

The **MAST** *Journal*

Apostolic Visitation and Religious Life

Women Religious in the United States Today

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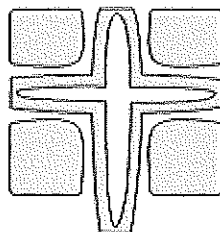
Susan A. Ross, Ph.D.

Wisdom that Endures

Seeking God in the Signs of the Times

Elizabeth Carroll, R.S.M.

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Dear Readers,

As a writer, my head is regularly engaged. But when I'm working on the elliptical at the gym, I know I have a heart. Rock music gets piped as background to help us move to a vigorous pace. I generally tune out the music and focus on the heart rate report and the timer for the minutes I've been working on the elliptical or the treadmill. But a few sessions ago, I found myself actually paying attention to the words of one song, "Love Machine." Its lyrics repeat the phrase, "I'm just a love machine. And I won't work for nobody but you. I'm just a love machine...."

A moment of clarity. Was this what went awry from the very beginning of the Apostolic Visitation – that religious life was conceived as a sort of machine, and women religious were keeping "it" going? Or was religious life imagined as a product that women religious "manufactured" under the roof of a particular plant, a convent? Was the quality of this product called "religious life" guaranteed by analyzing the "raw materials" of prayers said in common, verifying women's location in a chapel in which Eucharist was celebrated daily by a priest, determination of a predictable schedule for daily tasks, registering a geographically limited apostolate that allowed all Sisters to keep regular hours at the convent? And did this "production" require the air conditioning of certain thoughts about the Church's teaching that did not deviate from the examiners' presuppositions about what those thoughts should be? Was the life itself of apostolic women religious in the United States conceived of as a machine? Or as a product produced by machines, whose quality could be tested for adherence to a standard model? If one read the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Visitation, with its many categories of "quality control," one could get this impression, at least in light of the lyrics of "Love Machine."

Somewhere in the Visitation process there must have been a change of mentality. Women religious were resisting an approach which assumed they were producing a product called "religious life." They were persons with individual histories. Though I myself never had occasion to have a meeting with Visitors, reports of those who did emphasized their experience of the personal, respectful listening by Visitors to stories of Sisters' vocations and narratives about their ministries. Somewhere, the depersonalized machine model seemed to have been replaced by respect for the mystery of the individual woman religious.

Articles in this issue were written at various stages during the "mid-cycle" of the Apostolic Visitation. At the time you receive this issue, the process will be pretty much played out. However, some critical issues for women religious transcend the process of the Apostolic Visitation.

I met Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA, at the annual meeting of the Canon Law Society of America, where she was on the program, and presenting a paper about the Apostolic Visitation. I was aware that she was LCWR President at this most fraught time of the doctrinal Investigation, running simultaneously with the Apostolic Visitation. I asked if the sisterhood at large could have some version of her presentations. I am grateful for her spontaneity and generosity here in outlining some "signs of the times" that are shaping our future as women religious.

Helen Marie Burns, who also served as LCWR president, was trained in sociology and theology and did her dissertation on the "frontier" history of women religious. She explores the question, "What IS apostolic religious life and what characterizes the spirituality of women who are called to this apostolic form of religious life?" She proceeds positively, citing contemporary voices, describing the virtues, attitudes and personality traits of the "frontier" religious, those who take up new tasks in a new land. There is both continuity and discontinuity with forms of religious life that came before. But the frontier is where we can still imagine ourselves to be.

Doris Gottemoeller, first Institute President who also served in LCWR leadership, is well known for her articles which stress the continuity of contemporary religious life with its historical roots. In this talk, she acknowledges the context of social and political conflict in which the Apostolic Visitation is being

conducted. She then deals with three challenges to women religious and the implications for attracting new members—the need to find unity in our Eucharistic and sacramental life, the need to claim our ecclesial identity and the need to express our solidarity in some identifiable form of community life. She hears in a positive light the concerns of CICLSAL.

Mary Aquin O'Neill, co-founder and Director of Mount St. Agnes Theological Center for Women, offered this crisp analysis of the dynamics of the Apostolic Visitation soon after the process began. What are the over-arching questions which are bigger than the specifics of the questionnaire sent to presidents? What of our relationships to each other, and our understanding of the vow of obedience? What is the tension between obedience as an obligation formally invoked by a superior, and obedience understood as the communal search for God's will? What in our devotional history has sustained us and what is its effect on our self-understanding as women as we have grown in consciousness? What about our canonical relationship to the church?

