The MAST Journal

VOL. 1, NO. 3 SUMMER 1991

Rite and Ritual

Summer, 1991

Dear Readers,

This issue of The MAST Journal marks the completion of the first volume and the members of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology met in Atlanta in June to celebrate. In the midst of Southern hospitality coordinated by Joanne Lappetito and the St. Joseph's hospital community, the members of MAST also attended plenary sessions on bioethical issues and their impact on women and listened to reports on research in progress on the prophet theme in the New Testament (Judith Schubert, Plainfield) and on Sacraments and Liturgy (Julia Upton, Brooklyn).

Because this is the end of our first year, we would appreciate you, our readers, filling out the questionnaire on page 14. We need to hear from you about whether the journal actually fulfills its purpose . . . "to foster conversation about mission and ministry within the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas." We want any suggestions you may have for improving the journal. We will also begin taking subscriptions to the Journal as described on the inside back cover.

This issue, funded by a partial grant and a loan from the Omaha community, is dedicated to rite and ritual. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy our church states a desire to intensify our daily growth as Catholic Christians by making more responsive to the requirements of our times those church observances open to adaptation and strengthening those aspects of the church which might help summon all into its embrace (#1). Rite and ritual are crucial to our understanding of ourselves as Sisters of Mercy, as Christians and as Catholics. It is through rite and ritual that we express in our lives and manifest to others the mystery of our God, our existence and our unity.

And yet we know the search for ways to celebrate our God, our community and our church is not an easy one. We've all been to deadening rites and to flimsy, inspirationless rituals. We're caught. We can't rely completely on the rubrics nor can we just take off and fail to mine the rich resources of our past. Questions abound: it is more appropriate for one of our sisters to give the homily at the funeral liturgy or the final profession of one of our sisters even though the order of the eucharistic liturgy calls for an ordained minister to give the homily? Is it appropriate or inappropriate for the whole community to share in the words of consecration? How shall we ritualize the new life born of death or the changing ministry of one our sisters?

This issue comes to you in hopes that you will reflect on the rites and rituals in your communities. As always our hope is for lively conversation and debate. Please send any reflections to me and I will print them in the next issue.

Sincerely,

Maryanne Stevens, RSM

The MAST Journal is published three times a year (November, March and July) by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Srs. Maryanne Stevens (Omaha), Joanne Lappetito (Baltimore), Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt (Burlingame), Elizabeth McMillan (Pittsburgh) and Julia Upton (Brooklyn). All correspondence should be mailed to Maryanne Stevens, RSM, 9411 Ohio Street, Omaha, Nebraska, 68134.

Rituals for This New Day

Julia Ann Upton, RSM

Our conversation about the place of ritual and symbol in our lives as Sisters of Mercy began in the February 1990 issue of Mercy Life with the article "Ritual and Symbolism in Religious Communities," and continues in this issue.

Few of our regional communities, I imagine, have not experienced difficulties with shaping communal rituals that will be life-giving for everyone. Whether our discussion centers on praying the Liturgy of the Hours in local communities, celebrating Eucharist on the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, or planning for the sisters' jubilees, the common denominators these days is angst.

. . . ritualization and symbolization are integral to humanity.

Anthropologists and theologians alike have made it quite clear to us that ritualization and symbolization are integral to humanity. For Sisters of Mercy ritualizing the significant moments of our personal and communal lives, therefore, is not peripheral but integral to our identity as daughters of Catherine, followers of Jesus, women of compassion, or children of the earth. To ritualize is not to repeat unconsciously the patterns of the past, but to give new life to them in the present. As Margaret Mead writes, "The essence of ritual is the ability of the known form to reinvoke past emotion, to bind the individual to her own past experience, and to bring the members of the group together in a shared experience."[1] Once our celebrations were the source of such deep joy, why are they now laced with such pain? Is there something wrong with our rituals?

Actually, if our rituals are a source of struggle for us these days, it is because there is something "right" with them. In ritual the known form reinvokes past emotion. Today many women are finding that the known forms — "tradition" religious rituals — are invoking painful emotions of oppressions and alienation long denied or overlooked. In response they attempt to develop new rituals which will express more clearly their identity in this "new age" of self-awareness. For others the known forms reinvoke positive emotions associated with pleasurable experiences. So what happens is those who do not feel oppressed by the "traditional" rituals, often find themselves oppressed instead by the "new" rituals precisely because these innovative rituals are linked neither to past emotion nor present experience. Since celebrations must be ceremonies in which each finds something together,[2] it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to celebrate our identity as Women of Mercy at the close of the second millennium. How can we shape rituals in which each finds something together?

Sister Karen Schneider of the Brooklyn Regional Community had just such a question in the back of her head as time for her final profession drew near. A "devout" feminist, Karen knew that some of the congregation's more innovative ritual experiences had been cause for alienation rather than celebration among many of our sisters and she did not want her profession to be either an experience of hierarchical oppression for her or alienation for them. A visit to Weston Priory gave her an idea for another ritual option.

In many monastic communities Eucharist is "packaged" with one of the celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours. At the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, for example, because of the wide variation in class schedules, the community celebrates Vespers/Eucharist in the evening. For more "contemplative" reasons the Camoldolese Monks in Big Sur pray Lauds/Eucharist at 6:30 each morning. These "packages" begin with the psalmody, move into the readings for the day from the lectionary, use the petitions from the office book, and then move to the table for the Liturgy of Eucharist. It is hardly an ideal liturgists agree, but Karen saw possibilities in it.

