters of Mercy, Preface by T.A. Butler. Baltimore, Md.; Baltimore

Publishing Co., 1887. Grammatical structure quoted as in text.

3. Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Bermondsey, London. Also known as "London Manuscript."

4. *Ibid.*

5. Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland.* Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1988.

6. Mrs. Bessie R. Belloc, "Mrs. M'Aulay," in *Historic Nuns.* London: Duckworth, 1898.

7. Sister Mary Clare Augustine Moore, A Memoir of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley (incomplete). 1864. Also known as "Dublin Manuscript".

8. Correspondence between Sister Mary Clare Augustine Moore and her sister, Sister Mary Clare (nee Georgina) Moore, August 28, 1844. In Dublin archives.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Kinsale, Ireland. See also the annals of Cork, Galway, Limerick, Tullamore, and Carlow.

11. Sister Mary Ann Doyle, Notes on the Life of Catherine McAuley (incomplete manuscript, known as "Derry L"). Original in Dublin archives.

12. Catherine McAuley, *A Cottage Controversy.* Written in the 1830's at the request of Sister M. Vincent Deasy. Edited by Mother Mary Teresa Austin Carroll. N.Y.: P. O'Shea, 1883. See Catherine's playful reference to it in a letter, in Sister M. Angela Bolster, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841* (Cork: Sisters of Mercy, 1989), pp. 96-97. Much research remains to be done on this document.

13. Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15.

14. #8. *Vatican II Council: The Conciliar and Post-Consiliar Documents* (Edited by Austin Flannery, O.P. N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1975), p. 754.

15. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970. (Original edition 1962)

16. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M. "The Shifting Order of Religious Life in our Church," *Review for Religious* 48 (July-August 1989), 521.

17. For this insight, I thank Sister Rosaleen O'Sullivan of Burlingame and Thomas Hand, S.J. See Agnes Lee and Thomas Hand, *A Taste of Water* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1990), especially pp. 126 ff.

18. Charles Reutmann, F.S.C., "Religious Life Spirituality for the Year 2010," *Review for Religious* 49 (March-April 1990), 187.

19. Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today.* N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1986.

20. This article is based on a talk given to the national meeting of Directors of Mercy Associates, at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, May 4, 1990.

Called to a New Form of Mercy

Karen Schwarz

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time . . .
T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*[1]

In 1985, while sharing with members of my Women-Church[2] group that I was exploring non-canonical religious congregations, a Burlingame Mercy suggested that I look into their associate program. I politely declined her offer, however, because I desired more congregational incorporation and commitment than their associate program seemed to entail. For, after years of trying to reconcile my feminist commitment with a call to religious life, I had come to see non-canonical religious commitment as a viable alternative.

Interestingly enough, the Burlingame Mercy and I became fast friends. And — as good friends do — she shared her other friends with me, often inviting me to prayers, meals, and celebrations. From the beginning, I was deeply struck by the authenticity and vitality of these Burlingame Mercies. I was moved by their clearly evident spiritual, psychological, and religious renewal. I resonated with their deep commitment to effect justice in church and society, and with their special dedication to the empowerment of women.

Over time, I began to realize that I felt tremendously energized and affirmed whenever I was with these women. Unlike my experience of initial formation with another congregation some years before, I felt genuinely accepted and liked by these women. They did not seem to be threatened by me or by my progressive, perhaps even radical, ideas. Rather, many encouraged me to dream about future visions of church and religious life. Some even dared to dream with me.

I soon came to realize that I was experiencing the very real, healing mercy of God in these women of Mercy. And eventually, I discovered that I was becoming captivated by Catherine's spirit and vision. At a non-verbal, "gut" level, I recognized this resonance — I had experienced it before, during my childhood years in a Burlingame Mercies' grammar school.

I found myself losing interest in the non-canonical congregations I had been exploring, and wondering instead about becoming a part of Mercy. Because of my feminist convictions, I could not in conscience take on canonical status and "enter" the congregation. But neither could I content myself with the somewhat casual arrangement of associate membership. It therefore seemed like a foregone conclusion that, obviously, I was not called to Mercy. And yet, I could not let Mercy go. Or perhaps, more accurately, Mercy would not let me go.