Deborah Watson of CCASA, recalling the image of a woman weaver, offers a contrast between charismatic and institutional dimensions of religious life, and how northern and southern hemisphere women religious differ in their relationship to society and church. One striking contrast is the risk to religious of "laying down one's life" for the poor. There are many martyrs in the southern hemisphere. Thus, the prophetic dimension of religious life is dramatically lived out there in a way not so visible in the north.

I was attending a Jubilee celebration at our Motherhouse in Burlingame, California, a ritual repeated every year in every congregation of women religious. This time, I was struck by the straightforward repetition of the narrative of fidelity and creativity in ministry as a story that preceded the announcement of the Apostolic Visitation and was its true subject. It seemed to me that the welcome by jubilarian Toni Lynn Gallagher and the reflections by jubilarian Bernadette Hart were themselves a testament to the "quality of religious life" as it has been lived for decades by our sisters. What if every congregation being visited just sent in texts like this to CICLSAL and have done with the process? What more needs to be said?

At the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics held in New Orleans in January of 2011, I was moved by the reflections given on the Sunday readings for the Baptism of the Lord by Professor Susan Ross, whom I had known in Chicago in the mid 1980's when we were both early in our academic careers. Her reflections on racism touched a nerve – and one of our critical concerns. When all is done, the Apostolic Visitation underlines the reality that the sisterhood of women is not merely religious life, but a sisterhood with other women who are also committed to heal the world.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Editor, *The MAST Journal*

Women Religious in the United States Today

Marlene Weisenbeck, F.S.P.A.

Welcoming the Future

More than 50 years ago Pope John XXIII popularized the expression "reading the signs of the times" as a way of responding to the present and looking to the future. According to this method, before saying anything about God one should first listen to the situation, to what is going on in the world around us, to hear what it may be telling us about the needs of the world. The assumption is that God is active in the world and in people's relationships. By reflecting on these, we learn how to fashion our service to the world. These places where we find God also indicate the places where we should respond to God.

Some areas which tell us about the signs of our times in this 21st century, and where the vision is emerging are the following.

1 John Allen's ten trends revolutionizing the Catholic Church today, where he describes:

- a world church where the church in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are heavily influencing doctrine and practices;
- the new demography – a universal church dominated by the culture, practice, and theology of Southern Hemisphere Catholics;
- evangelical Catholicism, embracing more traditional Catholic practices;
- influences of pentecostalism and Islam;
- the expanding roles of the laity desiring to incorporate the experiences and insights of women as full partners in both church and society;
- multipolarism – shifting centers of power and a dynamic of a remarkably religious marketplace where institutional controversies are touted;
- the influence of multinational organizations on local and ethical standards;
- the biotechnical revolution, including genetic enhancements – understanding the human person in an increasingly diverse,

materialistic, and scientifically geared world;

- globalization; and
- environmental concerns.

In his analysis, Allen shows that the Church, including women religious, will have to respond to changes within the institution itself and in the world as a whole. They will have to learn to face outward with entrepreneurial spirit. He states, "Catholicism won't rise to the occasion of these new challenges – it'll be steamrolled by them." The Gospels, the life of grace, and the unpredictability of the Holy Spirit will play the larger role, if humanity but let it do so.¹

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Other significant studies that reveal the signs of the times are the Pew Forums on Religion² and the CARA Study on religious vocations,³ both of which indicate significant changes in the way people exercise their religious convictions. The latter presents a sobering response by younger generations to the possibility of embracing a religious vocation.

2. A second substantial study is entitled *An African Sister's Vision of the Role of Women Religious in the Mission of Evangelization*.

Women religious around the globe typically have expressed their Gospel call through identification of feminine roles in family and society. In the U.S., women religious have been immersed in these realities from time immemorial as their communities established missions and provinces in many international settings. The recent study by Sister Gloria Wirba TSSF from Cameroon envisioned these roles for African women religious involved in the mission of

evangelization today.⁴ Women religious around the world would resonate with her vision of ...

- *Woman as mother*; motherhood as a school of self-giving and the moral traditions of abundant life.
- *Woman as educator, advisor or counselor*; insight, solidarity, spiritual sensibility and self-reliance are characteristics formed and shared.
- *Woman as promoter and protector of religious traditions*; presiding as priestess in mediating the healing rituals.
- *Woman as authority in familial relationships*; through the authority of one's experience, one's holiness and personal mysticism.
- *Woman as missionary and evangelizer of the faith*; planting of the church in the global village through apostolic works which focus on those whose needs are not met -- caring for the sick, educating the children, speaking through the mass media, and promoting peace, justice and reconciliation.