Karen envisioned a celebration in which her profession would be set within the Eucharist (as has been our practice for generations) and that Eucharist could be set within the daily prayer of the Church, which would look something like this:

Liturgy of the Hours
Eucharist
Profession

. . . this format would allow for one of the sisters to preside over . . . the Liturgy of the Hours.

Karen also saw that while it was appropriate for our Superior General to preside over the profession, and a priest to preside over the Eucharist, this format would allow for one of the sisters to preside over the larger celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours.

The resulting celebration was our first experiment

with such a format, and we have been encouraged by the response of the sisters. For everyone involved it raised old questions and awakened new possibilities. Throughout the entire celebration the priest/presider and sister/presider remained together in the sanctuary, but there was no attempt for the sister to co-preside over the table at Eucharist. Instead we achieved a delicate balance that encouraged and excited us.

There was no doubt about the ritual being a known form, but the very way it was planned and celebrated "owned" both the pain and the pleasure of the memories it reinvoked. This was "ritual in a new key" — still short of the eschatological banquet, but truly momentous nevertheless.

Footnotes

1. Margaret Mead, "Celebration: A Human Need," 123-130 in *Twentieth Century Faith: Hope and Survival* (NY: Harper and Row, 1972).

2. Mead, 128.

Funeral Rituals: Our Belonging is Complete

Cynthia Serjak, RSM

The door to the foyer of the Motherhouse opens and the casket bearing the body of our sister is brought into the midst of those assembled: a few family members, several retired sisters, some who were able to get away from work for a few moments. One of the sisters begins:

> *Long ago Sister Mary Catherine was welcomed into this house of Mercy as a sister in community. From this house she traveled often, doing works of compassion, helping to free those in bondage, teaching, preaching and healing in God's name.*
>
> *We now welcome her home for the last time. We reverently receive her body as a reminder of her years of Mercy living and as we keep vigil here we will remember how she lived and worked with us.*
>
> *During her life Mary Catherine drank deeply of the living water poured out so freely by our God. With this holy water we bless her again, trusting that the ever-flowing water of eternal life will carry her into the arms of her Creator.*

A song enfolds the assembly as holy water is sprinkled on the body. A reading from Scripture is a focus for feelings and thoughts, and a reminder of the broader story in which our mourning finds meaning.

The presider continues:

> *Creator God, you are the loving one who gave Mary Catherine life by breathing into her your own divine breath. You are the all-wise one who has now called her from among us. We ask that in your wisdom and compassion you keep vigil with us as we learn to let go of this one whom we have greatly loved. May this time of tears and grieving be tempered by our storytelling and mutual support, so that as we become strong together we may be ready to return our sister to you, our loving God.*
>
> *We stand here with Jesus, the one who has shown us the true meaning of death. With him and in his Holy Spirit we place ourselves in your hands, now and forever. Amen.*

These prayers for the reception of the body of a deceased sister have been written in the context of lived experience. They recognize the very real and human emotion of grief, while placing that emotion in counterpoint with the reality of death and the message of the gospel. They stress the importance of mutual support, storytelling and the rhythm of the day or two to come: the rhythm of letting go in death and celebrating in life. They are an example of the ways in which we have began to adapt the rituals for funerals to express and celebrate the unique nature of our experience.

While there are many questions that underlie our desire to reshape the particular way we pray together in the face of death I believe they can be focused into one: **How does the membership of the sister who has died find its full expression, its "completion," in the rituals of her funeral?**

This question encourages us to examine the meaning of membership in a radical way by putting into dialogue the experience of years of belonging to a faith community and the present experience of leave-taking from that community. If we accept this dialogue as an underlying source in our planning, then the funeral ritual can take its shape and flavor from the community's understanding of the whole of membership, i.e., how women are initiated, how they learn "to be" Sisters of Mercy, how they interact with the community throughout their lives, and finally how they are sent forth into a new life after earthly death.

Ritual: The Community's Work

Recently our congregation developed a retreat based on the ritual of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). In the process of adapting the rituals to celebrate membership in the congregation, we learned a great deal about the power of rituals in any life process. An example of an initiation dynamic which the RCIA teaches is that it is the community that welcomes the candidate, the community that initiates here, the community that helps to form her. While there may be individual sisters delegated by the community to serve as her guides and mentors, initiation is the responsibility and the privilege of the whole community.

Last summer we welcomed a sister who is transferring from another congregation. Adapting the Rite of Acceptance from the RCIA, the community first assembled in the Motherhouse foyer to reflect on its responsibility in the process which was beginning. Then all those assembled processed with song to the door, to greet the woman applying for transfer. Since she had just come from the airport, her baggage was there too, as well as two sisters who had met her plane. The community continued singing as the president brought her inside the house. In the community's name the president asked "What do you seek here?" Knowing that this question was to be asked the sister responded, "I want to share my life with this community." With more song the community accompanied her back to the foyer, "the heart" of the house, and the space through which most of them had come to the community. This rite of welcome continued with Scripture, a gesture of signing adapted from the RCIA Rite of Acceptance, and the signing of a document of

intention.