My friend was speechless when I told her that I had been talking with my spiritual director for several months about becoming an associate member of Mercy, with the hope of working with the congregation to birth a new, more inclusive form of non-canonical membership. Her reaction was one of both excitement and concern. Excitement, because she believed that the congregation and I had a lot to give to each other. And concern, because she knew that I would be living on the cutting-edge of a reality that is not yet here.

Her excitement and her concern were both well-founded. In September, as I began my third year as an associate member of Burlingame, I was struck with the bittersweet quality of my feelings. For although I experience much joy and hope in Mercy, I am also aware of moments of pain and fear in the face of some very real and formidable difficulties.

I am told that some Sisters resent Associates for "wanting our cake and eating it, too".

Unlike most of our Associates[3], I seek active involvement and incorporation in the congregation. I am heartened at how this has been made possible in the last few years, and in so many ways. I am a non-resident member of a local living group at the Motherhouse complex. Although I have the option of "living in", as an introvert in the ministry of clinical psychology, I cherish and need my individual space; I therefore choose to live alone in an apartment. Still, I am frequently with the members of my local community, either at their house or mine. I also serve on two congregational committees, the Justice Steering Committee and the Associate Coordinating Committee. The Justice Steering Committee, because our work addresses and impacts the congregation as a whole, is an experience of real participatory inclusiveness for me. Similarly, I have attended the last two national meetings of the Mercy Justice Coalition and

have rejoiced at Associates' full participation.

Our current leadership team has made tremendous efforts to include Associates more fully in the life of the congregation. Official congregational correspondence now is addressed to "Sisters and Associates". So, too, special care is being taken to invite Associates to attend and participate in congregational assemblies and events. Our Annual Convocation this past August was a marvelous example of this emerging inclusiveness, as Associates were included as full participants in all large and small group sessions. In addition, we facilitated and recorded some of the small groups, were part of large group presentations, planned and presided at small group prayer rituals, were involved with the large group rituals, and were invited to serve on the Convocation planning committees.

Much of the . . . resistance to Associate inclusion, stems . . . from the nebulous and oftentimes nondescript definition of associate membership.

Although these and many other examples of inclusiveness abound and are definitely increasing, exclusion of Associates still does occur. When this happens, it jolts me back into the difficult but all-too-true reality that Associates are not really part of the congregation, and that regardless of my personal experience, my particular lifestyle in Mercy is not officially sanctioned or publicly advertised by the congregation. For in reality, my experience is due largely to my having "found" a local living group and two congregational committees that are willing to incorporate me so fully. New Associates, or people preparing to make their first associate commitment, are not generally invited to become members of a local community, be it on a residential or non-residential basis. Similarly, service on congregational committees, apart from the two I work with, is not yet open to Associates.

Another source of pain for me is that some Sisters seem uncomfortable with Associates' increasing involvement in the congregation. I am told that some Sisters resent Associates for "wanting our cake and eating it, too". I can appreciate the difficulty that some must have in sharing their congregation with those who have not made a similar all-inclusive vowed commitment. Perhaps if we could begin to dialogue together, "these Sisters can come to see Associates as allies and partners who will ensure the future of their congregations, not as competitors who reap the benefits of congregational membership without making any of the sacrifices".[4]

Nationally, with the exception of the Mercy Justice Coalition, Associates are not usually included in Mercy gatherings. However, it is heartening that Associates have been included in the Institute Visioning process, and that an Associate[5] serves on the Visioning Committee. To my knowledge, though, no Associates have been involved in any of the preparations for the first Institute Chapter. While I acknowledge the obvious canonical restraints that prevent Associates from serving as delegates to the Institute Chapter or being involved in any official canonical capacity, I wish Associates had been included on some of the planning committees. Similarly, I would have liked to have had "Associate delegates" selected, so that there would be an "official", albeit non-voting, Associate presence at the Chapter.