In summary, woman is a figure of continuity in the culture. In such a vision, the emerging model of religious life is one of women consecrated through vows freely chosen for the sake of dedication to the mission of the proclamation of the Gospel. Reflecting on these emerging "signs of our times," women religious will be seen as beacons of the blessing of justice, particularly in the areas of healing, hope, reconciliation and beauty. They will be involved in the collective transformation of structures and the work of creating structures of compassion, structures of protection, and structures of healing and learning in which the human family can find its belonging.⁵ Only through the transformation of our community life and the collegial service with and among others will this vision be realized.

Where Is The Future Vision Alive Today?

The future is alive in the tradition of women in America who have proclaimed that "resistance to tyranny of any kind is obedience to God." A similar congruence in this quote by Susan B.

Anthony is found in women religious who have moved away from anathemas to a legitimate appropriation of God's role in their life. A Sister from Singapore stated, "Jesus allowed women to be themselves. He gave women security and space to come forward."⁶ At the same conference of women religious in Asia-Oceania, Sister Rekha Chennattu called for a radically new paradigm for women religious, saying, "The time has come for women religious to leave a culture of command and control and enter one built on service and friendship."⁷ These proclamations of global solidarity and sisterhood verify that an interpretation of religious life that witnesses to a vision of ministerial religious life expresses itself above all in an intentional discipleship of Jesus.

It is alive in international collaborations such as the Franciscan Common Venture, the African Sisters Education Initiative and the countless missionary efforts of women's U.S. religious institutes today. In these ventures, those in the advanced societies learn the lessons of working in equi-cultural relationships rather than hierarchical modes of power.

The vision is alive in dozens of religious communities that actively support ecology centers and ecological practices in the belief that the earth is our mother.

It is alive in Spirituality Centers that invite Catholics and others to a deeper understanding of their personal faith and into ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. While it is not always possible to share the same stage because of boundaries that separate us in terms of doctrine or governance, (even within our own churches), ecumenical work highlights the Gospel that is proclaimed in a way that knows no boundaries. God really intended that divine Wisdom needs to be expressed in many forms of faith, so that the prism of God's goodness is given full exposure.⁸

The vision is alive in examples of *prophetic witness* of women religious through:⁹

- **Permanent commitments:** a sign of God's never ending love for creation and the credibility of the Incarnation. While the cultural value of celibacy is greatly diminished, celibate life *is* a witness to an incarnated audacity for life with a special tenderness for the unloved.

- **Presence:** Supporting missionaries in oppressed continents; living in the holiness of communion without domination over one another;
 - Integration of mission with lay partners in our Catholic institutions, thereby maximizing institutional presence and enabling us to have a voice in the public square;
 - Quietly teaching the clergy;
 - Being "sister" to our community members in crisis;
 - Supporting victims of sex abuse arising out of a culture of power and violence;
 - Advocating for the poor through support of legislation for health care reform and immigration reform.
- **Preferential attitudes for ethical behavior**
 - Opting *out* of hyper-consumerism and opting *for* accountability;
 - Working hard at developing *a spirituality of the heart* which guides our decisions and choices for beatitude living;
 - Avoiding corruption in our management styles;
 - Bringing passion, wonder and reverence to our tasks;¹⁰
 - Giving up assumptions that we are powerless;
 - Fostering an expanded consciousness in our view of the world, and letting go of the arrogance of knowing only mere facts.¹¹
- **Standing with the oppressed:**
 - Rape victims in Catholic hospitals;
 - Trafficked persons;
 - Homosexuals;
 - Healing relationships and shepherding grief to new places of hope.
- **Working for Christian unity and interfaith understanding** through the power of assembling the people for dialogue;

Mae Chee Sansanee, a Buddhist nun from Thailand, started uninterrupted meditation in her Thailand Buddhist monastery, modeling it after the practice of perpetual adoration by the

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin;

Raising our voices in protest of hate speech against Islamic peoples and their efforts to promote civil discourse and build centers for community action.

- **Schools and counseling centers for peace and non-violent living**
- **Individual and systemic response to environmental abuse**
 - Refusing to use bottled water;
 - Lobbying companies that profit from the industry;
 - Supplying water to poor villages in a developing world;
 - Combined heat and power projects;
 - Protecting beauty and honoring our artists.

Practicing a relational economy

- Fasting from technology and moving in touch with God's heart;
- Living out of a spirituality of abundance rather than one of scarcity;
- Engaging the globalization of human suffering with the principles of communion and transcendent desire. (David Couturier)
- **Lay associations and affiliations with religious communities** pursuing together a creative vision of God's justice in the world.