Reflecting back on the event reminds us powerfully of the role of the community as it gathered at the door, some members straining for a glimpse of the new face, some reaching out to touch her as she passed by. It is the same community, even many of the same individuals, that gathers in the foyer to welcome a sister home for the last time. The community's rightful and crucial role is named in the prayers: "we welcome her home . . . we reverently receive her body . . . we keep vigil . . . we bless her again. May this time of tears and grieving be tempered by our storytelling and mutual support, so that as we become strong together we may be ready to return our sister to you, our loving God." It is a kind of energy of affectionate ownership that both receives the new member and sends the member who is passing over. It is an energy born in belonging, an energy of sisterly bonding, rooted in the response to God, an embrace of a particular charism, and the communal lived experience which strengthens us both to risk receiving a new member and to be ready to let her go again.

Ritual: The Community's Storytelling

Another way in which the membership of a sister in community can be given expression in the funeral rite is at the time of Vigil. The New Order of Christian Funerals presents an outline for a Vigil Service while allowing that circumstances may call for pastoral adaptations. Although the entire Vigil rite is worthy of reflection, one particular suggestion is helpful in thinking about our rituals and our membership in community. At #62 in the Rite we read that a member of the family or a friend of the deceased may speak in remembrance of the deceased. This invitation to storytelling may well evoke the most powerful moments of the Vigil service, for the stories that emerge are the stories of belonging. From family members as well as from sisters in community come the stories that tell how this loved one belonged, how she grew with us and taught us, how her particular response to God's call helped to shape our own, how her membership with us mattered to us. While these memories may at first seem small attempts to convey the meaning of a life lived fully, nevertheless for all those who listen they paint a picture which becomes a way to cherish what the deceased has been. They also are instructive to those who are seeking to understand their own life and death. Sometimes the stories are surprising as family members hear the sister-stories of belonging that have been woven in the daily fabric of community life, while sisters hear how someone they knew in one way also remained close in another way to those whom she called family. The New Order of Christian Funerals suggests that the time of death may even be an opportunity for reconciliation. While stories of the deceased sister may seem to make her larger than life, they also replenish the well of the community's memory, laying before us the stories that will continue to inspire and challenge us, amuse and delight us, and help us to know that we, too, belong.

In the earlier mentioned retreats based on the RCIA, the team members asked one older sister to tell the story of her coming to the community as a way of beginning the faith-sharing dynamic of the retreat. As surprisingly powerful as some of the stories were, the fact that not many of those present knew those stories was even more surprising. And so in the retreat we encouraged each other to listen more closely, to risk asking the deeper questions, to be more willing to talk about our own faith and vocation experiences. The hope is that a sister's story is woven into the community's story as the members live it together. The Vigil at death is an opportunity for another telling, a cherishing of the significant moments, be they joyful or sad, pleasant times or hard times. If our well of memories is to be an effective source of energy for us, it needs to have stories that tell of life's difficulties as well as its great joys. The Vigil with our sister invites us to be refreshed by the stories of her life, and to add our own water to the growing memory well of those who have gone before us.

Ritual: The Community's Gesture

A third piece of the funeral rite which encourages us to celebrate the membership of the deceased is the final leave-taking at the cemetery.

At the gate of the cemetery the procession forms, including two sister prayer leaders and the honorary sister pallbearers. The casket is taken near the grave, the presider begins:

> *We bring the body of our sister Mary Catherine to return it to the earth from which it was formed by our loving Creator. It is fitting that we do so, since it is this mother earth which gave her body shape and color and strength. We know that this is a worthy resting place. With reverence we touch this earth and bless our sister's body.*

While those gathered sing Psalm 22 each person places earth from a prepared basket on the casket. Then the casket is placed at the grave. The presider continues:

> *While we entrust this body of flesh to the earth from whence it came we remember the earth's faithful promise of spring — that from her dark and mysterious richness new and surprising growth abound. This promise has been made clear for us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who, like Mary Catherine, died and was laid in the earth. We believe that, like Jesus, our sister will come to new life in that same Jesus Christ.*
>
> *While we leave this holy place behind we carry with us the living spirit of Mary Catherine and of all those holy women who have gone before*

us and who now live a new and glorious life. Commending their remains to this earth we commend their spirit to all who have loved and now remember them.

Then is sung a Litany of Holy Women which includes women from Scripture, Catherine McAuley, Frances Warde and the six who accompanied her to Pittsburgh, then the names of those sisters who have died in the past year. Finally, this sister's name is sung in the Litany for the first time.

The presider concludes:

Loving and merciful God hear the prayers we offer for our sister Mary Catherine. By her faith and hope she has always been united with you, her Creator. By her generous service she has been a loving disciple of Jesus Christ. In her strong and enabling love she has lived in your Holy Spirit. Receive her now into the fullness of your presence. Give comfort to all of us who mourn her passing from our midst. For we believe that you will raise us all on the last day. And so with Jesus we pray, Our Father . . . For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.

As the "Salve Regina" is sung, our sister's body is lowered into the earth.

Those who accompanied her are invited to our house nearby to share some simple food.

Ritual: The Community's Fidelity

The gestures of accompaniment are strong: we go to the door to greet you, we go to the grave to send you home. When a sister has had a period of days during which her death was imminent, the community has kept vigil praying and singing to remind her that she belongs, that she is accompanied, that we are ready to send her to God. Our final gesture is to give her to the earth, to touch the earth itself, to sing her into the arms of her loving Creator.

Inviting each person present to place earth on the coffin is inviting a visible expression of letting go. It reemphasizes the communal nature of these rites. The Litany gathers around us some of those whom we hope will welcome our sister into heaven. It includes the names of those near whom she will be laid to rest and among whom her name now finds a place. She is surrounded by the community that sends her and the community that receives her "on the other side." Her belonging is complete.