Much of the difficulty in and resistance to Associate inclusion, stems, I believe, from the nebulous and oftentimes nondescript definition of associate membership. As I stated earlier, most associate members seek local prayer and ministry support; they do not seek active congregational incorporation. For the great majority of Associates, then, casual and infrequent congregational contact is the norm. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with this, for congregational incorporation and activity are not necessary for living the charism of Mercy. The lifestyles of these Associates are certainly viable and good options for them.

However, for those of us who do desire congregational incorporation, this creates an identity problem of sorts. No differentiation is made between those of us wanting congregational involvement, and those who do not. In other words, two very different realities are seen and understood as a single reality. Two very different groups of people, with two very different expressions of commitment to and involvement in the congregation, are treated as if they were the same. I am not saying that either group is any better or any holier than the other. Rather, I am stating the simple fact that the two groups are about two very different lifestyles. Be extrapolation, then, I am suggesting that each group would be better served if these two realities were acknowledged and addressed as such.

To this end, I am co-authoring a proposal for a new form of alternative membership in Mercy.[6] My co-author, Mary Kathryn Grant, is an associate member of Detroit. Working with my own ideas for several months, I became aware of Mary Kathryn and her work in early Spring 1990 as she was preparing a presentation for the National Meeting of Mercy Association Program Directors.[7] How heartening it was for each of us to find each other — a kindred and like-minded spirit in Mercy. Amazingly, our individual proposals were very similar. With the encouragement of the participants of the National Meeting of Mercy Association Program Directors, we pooled our individual ideas and created one joint proposal. Calling for

an Institute-encouraged pilot study of a new, more inclusive form of non-canonical membership, our proposal is currently circulating through the regional communities.

Alternative membership, as we are proposing it, would be a third expression of membership in Mercy. Unlike vowed membership, alternative membership would not be canonically recognized or juridically-binding. However, unlike associate membership, it would involve long-term and even permanent commitment, and it would incorporate the alternative member into most aspects of the congregation. Alternative membership, therefore, would be an alternate form of membership for those who seek deeper and fuller insertion into the life of the congregation of Mercy without the canonical commitment of poverty, chastity, and obedience as they are expressed by vowed members of the congregation.

Alternative membership . . . is a radical transformation of what it means to be a religious congregation.

Our proposed form of alternative membership would be open to adult Christian women and men who experience a call to gospel community in Mercy, but who, for various reasons, do not find canonical vows affirming or appropriate. Some of these people are married or in committed relationships or wish to marry, and are therefore ineligible for religious vows. Many wish to maintain financial independence, and although desiring community accountability, choose to retain ultimate authority in personal decision-making concerning finances and material possessions. Some do not seek the permanent and/or primary commitment that is reflected in vowed membership. Some are men who are attracted by the renewal and vitality of women's congregations, but who are obviously ineligible for canonical membership. Others are women (and perhaps some men can be included here, too) who are not comfortable with canonical status in the institutional church.[8]

Alternative members[9] would make a public commitment to live simply, to be open to the discernment of the Spirit individually and collectively, to love non-exclusively (whether single, married, or in a committed relationship), and to minister to the poor, sick, and uneducated. They would be expected to tithe a significant portion of their income to the congregation and to be present at congregational assemblies and events. Alternative members would also have the option of living or affiliating with local living groups, working in congregational ministries, serving on congregational committees, being eligible for representing the congregation on institutional boards and in congregationally-sponsored ministries, and participating in congregational discernment and decision-making. It is hoped that alternative members would eventually be included on local and national leadership teams.