In view of the "signs of the times", the stressors coming from within our church, and the possibility for creating structures of compassion in a world of growing depersonalization, we hope for a summit on religious life where conferences of religious women and men from North America, Latin America, and South America (CLAR, CRC, CMSM, LCWR, CMSWR)¹² would exchange views on a theology of religious life for this 21st century, a theology that would guide what it means to minister in a multi-polar and international church where global collaboration would guide service for the development of peoples from a deeply relational core of life.

The future of religious life also abides in our hope for a new Council of the Church in this century, perhaps a Council of La Paz or of Santa

Cruz, or a Council of Yaounde or Nairobi. Religious life will endure where cultures of the world will enrich our understanding of God and our faith life, where interfaith dialogue will be welcomed, where women will be recognized as equals in the celebration of church life (not mere bystanders, maids, or survivors), and where a renewal of church structures will arise after the scandals of power in every form will have subsided. That which prompts solidarity toward this vision will not only be hierarchical disarray and global terrorism, but also those who collectively seek dignity, and who desire to make a contribution and to collaborate with humanity.

An authentic Christian community is thoroughly rooted in God's creation and entirely bent on moving toward God. With a vital hope and the bond between the future and the present, we rely on others, to help carry forward the completion of the task, the ministry, the mission. We need others to dance with us, to heal us, to teach us, to love us. These are the outward gestures of the communion we experience as together we wend our way toward God.

Conclusion

I conclude by sharing a message from the presidents of LCWR in its 2010 Annual Report.

Looking over a year of challenges, contrasts, and commitments, we find ourselves immersed in the Paschal Mystery as we conclude the initial decade of this 21st century. We have found ourselves celebrating the stories of our foremothers in America through the great exhibit we have called *Women & Spirit*. Each opening of the exhibit in Cincinnati; Dallas; Washington, DC; Cleveland and Ellis Island etched more deeply into our hearts the memory of the great-souled women who served the needs of the poor with an unrelenting response for right relationships in their world.

These very stories have provided us the impetus to face our own surprises of the past year. The apostolic visitation and doctrinal assessment seemed a formidable experience of chaos. As if the chaos of ecclesial brokenness all around us was not enough, our very earth itself shook with quakes and floods and eruptions. Could mystery be any more evident in cosmic destruction and the disruption of human relationships happening simultaneously?

Women religious are not afraid of chaos. We have our terrors and our doubts that can threaten the work of the Spirit. Even so, we transmute one thing into another, turning disappointments and tragedies into new stories of healing and loving. The call to create in disturbing times is a calling like no other. It is an urge that howls for expression in shadows seeking more light. It is an act of faith to respond to this inner voice, to give it our time and our love, and if grace be with us, to bring forth blessing and peace.

Our centeredness in the Paschal Mystery has prompted us to cry out to the Christ who leads us. Our crying out is a potent message with great good news that, in Christ, humanity is delivered from all gloom. We are restored to grace and holiness of life. Jesus said that if we fail to tell this story, the "stones will cry out." It seems that this is a time when we are crying out with the stones! Our spirits spring into the universe with redemptive and prophetic urgency.¹³

The 59,000 women religious in some 725 communities of religious institutes (active and contemplative)¹⁴ cannot be defined by musings and suppositions, or by a lack of understanding on the part of the hierarchy or anyone else. As history as shown, women religious have been wrestling with the questions of identity and service for centuries. As their solidarity grows, they enter into covenant relationships with one another, the poor and other minorities. Today, it witnesses to a type of kinship which seems to be moving toward a more universal expression of religious life and away from competition among charisms and ministerial prowess.

At the opening prayer for the LCWR Assembly in August, participants held candles in the darkness and sang the refrain "Christ be our light". The faith and energy in the room was palpable. As these same women left the Assembly they expressed the realization that we are being called to something new—not as individuals, but together. Like Mary and Elizabeth, the women of the visitation, we are filled with life, shaped by the God who has called us, and willing to embrace the call to discipleship.¹⁵ The impulse was one of generosity and generativity that will inevitably reveal Christ to the world. May we be worthy of the light we carry!