In the past the signs of our belonging were more visible and describable — the habit, our horarium, our customs. We are in a time of revisioning what belonging means, struggling to be inclusive, yet to somehow identify ourselves as women of Mercy. The RCIA suggests that others will know who we are by how we initiate new members. If we take this to heart we will have to reexamine how we initiate new members, but also how belonging is expressed throughout a member's life, and how her membership is fulfilled in her passing. In all cases the role of the community is crucial — in its current and past membership, in its traditions and customs, in its storytelling and singing, in its gestures of affection and love.

* * * * * * * *

Most of this article was written at the bedside of Mary Louis Wohleber, RSM, who died at the age of 98, having lived for nearly 82 years as a Sister of Mercy. I am grateful for her accompaniment as I wrote. Her belonging is now complete.

Coming Issues

Fall, 1991: Healing and Health Care.
Associate Editor: Elizabeth McMillan (Pittsburgh)

Winter, 1992: Mercy Spirituality
Associate Editors: Janet Ruffling (Burlingame) and Mary Daly (Hartford)

Spring, 1992: Evangelization in the "New" World
Associate Editor: Eloise Rosenblatt (Burlingame)

Praying: Then and Now

Jane Klimisch, OSB

Once upon a time, a clanging bell roused me out of my slumbers at 4:45 a.m. for the Office of Lauds. An ancient Greek name for God is HO KALON, one who calls. We novices learned that God calls us with the sound of a bell. Sometime, depending on my faith mood, the bell sounded resonant and sweet. At other times, the bell sounded rude and abrasive as it interrupted a deep sleep. But, whatever my first response — welcoming or faltering — the call to prayer was heard and needed.

Having successfully stumbled through the rising/dressing rituals, I soon sensed the beauty of a new day. Moving quickly through half-awake halls and stairways, I entered a quiet chapel. The feeling was that of having reached a clearing, a place of sun and sight. Other sisters had already gathered there. Finding my assigned place made me feel purposeful and at home. As we waited only minutes for another gong giving us the pitch for chanted prayer, we had time either to wake up further or to fall back into drowsiness. Or we could prepare our breviary pages, or simply be.

For the most part, I loved praying Lauds. The psalms of praise seemed right as a way to greet the new day. Perhaps the only exception was the Saturday office of Lent. The lengthy canticle of Moses became tedious. The stirring recital of divine deeds in a past generation sometimes drifted into a soporific lullaby. The radiant Easter office, however, offset this dreary Lenten fare. The first antiphon of Sunday Lauds fairly danced in a procession of nine successive Alleluias. For me, this nine-fold song was a piece of heaven. Its momentum seemed endless. Often my imagination fancied the song becoming unstoppable.

Pre-Vatican II praying in a religious community was for me a grace-filled, joyful experience. It had its agonies as well — mining Latin phrases for meaning, expending much human effort to be one voice and heart, struggling with fatigue, enduring the rigors of a prayer environment that was either too hot or too cold — typical of the Dakota prairies. But the psalms became my friends for both inner and outer seasons. And praying with others in one voice enlarged and carried my own efforts. Divine Office, eucharist, sacraments, lectio — these were a replenishing and stable axis within the revolving wheel of community life.

A New Day

In today's decade of the 1990's, the mode of praying in my religious community is vastly different. What was fitting in one era is being replaced with a mode of prayer more in tune with today. I do not see the present era as a break with the values and beauties of the past but rather as an entry into a new awareness and a sign of organic growth. In the realm of mystery — and prayer is a mystery of faith — we are never finished. We may always look forward to surprises and to refreshing uncoverings of well-worn traditions.

The round of Offices — Lauds, Prime, Little Hours, Vespers, Compline, Matins — has been melted down into a Liturgy of the Hours reflecting the beginning, middle, and end of an American day. Thus, we now simply pray morning, noon, and evening praise. The doing of eucharist, once so inflexibly daily, is now frequent but not always daily. What is important is the intentional gathering of those who celebrate. This gathering proclaims our identity as baptized Christians and, in my case, as persons who belong to one another in a specific religious community. In this context of community, we are privileged to "do in memory" of Christ Jesus. Eucharist says and does who we are — and are yet to become — as Christian people loved with an everlasting and unconditional love. We are only beginning, in recent years, to grasp some of the riches here.

Life itself is loaded with grace.

Sacramental life, too, wears a new coat. Its theological meaning is no longer limited to the narrow sense of seven sacraments. Life itself is loaded with grace. The air around us trembles with goodness if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. We need the penetrating eyes of faith to discover and experience this wider reality. But sacramentally-charged moments which envelop specific human events in appropriate ritual celebration are not to be lost. The birth and naming of a baby, teen-age blossoming, marrying and creating a new family, the suffering inherent in illness and death — events such as these cry out for celebration and for a transfiguring imprint marking their goodness. We are thus on the way to re-discovering our sacramental birthright and again inviting the touch of God to bless and shine through human events. Grace then becomes visible as transforming power in our actions, experiences, and relationships.[1]

Personal prayer, too, is coming to life in new ways. The emphasis in my Benedictine tradition is on lectio — a slow, contemplative praying of the scriptures which enables the Bible, the word of God, to become a means of union with God.[2] For me, lectio gathers up the fragments of many modes of personal prayer such as centering, spiritual reading, and meditation. Lectio, beautifully named "the embrace of God,"[3]

is a holistic prayer. The post-Vatican II years have encouraged us to plumb the riches of this prayer mode. In the gospels, it is very clear that the whole ministry of Jesus was rooted in prayer. How firm a foundation for all of us! Here, too, we are on the way . . . and perhaps always shall be.