Alternative membership, as we are proposing it, is a radical transformation of what it means to be a religious congregation. In a previous paper, I describe this radical transformation of religious life in the following way:

> *Transformation involves change, and change means that things will not be as they have been. Just as the shape of religious life has changed in the past to meet the emerging challenges and needs of each historical era, so too it will change again. And as in the past, some congregations will resist this transformation, and will cease to exist.*[10,11]

Such a revolutionary change in the understanding of religious life is nothing less than a "paradigm shift".[12] Understood as the symbolic framework or organizing principle that underlies our assumptions and understandings, a paradigm, to a large extent, functions like language for it both defines and limits our reality. A "paradigm shift", therefore, is defined in the following way:

> *A "paradigm shift" . . . is a fundamental change in our underlying assumptions and organizing principles. It is a radical reformulation of the way we approach reality, a breaking-through to a new, broader, and more inclusive perspective that both alters our experience and redefines our reality.*[13]

To birth a new paradigm is a long and arduous undertaking, one that is "neither completely rational nor completely irrational, and is often more revolutionary than evolutionary".[14] "New paradigms emerge out of old truths, and are the result of a gradual letting go of traditional assumptions, prejudices, and ways of thought".[15] However, these older ways of knowing are never completely eradicated by the new paradigm, but become part of the historical context of the new paradigm. As such, they continue to exist as partial truths within a larger and more inclusive framework.

Alternative membership, as described in the proposal co-authored by Mary Kathryn Grant and me[16], is a major paradigm shift for the Institute of Mercy. A paradigm shift, because it is literally "the time between the parentheses", is both difficult and challenging. As the old paradigm of religious life crumbles around us[17], the new paradigm is not yet clear. We are like Sarah and Abraham in the Promised Land, for we do not know exactly where we are going. However, because they trusted in the promise of God, Sarah and Abraham knew that they were headed in the right direction. They knew that wherever it was they were

going, they were drawn there by God.

Conscious of the myriad difficulties inherent in any paradigm shift, Mary Kathryn and I offer our proposal as a starting-point for dialogue. It is our hope that in doing so, we are assisting in the birth pangs of a new form of religious life in this Institute of Mercy.

Footnotes

1. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

2. "Women-Church" is defined by Mary E. Hunt as "a global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity" ("Defining 'Women-Church'," *Waterwheel* (Women's Alliance For Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), 8035 13th Street, Silver Spring, MD 20910), *3*(2) (Summer 1990), p.1) and by Rosemary Radford Ruether as a "community of women constituted as the exodus community from patriarchy" ("WomanChurch Calls Men to Exodus From Patriarchy," *National Catholic Reporter*, 23 March 1984, p. 16). See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

3. The majority of our Associates and people seeking to become Associates are looking for ongoing prayer and ministry support within the context of the charism of Catherine McAuley and her spirituality of Mercy. Some are involved in locally-based prayer-support groups composed of Sisters and Associates, and many work in congregational ministries, usually on a volunteer basis. Some, however, appear to desire active congregational involvement and incorporation.

4. Karen Schwarz, "Alternative Membership in Religious Congregations," *Review Fore Religious,* in press.

5. Marty Jennings, Detroit.

6. Mary Kathryn Grant and Karen Schwarz, *Proposal For Institute Pilot Study: Alternative Membership in Mercy,* May 1990. Copies are available through regional community Presidents and Membership Committees.

7. National Meeting of Mercy Associate Program Directors (Burlingame, CA: Mercy Center, May 1990).

8. Some women are declining canonical status today because they do not want to identify with the Church hierarchy and its increasingly authoritarian attempts to silence dissent and diversity. Many of these women are also unwilling to accept canonically-imposed limitations on their speech and action. See Rita Mary Bradley, "The Future of Religious Life," *Newsletter of the National Coalition of American Nuns* (National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN), P.O. Box 60616-6794, Chicago, IL 60616) (Winter, 1989); Mary Ann Donovan, "A More Limited Witness: An Historical Theologian Looks At the Signposts," in *The Crisis in Religious Vocations*, Laurie Felknor, Ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989), pp. 84-98; Lillanna Kopp, "The Shape of Sisterhoods to Come: When Going Noncanonical Becomes A Moral Imperative," *Newsletter of the National Coalition of American Nuns* (Summer, 1988); Lillanna Kopp, *Sudden Spring: 6th Stage Sisters* (Waldport, OR: Sunspot Publications, 1983); Rose McDermott, "A Canonical Perspective on the Departures From Religious Life," in *The Crisis in Religious Vocations,* Laurie Felknor, Ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989), pp. 210-227; National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAn), "Declaration on Canonical Status", in *If Any One Can: NCAN. 25 Years of Speaking Out* (Chicago: National Coalition of American Nuns, 1989); Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Biblical Observations on the Decline of Vocations to Religious Life," in *The Crisis in Religious Vocations,* Laurie Felknor, Ed. (New York: Paulist, 1989), pp. 152-164.