NOTES

- 1 Patrick Jordon. "Cloudy Crystal Ball", a review of John Allen's book entitled *The Future Church*, in *Commonweal*. Vol. CXXXVI, No. 19 (November 6, 2009), 36-38.
- 2 Religion in American Culture -The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>
- 3 NRVC/CARA Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life. November 2009. http://www.nrvc.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=393&Itemid=74
- 4 Kenyuyfoon Gloria Wirba. *The Role of Religious Women in the Mission of Evangelization in Africa*, Rome, Italy: Leberit Srl Press, 2009.
- 5 Peter Block. *The Structure of Belonging*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2008, 9-10.
- 6 Tom Fox "Asia-Oceania sisters offer support to US peers" in *National Catholic Reporter*, (October 30, 2009), 6.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Cardinal Karl Kasper, the former Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, clarified this theme with passion by addressing methods and means of interfaith dialogue in stating that two major components – the global and the local, scholarship and praxis – must go hand in hand. But the real dialogue takes place *only* when each partner is deeply steeped in the fullness of their respective traditions, and then in reverent dialogue – listening, more than talking – *goes deeper* to find the common root in faith, *THE HOLY*. (Observed by Dawn M. Notwehr, OSF, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Chicago Theological Union, in *Going Deeper to Find the Common Root in Interchange* (Exploring Values Common to You and Today's Rochester Franciscans), Fall 2007, page 5.
- 9 Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA. "Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?" Response to Michael Crosby OFM Cap. LCWR IX meeting in Eau Claire, WI. October 22, 2006.
- 10 Christine Vladimiroff. *Religious Life's Prophetic Dimension* in *Origins* Vol. 36, No. 15 [September 21, 2006].
- 11 Ibid. 237.
- 12 Conference of Latin American Religious, Canadian Religious Conference, Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious.
- 13 *Creating in Chaos*. 2009-2010 Annual Report, Leadership Conference of Women Religious. page 3.
- 14 Mary L. Gautier, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate at Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Washington D.C: Georgetown University. Email dated July 29, 2010. She emphasized that there is no succinct answer as to how many women's religious institutes there are in the U.S. It depends on the definition of "religious institute" and the definition of "in the U.S." The number of "congregations" depends on how the term is used. For example, until recently, there were 25 separate regional communities (equivalent to provinces in Canon Law) of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in the United States. They are all part of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. In addition, there are two independent groups of U.S. Sisters as well as a U.S. Province of the Irish Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. These Sisters of Mercy could be counted as one congregation or four or 29. A similar complication occurs with the Sisters of Saint Joseph and even more so when with all the different Franciscans.
When CARA conducted the national study of new vocations to religious life for the National Religious Vocation Conference, it surveyed a total of 976 religious institutes and societies of apostolic life, using lists provided by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) as well as its own database of emerging communities of religious life. About 250 of those were men's religious institutes, so the number of women's institutes at that time would have been about 725.
- 15 Mary Hughes, OP. President of LCWR. Message to the media on August 16, 2010.

Peeling an Onion

The Life and Times of Active Religious Life

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.

Active religious life in the Catholic Church in the United States enters the twenty-first century much blessed by the old adage: "May you live in troubled times." Investigations, visitations, condemnations and confirmations abound. Meanwhile, quietly and steadily, works of mercy and justice in the name of the Catholic Church proceed in hospitals, clinics, schools, colleges,

I hope to show that current tensions around this specific expression in the U. S. Church are neither original nor unusual, but rather a consistent element of the on-going life and times of active religious congregations of women.

women's shelters, neighborhood centers, pastoral programs, and advocacy organizations. Many of these works are guided by members of active religious congregations of women, their associates, colleagues and benefactors. These congregations are multi-layered and multi-faceted: ecclesiological and theological constructs, sociological, cultural and historical realities. Any discussion of the phenomenon of religious life in the Catholic Church in the United States that wishes to be comprehensive and accurate faces a daunting challenge.

For this reason, the metaphor – "peeling an onion" – seems useful. In many ways, examining the many layers and facets of religious life leads not to an inner core, but to bits and pieces, tears and consternation! One does not discover the essence of an onion in peeling back its layers. One, rather, discovers that the layers are the essence. The whole remains, however, a source of much flavoring for the reality into which any single or multiple layers are folded. While Sandra Schneiders has made an invaluable contribution to

the study of the phenomenon of religious life using the lens of history, Scripture and theology,¹ her work views religious life through its long history and many-faceted expressions.

Since I believe there is need today to be respectful of the various layers or expressions in order to preserve the essential flavoring which is the gift of religious life to the Church, I have set a simpler task for myself. This article will focus on *active religious life for women*, a small piece of the history of religious life and one valuable expression of the multi-layered reality which is religious life in the Church. I wish to explore this specific expression of religious life – active religious life for women – in the context of a specific local church – the local church of the United States. In so doing,

Active religious life for women rests in a much larger reality identified within the Roman Catholic Church as the phenomenon of religious life. Canon law suggests that the broadest understanding of the gift of religious life lies in the dedication to God's honor, the building of the Church, and the salvation of the world.² *Lumen Gentium* speaks of "some Christians...called by God so that they may enjoy a special gift of grace in the life of the Church and may contribute, each in his/her own way, to the saving mission of the Church."³ Johannes Metz in *Followers of Christ* (1978) defines the gift as a "dangerous memory" and observes that "religious orders...have something like an innovative function for the Church. They offer productive models for the Church as a whole in the business of growing accustomed to living in new social, economic, intellectual and cultural situations."⁴ Whatever the particular expression or definition we may choose; religious life is seen as a stable form of living at the service of the Church.