We live in a God-drenched universe.

For us, as a religious community within the mosaic of the church of God, liturgical prayer sets the pattern for prayer and life. Its fundamental dynamic, that of dialog (call/response), enables us to become persons of prayer. We live in a God-drenched universe. The Rule of Benedict and the scriptures as a whole exult in a God-presence that is everywhere. We have only to recall Psalm 139 ("O where can I flee from your presence?") or the pages of the Benedictine Rule where Christ is found in the sick, in the guest, in the poor, in the workplace, in the young and old — in everyone and everywhere. The prologue of this document even quotes Isaiah 58:9 in the blessed assurance that "even before you call me, I will say to you: here I am." Wherever we are, whatever we do, the bell still rings in our hearts if not in our bell towers calling us to remember who we are and to meet the God-presence that envelops us. This is the meaning of "persons of prayer."

Treasure Old and New

In conclusion, I should like to list some of the riches which today's public and personal prayer highlight for us.[4] These might be grouped in two categories: Who prays and why? and How do we pray?

Who/Why

1. Today's prayer accents the faith-relationship which brings us together to pray. Faith is a movement towards Someone and an experience of mutuality. Note the emphasis on the gathering-ritual of eucharist where we first experience ourselves as a faith community. Further, note that eucharist then becomes an action of all the people of God and not only that of a presider.

2. Today's prayer is dialogic and participatory. Note the many forms of dialog which make up our eucharist and liturgy of the hours. Dialogic prayer, embracing both neighbor and God, has ancient roots. Representing his people, Moses spoke face to face with God and, in turn, was blessed with a sun-like radiance. We, too, can be beautified by the intimacy of divine dialog.

3. Today's prayer grows out of life. It is no longer regarded as a separate dimension of life; it is co-extensive with life.

4. Today's prayer includes a passionate listening (hearing and doing) to the needs of the world in which we live. The deeds enumerated in the social gospel are an outcome of prayer.

5. Today's prayer engages the whole person. Right-brain emphasis has alerted us to the power of the intuitive, the imaginative, and the poetic as well as left-brain analytical powers.

6. Today's prayer finds its uniqueness in the presence of the risen Christ. Hopkins spoke of God as "eastering in us."[5] Paul describes our deepest prayer as "the Spirit groaning within us." (cf. Rom 8:14-26).

How do we pray?

1. Bodily (incarnational) expression enhances our prayer: speech and song; space and environment; posture, gesture, movement; sense involvement through taste and touch, seeing, smelling, hearing.

2. Symbols and movement help us to discover a wide range of meanings in the mysteries we celebrate.

3. In today's prayer, the rhythm of time is cherished and ritualized more intensely: morning and evening, seasons, special feasts and anniversaries, celebrations of reunions and jubilees and marriages, civil holidays, links with the saints who confirm our past faith-history, human events of forgiving, healing, rebirthing, marrying, empowering, being laid to rest in death. The special character of Sunday as a day of rest, restoration, praise and thanksgiving is yet to be more universally recognized and celebrated.

4. Today's prayer is more consciously linked with the scriptural word. Liturgy especially gives us a hermeneutical lens for reading and reflecting on scripture.

5. Today's prayer cultivates inner and outer silence in both public and personal prayer as the good ground (Mk 4:20) for the word.

6. Today's prayer moves beyond petitionary emphasis — something to be wangled out of God — to that of praise, thanksgiving, reconciliation.

7. Today's prayer attempts to include all peoples through universal language and the elimination of racist, sexist, and other discriminatory allusions.

8. Today's prayer attempts to harmonize the familiar with the new; it is prayer that "reassures by repetition, and refreshes by surprise."[6]

The disciple's request, "Lord, teach us to pray," (Lk 11:1-4) is life-long for us. For we do not have an idyllic church or perfect prayer but only a community of people struggling to live the gospel. Part of prayer will always be our own anxiety, fear, and even "storm at sea," or what John of the Cross called "the dark vision of God." But in this unending quest, the more we discover, the more there is to find. Dorothy Day described the spiritual life as "the greatest adventure in the world." The same could be said of prayer, the heartbeat of the spiritual life.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Hellwig, Monika K. "New Understanding of the Sacraments," *Commonweal*, June 16, 1978, pp. 375-380 for a somewhat prophetic description of new awarenesses in sacramental life which we are now experiencing more and more. Since sacramental life is rooted in Christology, I would also recommend Elizabeth Johnson's recent work, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) as a clear and lively exposition of what it means to be human both for ourselves and for God.

2. Dysinger, Luke, OSB. "Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina." Paper delivered at a meeting of the American Benedictine Academy, Yankton, SD in August 1990.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Cf. *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, 23:123, December 1990, p. 214ff, for further elaboration of these points.

5. Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

6. *Of Time Made Holy* (*Upon This Tradition*, II) A statement on the liturgy of the hours in the lives of American Benedictine Sisters, March 5, 1978.

A Church for the Next Generation

Sacraments in Transition

Julia Upton, RSM (Brooklyn)

Certain to prove invaluable to students of the liturgy and the sacraments, this study illuminates the evolutionary process from which the revised Rite of Christian Initiation developed, including the origins and history of infant baptism, confirmation, and the catechumenate.