9. See Mary Kathryn Grant and Karen Schwarz.

10. Karen Schwarz.

11. See especially Lawrence Cada, S.M., Raymond Fitz, S.M., Gertrude Foley, S.C., Thomas Giardino, S.M., Carol Lichtenberg, S.N.D. de N., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: Seabury, 1979); Joan Chittister, O.S.B., "Religious Life: The Leadership That Is Needed," *Origins, 7,* 14 (22 September 1977), pp. 209-213; Robert Faricy, *The End of the Religious Life* (Minneapolis MN: Winston, 1983); Paula Gonzalez, S.C., "God Calls Us to Community," Keynote Address of the First National Conference on Associate/Alternate Membership (Cincinnati OH: Xavier University, 23-25 June 1989).

12. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* 2nd Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

13. Karen Schwarz.

14. Hans Küng, "Paradigm Change in Theology," in *Paradigm Change In Theology,* Hans Küng and David Tracy, Eds. (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

15. Karen Schwarz.

16. See Mary Kathryn Grant and Karen Schwarz.

17. See especially Gerald Arbuckle, S.M., *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New York: Paulist, 1988); Lawrence Cada, et al; Joan Chittister; Robert Faricy; Laurie Felknor, Ed. *The Crisis in Religious Vocations: An Inside View* (New York: Paulist, 1989); Paula Gonzalez; Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., "The Shifting Order of Religious Life in Our Church", *Review For Religious,* (July-August, 1989), pp. 515-529; Evelyn Woodward, *Poets, Prophets, & Pragmatists: A New Challenge to Religious Life* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria, 1987).

Contributors

Maureen Crossen, R.S.M., is the coordinator of new membership and co-director of the associates' program for the Pittsburgh congregation. She teaches at Carlow College as a lecturer in theology. She is a member of the Mercy Vocation and Formation Conference, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology and she served as a facilitator in the Visioning process. Maureen is also a member of the Pittsburgh-Greensburg Vocation Council and Charities U.S.A. Commission on Women.

Mary Celester Rouleau, R.S.M. earned her Ph.D. at St. Louis University, and is currently teaching philosophy at University of San Francisco. She did post-doctoral studies in spirituality at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and private research in archives and libraries in Ireland, England, France, Belgium and Italy. Her "hobby" since she entered the Sisters of Mercy over forty years ago has been the spirituality of Catherine McAuley. She has written the article on Catherine for the French "Dictionnaire de spiritualite" (Chantilly, France 1978), and other articles on religious life in various journals. She has given many conferences on Mercy themes, and was one of the original writers who helped shape the new Constitutions. Her present project is a book about interpreting the spirituality of Catherine, integrating a method of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics with the data collected over the years.

Karen Schwarz is an Associate of the Burlingame unit. She is a member of Burlingame's Associate Coordinating Committee, and also the Justice Steering Committee, where she is a co-leader of the Women-In-Church Issue Area. She is active in Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) on both the national and local levels, and coordinates a local Women-Church group. Karen holds degrees in Psychology and Religious Studies, and is currently a doctoral candidate in Clinical Psychology. In her dissertation research, she is exploring women's attitudes towards the Roman Catholic Church.

Questions for Study/Reflection

1. Is there an albatross of which you are aware, that is, a sign of hope masked in struggle and tension?

2. Are you comfortable with the description of charism articulated on page 4? What implications does this understanding of charism have?

3. How has your response to God in the context of Mercy changed over the years? What paradigms of Mercy have shifted during your lifetime?

4. What shifts do you see occurring now? Which do you perceive as animating the energy of Mercy?

5. What is your greatest fear for the community of Mercy? — your greatest hope?

6. How accepting are you of alternative forms of membership? What motivates your acceptance/lack of acceptance?

Coming Issues

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