In relation to active religious life, Canon 675.1 states: "In the institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate, apostolic action pertains to their very nature. Hence, *the whole life of the members is to be imbued with an apostolic spirit, indeed the*

whole apostolic spirit is to be informed by a religious spirit." (Italics added.) The understanding of that apostolic spirit is nuanced and rendered specific by the founding inspiration and subsequent tradition of a given congregation. Hence the importance of paying careful attention to the specific context and stories of institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate. Many writers through the last half of the twentieth century, including some quoted in this paper, have utilized the term "apostolic religious life" to identify congregations of religious men and women whose context and story centers on "works of the apostolate". Sandra Schneiders, in her more recent works, prefers the term "ministerial religious life" in relation to these congregations and has written eloquently regarding her preference. I am more convinced that, for the Sisters of Mercy and similar congregations, "active religious life" is a more appropriate name as it signifies the distinct contribution to the history of religious life offered by Catherine of Siena, Angela Merici, Mary Ward, Mary Aikenhead, and Catherine McAuley. All religious congregations, indeed all Christian persons, can be identified as apostolic (pertaining to the mission of the apostles) and their ministerial activity as an apostolate (pertaining to the mission of the Apostolic Church). The newness of religious congregations in which the "apostolic action pertained to their very nature" was not found in their specific apostolate as much as it was found in their flexibility and mobility and creativity regarding these "works of the apostolate". The modality of their participation in the apostolic tradition was the point of tension and the point of contribution.

Active (apostolic) religious life, then, takes shape and form from the social and ecclesial order of its time and the pressing needs which reflect the absence of the God's vision for creation. Similar to the Sabbath in Jesus' time, the community of believers would do well to remember that active religious congregations were not Spirit-made primarily for the internal life of the Church, but for the Church's engagement of a world in need. The maturing process of grace for active religious women leads to balance between service, community, and contemplation rather than

emphasis. The call is a challenge to develop an active spirituality which is attentive to and motivated by the presence of the sacred in all creation. While member congregations of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious constitute the gamut of expressions of religious life (monastic, evangelical, and active congregations), the Prologue to their *Call for 2010-2015* speaks quite directly to active religious congregations of women:

We, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, believe that God's call is *written in the signs of our time. Our foremothers and founders stepped into the chaos* and the unknown of their day, trusting in God's good guidance and great providence. In our time, *we are called to do the same.* Inspired by the radical call of the Gospel, led by God's Spirit and companioned by one another, *we embrace our time as holy*, our leadership as gift, and our challenges as blessings.⁵ (Italics added.)

Ours is a call sustained by the story in which we find ourselves, faithful to the vision of active religious life, and authentic in its expression of Gospel living.

Two further contemporary definitions may help in the understanding of the manner in which the activity of service to a world in need centers the distinct nature of active religious life. Anne Clifford, CSJ, observes that

...apostolic religious life [assumes that] carrying out the mission of Jesus in our world is the primary locus for experiencing a heightened awareness and love of God.⁶

John Lozano, CMC, in his book *Ministerial Spirituality and Religious Life*, writes:

The entire development of apostolic spirituality will consist in a constantly more aware experience of the presence and action of God in our service.⁷

Contemporary writers on religious life remind us, in a variety of ways, that religious life as a sociological phenomenon addresses the deepest hopes/ sharpest anguish of the age in which it finds itself. This would seem to be even more so for members of active religious congregations. Diarmuid O'Murchu speaks of religious life as a social structure whose separation from society highlights the deepest hopes of that society:

Religious life exists not for its own sake, but for society at large to articulate the deepest hopes and

aspirations of people. ...Religious life will always exist because it is an integral part of human culture. It flourishes or declines according to its ability to address the critical issues of meaning within changing cultural patterns.⁸

Patricia Wittburg applies a concept of *religious virtuosi* to members of religious congregations and suggests that

the life calling of all types of virtuosi is to formulate a response to the 'sharpest anguish' or the 'sustained dissatisfaction' of their society and culture....Insofar as today's religious congregations are communal groups of religious virtuosi...their success will depend on whether or not they can uncover the 'sharpest anguish' of the twenty-first century and on how effectively they can formulate a spiritual answer to it.⁹

Most recently, Sandra Schneiders, in a series of articles for the *National Catholic Reporter*, has brought her gifts as a theologian and Scripture scholar to bear on the phenomenon of ministerial religious life. Her conclusions resemble the sociologists above in relation to the purpose and impact of religious life:

[Members of religious congregations] by their community life, are aligning themselves with the ecclesiology of the Church as People of God....They are gratefully living among their sisters and brothers the oneness of the Body of Christ....But this Body of Christ, which we are, *exists not just for the Church itself but for the world which God so loved....*The struggle between religious and the hierarchy is really, at its core, a struggle over the nature of religious life itself which is necessarily determined by *how one understands the Church in its relation to the world.*¹⁰(Italics added.)