After putting liturgical change into historical perspective, Dr. Upton uses the new rite as a model for revitalizing the other sacraments through more complete understanding and involvement on the part of the community, "a model that will focus our celebration of the sacraments in the next millennium."

Contemplative Living: A Compass(ion)

Marilyn King, SM

Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all. — morning prayer of a bodhisattva

These words of the zen master spoken during my recent zen retreat have been serving as a kind of koan from the time I heard them from him in my concluding interview. He had asked me why I came for the retreat; why did I choose to "sit" in silence for eight hours a day; why would I enter into the discipline and pain of doing nothing? As he spoke I was mentally adding other questions: What is a Sister of Mercy doing by just sitting? How can I set aside so much time for myself when there are so many needs in our world, not to speak of the incomplete projects on my desk at home? Remembrances of my novitiate training replayed tapes about how a Sister of Mercy doesn't spend too much time "with her sleeves on" but "pins up her skirts" and tends to the needs of others. There I sat before the master, struggling again with the elusive balance of the duties of Mary and Martha.

Contemplation is Compassion

Our interview continued. Why do I engage in prayer? There were some obvious practical explanations I could give for types of prayer such as intercessory prayer, scripture-based prayer, liturgical prayer, guided imagery, chant, and the like. But the prayer of just sitting? In reply to the master I explained that I have been drawn to a quiet type of prayer for many years because I sense it is a way to direct experience of deepest reality and with this comes enlightenment and with enlightenment comes wholeness and with wholeness comes fulfillment of God's design. The master nodded in agreement, but led me a step further. He recounted how most who come to him to learn the art of zen come seeking happiness, the end of their suffering, the liberating experience of knowing the truth. That is, they come for themselves. But the only way they will continue in the practice of zen is to take a second step and that is to sit for others, to be with others, all others, in utter purity and simplicity. The reason for zen sitting is compassion. More exactly, zen sitting is compassion.

"How is this?" I asked the master. "I can understand being compassionate in my attitude toward others, and in my service to others in need, and in my prayers for others. But how is the prayer of no-mind, what I call contemplative prayer, compassion?" He responded with an example. "Let us say that you began your practice of zen today with a sadness coming from something that is going on now in your life. In your sitting that sadness fills your mind and body. It makes "clear mind" impossible. How are you going to let go of that sadness and just sit? Simply pay attention to it. Be with the sadness as the only reality that is here and now. Don't analyze it or go back to its supposed cause or circumstances. Simply realize the sadness that is there right before you. It is all you have; it is all you are. That sadness is the sadness of the whole world. Breathe it in and breathe it out. In this single-mindedness you will find the healing of sadness, yours and the whole world's."

Everything is one: your suffering and my suffering, your need and my need, your song and my song.

The master continued. "I make this vow each morning: 'Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all.' How is this possible? Certainly not by individual acts, but by sitting. In this practice I get to the root of all that is, moment by moment. When I put aside my measuring mind all falls away but one thing: compassion. Everything is one: your suffering and my suffering, your need and my need, your song and my song. All divisions are relativized. All becomes one and the salvation of all is realized for that moment. This is my vowed life."

I left the interview astonished. I had just heard one of the most profound teachings about the purpose and meaning of my life as a Sister of Mercy. He put into words and showed me by his practice that the most universal and fundamental work of mercy is simply being. At my next sitting I renewed my vows as a Sister of Mercy.

Contemplative Living is Like a Compass

> . . . *those called to labor for the salvation of souls (are like) the compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its center. Now our center is God from whom all our actions should spring as from their source, and no exterior action should separate us from Him.* (Retreat Instructions)

In the days that followed my zen retreat I recalled this instruction of Catherine McAuley, always a favorite of mine. The image of the compass with its ever-active needle and motionless center captures the integration of the inside and the outside of my life, the activity and stillness that interplays in all aspects of my life from my ministry to my prayer, from my play to my chores. Of course, the challenge lies in fleshing

out this teaching of Catherine in the everyday.

How are we to live our Mercy vocation like the compass "that goes round its circle without stirring from its center"? Facetiously I can say that going around in circles is the easy part; it is staying motionless at the center that is the challenge, both for myself and, I think, for the women I live with in community. How to be Sister of Mercy, members of an active congregation, and cultivate that centeredness without which all our works of mercy simply fly off into chaotic motions. Putting the question to myself, how can I live contemplatively without becoming a contemplative? And how can I do this with others? This question has become for me life-directional.

As I have looked at my belief about the primacy of rootedness in God, I have also realized that, in fact, many of the choices I make regarding how I spend my time, money, energy, and talents are made without alluding too much to the connection of these parts of my life to the center. This realization became apparent when I tried to evaluate whether or not my ministry, financial decisions, community life, prayer, environment, relationships, choice of entertainment, and so on, enhanced or detracted from "compass centeredness." When I tried to adjust my life accordingly, familiar patterns shifted and my life habits squirmed. Perhaps the compass was really out of whack more than I thought. I wondered if God was beckoning me to begin again in earnest a way of life that "labored for the salvation of souls . . . without stirring from its center."

The Laura

In response to this urging of God, I and several other women who had been similarly led, came together in recent years to form what we are calling "The Laura." The term originally was used in our religious life heritage to describe a group of separate dwellings set around a central chapel, like points around a compass. This architectural configuration is an image of the type of life that the members of The Laura desire to live: a community of persons whose primary focus is contemplative living from which all other aspects of our life flow and to which they return.

The Primary Work of Contemplative Living

Although The Laura is still in its formative stage, most of its basic features are clear. For one, we believe that contemplative living is a work of mercy in itself. It is the source and summit of the ministry we engage in. But it is more than that. Living in contemplative awareness is mercy as just sitting is compassion.

The primacy of contemplative prayer and awareness prompts us to relativize everything else so that the reality of God, who is mercy, is central. By letting go of the activity of our selves, first of all, and being still in the God of all, we live in the climate of mercy. We believe that egoism is at the root of all human suffering. By unmasking the ego-self in just being, separateness and divisions disappear and we become mercy in solidarity with the griefs and anxieties and joys and hopes of everyone. Thus, we experience how contemplative life of its very nature leads to merciful compassion, to union and charity and works of mercy in a radical form.

Environment of The Laura

The environment of The Laura is designed to accentuate the compass nature of the life-style. We live in a rural setting. Although a laura doesn't necessarily have to be in the country, we find the beauty and harshness of nature to be an aide to contemplative living. There is an immediacy with the rhythms of creation that helps us get in touch with our own personal life movements. The rural environment also promotes simplicity in the kinds of places we live in and the furnishings we have and the foods we eat and the entertainment we enjoy. There really isn't much going on in the line of social events. Many of our neighbors are poor farmers or factory workers who live quite simply. Our surroundings, then, help us to be content with less and to subsequently have more time to simply be. I have found after four years of country living that more recreative joy comes from going for a walk or engaging in a good conversation or working in the garden or mushroom hunting or playing catch with the dog — alone or with others — than most of the packaged entertainment that I have consumed in the past. And I know from experience that these simple joys are hard to distinguish from prayer.

Even more important for contemplative living than external environment, however, is the environment of healthy, loving relationships among the members of The Laura. Our community comes from the four corners of the States and two different religious congregations. The three Mercies are each from a different regional community. So we have much to learn about each other. Because we believe that the quality of our interpersonal relationships directly affects the quality of our honesty before God, we have set aside time to develop our communication skills, share our family and community backgrounds, explore personality types, and simply to be with one another in common work and play. We consider it essential to be committed to mutual support and honest sharing with one another.

Prayer Forms

The priority given to contemplative prayer in The Laura is apparent in the time we have chosen to allot to this kind of prayer. Each member of The Laura sets aside time for personal prayer, reading, journaling, or just looking out the window according to her own inclination and ministerial responsibilities. But the group meets daily in the morning for an hour of quiet

prayer together. Depending on one's experience, this is referred to as zazen, centering prayer, or the Jesus Prayer. The prayer begins with the striking of a bell or gong which helps us focus. After chanting a simple mantra we enter into a period of quiet prayer together. This quiet sitting is alternated in the middle of the hour with ten minutes of meditative walking around the prayer room or outside, one behind the other. The sitting then resumes and is concluded by a repetition of the opening chant, a common recitation of the Suscipe of Catherine McAuley, and the ringing of the gong. We rise and bow to each other and to the Blessed Sacrament or the cross at the front of the room, leave silently and go about our business of the day.

. . . this adaptation of the Jesus Psalter (is) an effective way of praying in compassion . . .

I have taken the Jesus Psalter that was such a favorite of Catherine and simplified it to a set of fifteen mantras from which I choose one for that day's quiet prayer time. As I invoke the name of Jesus, I inhale; as I mentally speak the petition (mercy, help us, strengthen us, comfort us, steady us, enlighten us, . . .) I exhale. I have found this adaptation of the Jesus Psalter an effective way of praying in compassion, the kind spoken of by the zen master. I believe that by my simple breathing I and all others are steadied, enlightened, loved, purified, or whatever the invocation speaks.

We also gather each evening as our ministries permit for night prayer. At this point in our history only the general shape of this prayer time has been formed. It includes some simple opening song, a review of the day and asking for God's mercy, a short scripture reading, common silence, time for personal sharing of the events of the day or simply how things are going for us, some intercessory prayer; and concludes with the traditional Marian anthem and a blessing. Attention is given to the liturgical seasons in the selection of the songs and readings. For the most part, except for the readings, everything is done by memory so that the lights can be subdued and the mind can "float" on the words. I find this more verbal prayer time together, no matter how tired I am at the beginning, a source of bonding in our life together. Perhaps, because of the bedtime motif which this night prayer brings, we are all in a tired, but relaxed state and more open to each other in our need for love and mercy, and a readiness to give both. A community based on that interchange holds much mercy life for me.

As a laura community we also set aside a day of solitude each week. On this day, which may be different for each person, depending on her ministry, no work for work's sake is done. It is a true Sabbath, free of "have to's." Usually the person in solitude does not come to the community prayer, but spends the day alone in quiet. I find that during my day of solitude I don't set aside any special time for prayer, but choose rather just to let the day unfold in me, moment by moment, in all its beauty and purity. It is days like these that I feel I am most a Sister of Mercy because I am living with keen awareness of the compassionate ground of all being.

A Cup of Tea

The symbol of the compass reveals the reciprocity of ministry and contemplative living. It is an image of how compassionate works and just sitting are the same. A story of the zen master says it still another way.

On my retreat I had asked the master how zen could stop the war in the Persian Gulf which for me was a global example of the disunities within each of us. Can just sitting bring world peace? Can prayer be a work of mercy?

He answered: "Both Saddam Hussein and President Bush want Kuwait. This is a dilemma. Shall it be given to one or the other or perhaps cut in two as Solomon proposed to do with the baby presented to him. What do you think should be done?" He waited for me to answer.