Sandra Schneiders also has documented quite well the on-going struggle of active religious life for respectability and credibility. My own reading of this history, especially for women, concludes not only that active religious life has not yet been fully realized, but also that, only in recent times, has a convergence occurred which provided the possibility for the full flowering of this expression of religious life. Only in the twentieth century did a prevalent ecclesiology, economic and social mores relative to women, and active religious congregations meet in circumstances that enhanced one another. However, as the twenty-

first century dawns, the respectability and credibility tension for members of active religious congregations of women in the United States has once again surfaced. This tension lies in the

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nature of active religious life and the peculiar experience of active religious life in the frontier context of the nineteenth century United States.

Most historians of religious life posit the origins of active religious life in the sixteenth century. Schneiders, however, credits the third order experience of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) as "the first successful feminine outmaneuvering of male restrictions for the sake of apostolic involvement."¹¹ Prior to that time, Gregory VII's (1073-85) medieval reform of western Christendom countered the decentralization of monasticism which had flourished in the western Church from the sixth through the tenth centuries, providing equal opportunity for men and for women. His adaptation of a nation - state system of governance to ecclesiastical reality enhanced the influence of canon law, centralized the western Catholic Church under the direction of papal and episcopal office, and effected a gradual dislocation for women religious to the periphery of ecclesiastical power. Boniface VIII's *Periculoso* (1298) decreed that all women religious, "present and future, to whatever order they belong and in whatever part of the world, shall henceforth remain perpetually enclosed within their monasteries."

From the thirteenth century onward, women were treated differently than men. They were regarded as minors in canon law and in church practice. Their works and their mobility were restricted by enclosure and other canonical regulations. The difference weakened women's participation in the rise of mendicant orders/

congregations and in the rise of active religious congregations whose focus would be a radical concern for the works of mercy.

After Catherine of Siena's early intervention, more enduring expressions of active religious life for women came in the work of Angela Merici (d. 1540), Mary Ward (d. 1645) and Nano Nagle (d. 1784). Still, even these attempts eventually yielded to the demands of enclosure with its restricted exercise of the works of mercy. The flourishing of active religious life for women did not occur until the nineteenth century. John W. Padberg, S.J., describes the circumstance for women quite succinctly:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, extraordinarily imaginative women and men tried to fashion specifically [active] congregations for women, dedicated to work outside the cloister....The record of innovation is impressive: Angela Merici, Jane deChantal and Frances deSales, Mary Ward, Vincent DePaul and Louise deMarillac. The problem lay with those who had to approve and make use of the orders. Every one of these religious congregations of women was forced back into the cloister, with the sole exception of the Daughters of Charity....Only in the nineteenth century, did externally apostolic orders of women come into being on a significant scale.¹²

This nineteenth-century proliferation of active religious congregations of women happened mainly in France, Ireland, and the United States. Their growth and expansion provided a pastoral response to the ravages of revolution, war, and epidemics; to the challenges of immigration and industrialization; and, in the United States, to the settlement of frontier areas.

This frontier influence on various cultural institutions in the United States, including religious institutions, has been the focus of academic studies through the last three decades. Editors of a 1992 collection of essays echoed Frederick Jackson Turner's original claim that "one cannot understand the modern United States without coming to terms with its western [frontier] past."¹³ If one cannot understand the modern United States without reference to its frontier past, it is likely also that specific institutions within modern United States society may not be

understood fully without reference to this frontier past.

As studies multiplied and analysis broadened, western historians began to assume a definite connection between the frontier experience and the experience of religion in the United States: "a virtually boundless frontier and unrestricted immigration quite adequately account for the various adjectives most frequently applied to the American religious patterns: pluralistic, voluntaristic, individualistic, democratic, pragmatic, activist, revivalistic, and enthusiastic."¹⁴ Both Thomas Spalding and Christopher Kauffman, twentieth century historians of the Catholic experience in the United States, offer similar lists of discernible tendencies credited to a frontier influence: an ecumenical spirit vis-à-vis Protestants; openness to the plasticity of culture; self-reliance on and trust of individual initiative; emphasis on active virtues (honesty, industry, thrift) over passive virtues (endurance, piety, submission); and an inclination of vowed religious life toward a more active life.¹⁵

Active religious congregations of men and women were founded on premises of adaptability, self-determination, and responsiveness to a variety of human needs. These qualities were particularly compatible with the needs of the Catholic Church in the frontier environment of the United States. Their own governance structures and sense of purpose made them particularly effective in environments which required mobility, agency, and creativity.