I came up with solutions that dealt with political action to be taken to change our foreign policy by which we think we are the police of the world or to advocate an economic policy which would free us from reliance on imported oil. I spoke of making a choice myself of simplifying my own life style in the belief that it is the consumerism of the U.S. which is at the root of our action in the Gulf. The master just shook his head and said, "You are treating the symptoms. This is what you can do. Drink a cup of tea with a friend." The interview ended with that.

I am still trying to comprehend the full meaning of his words (a foolish thing to do with a zen teaching!). But they reminded me so much of Catherine's commendation to make sure that the Sisters all had a comfortable cup of tea when she was gone. Just be with. Do mercy by paying attention to your breathing, by being with a friend, by drinking a cup of tea, "and no exterior action should separate us from Him." The center of the compass is compassion.

1992 MAST Meeting

June 8-11, 1992
Carlow College, Pittsburgh
Maureen Crossen, RSM Site Co-ordinator

Book Review:
The Art of Public Prayer. Not for Clergy Only.

By Lawrence A. Hoffman Reviewed by Sheila Browne, RSM

Some years ago a group of us who lived together in a convent on Grove Street realized that our living room had become a very special place. In this room we had house meetings, celebrated Eucharist, enjoyed parties, entertained company, or simply relaxed. One day, someone remarked that when she was the only one home, she hadn't felt alone at all. She worked in the living room, lit our "house candle", and felt the presence of everyone.

In *The Art of Public Prayer. Not for Clergy Only.*, Lawrence Hoffman gives insight into how this room became so special to us. Because of the quality of life we had experienced there, we had, like artists, created something of our own. We had decided upon the "shape" of this room, and each time we gathered there, alone or together, we re-experienced the community, we knew holy space and holy time. Our shared life witnessed to an alternate world of values shared by the whole community.

Rabbi Hoffman's book is about "the *communal* base of individual life, and in particular, the ways we depend on *religious community* to make us what we can be." His use of "religious community" means a synagogue or church, but if we include our particular understanding of this expression, *The Art of Public Prayer* is thick with meaning for us both as Sisters of Mercy and as women of the church.

Worship . . . defines an alternate world of values that the group members share . . .

Worship, he says, defines an alternate world of values that the group members share; worship mirrors and directs the social order in which the group lives. But, he maintains, the system is in trouble. Symbols no longer speak the same language as they once did — what is meaningful to one person or goup is not so meaningful to another. Many worship services assemble people who share no symbols and so have no emotional investment in what takes place. At other times different expectations place on worship more freight than it can bear. For example, to encourage groups to come to church, parishes sponsor Scout Masses, or Rock Masses or Family masses, (religous houses have theme masses), planting within those who do come certain expectations which the liturgy cannot of its very nature fulfill. Communication is scrambled: a message is being sent, but the looked for messages are not the ones received, thus rendering worship meaningless for many. The result is worship dysfunction: the actual activity of the rock Mass is rock rather than worship.

The starting point for correcting our worship ills, Rabbi Hoffman suggests, is to note what worship's function really is for us. In our age, worship serves to connect the individual with God, and to bond believers with each other, to create an alternate world of meaning. Religion is not the search for limits and theological truths alone, but for patterns that provide meaning out of chaos: exactly what dancers do with random movement, composers with arbitrary noise, painters with pointless shape and color, and what we had done in our living room on Grove Street. In the ideal world we sculpt our time and space, our history and our heros (and heroines) in consensus with our community, affirming together that these are the people, places, times and things that matter most. Public worship is the public recognition of that form of things that we agree is there. It is the artistry by which we paint the canvas of a world shaped not by happenstance but the way we believe things ultimately cohere. What centers our prayer, who leads it, what we pray for, the words we use, the shape of our space: all can come together to fashion a universe sufficiently compelling to banish doubt.

Reading this book moves me to exciting reflections on the opportunities that lie before us. We Sisters of Mercy live now at the brink of the Institute, with opportunity to articulate new rituals and prayer forms. What worship patterns will we fashion for ourselves? How will our public sacramental and non-sacramental worship as the Institute of Mercy reflect our artistry as women bonded by mercy and justice embracing? What alternate worlds will we create when we pray together? What social orders will we mirror to ourselves and to the world? In the larger picture, what will the quality of our life and prayer bring to bear on the public worship of our Church and the system which, Rabbi Hoffman reminds us, is in dysfunction? And with what mercy will we do it!

The Art of Public Prayer. Not for Clergy Only. Lawrence A. Hoffman. The Pastoral Press, Washington, D.C., 1988. 290 pp. $19.95

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Questions for Study/Reflection

1. After reading "Rituals for this New Day" where do you find the points of intersection with your own experiences — personally, communally? What elements of communal rituals have given you life, and which have caused you pain?

2. What elements of the ritual described by Cynthia Serjak might be woven into your communal or parish celebrations?

3. St. Benedict took the Gospel message and fashioned a rule of life for ordinary people, not monks and nuns. S. Jane Klimisch, OSB reflects on her experience of praying — then and now. What are the riches of prayer for you? In what ways has Sister Jane named your experience? Are there any ways in which she has left you feeling impoverished?

4. Have you struggled with balancing out the contemplative dimension of the call to be mercy? What has Marilyn King brought you to help even out the scales? What questions has she raised for you?

Questionnaire

Please return by August 31 to: Joanne Lappetito, RSM
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