The first communities of women religious to serve the church in the land now constituting the United States were active and contemplative, respectively: the Ursulines arrived in New Orleans in 1727 and the Carmelites came to Port Tobacco, Maryland in 1790. They were followed in the nineteenth century by seventy-two additional congregations of women religious. Sixty-seven of these were active religious congregations, three were semi-contemplative congregations (Ursuline Sisters, Good Shepherd Sisters, the Poor Clare Sisters), and two were monastic orders (both Benedictines).¹⁶ The frontier environment in which the active religious congregations moved allowed them to actualize the impulse to mobility, agency and creativity which was part of their self-

understanding as members of active religious congregations.

The success of active religious congregations in a frontier environment may be attributable in part to a complex identity which represented continuity with the long tradition of religious life in the Roman Catholic Church and, at the same time, discontinuity with that tradition's emphasis on enclosure, stability, and limited agency vis-à-vis their works.¹⁷ In one sense, active religious congregations of women in the nineteenth century (and now, it would appear, in the twenty-first century) were themselves a frontier within the landscape of Roman Catholicism. They provided an instance of established structures of religious life being challenged by new opportunity as well as an instance of traditions meeting the demand of new environments. Active religious congregations required free space and free movement in order to accomplish their purpose and both of these were somewhat antithetical to the settled terrain of ecclesiastical structures.

Mobility understood as the ability to move freely, easily and independently from place to place, was not so frequent an attribute of women's lives in the nineteenth century. However, in frontier areas, the limitations on women regarding mobility were often overlooked. While it is true that most active religious congregations entered the frontier at the invitation of a local bishop or priest, stories abound to indicate their relative independence in many of their works on the frontier. Members of active religious congregations traveled widely unaccompanied by men and moved easily in the public and private spheres of frontier life. Their works often evolved beyond the initial invitation in unexpected ways.

Mobility understood as the ability to change rapidly or easily in response to different needs, conditions, or influences, was more often a quality of women's lives as, within the domestic sphere, they were often called upon to shift focus and activity and, occasionally, place. This sense of mobility, flexibility and adaptability, also characterized the lives of women in active religious congregations as they strove to address the needs of those among whom they served.

The agency and voice exercised by members of active religious congregations of women on the

U. S. frontier was not limited to those in positions of leadership. Independent movement and self-determination are apparent in the correspondence and annals of early congregational members as they were often isolated from leaders and benefactors by lack of transportation and systems

Active religious congregations of men and women were founded on premises of adaptability, self-determination, and responsiveness to a variety of human needs. These qualities were particularly compatible with the needs of the Catholic Church in the frontier environment of the United States.

of immediate communication. Members of these congregations traveled alone or with companions, stayed overnight in public or private settings as need dictated, and determined for themselves their responses to unexpected circumstances. It was the nature of the frontier and the nature of an expression of religious life in which vows and community took shape and form from the social and ecclesial order of the time and the pressing needs which reflected the absence of God's vision for creation.

These same pressing needs served as impetus for much creativity within and among the works of active religious congregations. The frontier experience necessitated creative responses to address overwhelming needs for education, health care, and social services. With the people, active religious congregations of women built systems and institutions to serve persons who were poor, sick, and uneducated. These active female congregations were engaged in a civilizing process within Catholic culture as well as a civilizing process within frontier culture. That is, these congregations were helping to introduce and nurture, in an unsettled environment, the practices, customs, and mind-sets which would ground traditional structures and institutions of Catholicism on the frontier even as they and other

women were engaged in introducing the practices, customs, and mind-sets which would help to ground traditional structures and institutions of the U. S. society on the frontier.

These early frontier influences were muted as time progressed and the institutions of the Catholic Church in the United States became more and more settled. The twentieth century dawned with great hope for active religious congregations of women. For the first time official documents of the Roman Catholic Church recognized active religious life for women, economic and social movements advocated for the advancement of women,¹⁸ in the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council encouraged engagement with context and culture; and the works of active religious congregations in the Catholic Church in the United States were flourishing. Sandra Schneiders describes the circumstance and the irony of the official proclamation:

New congregations of apostolic religious women...were finally recognized as canonical religious congregations of simple vows by the document *Conditate a Christo* of Leo XIII in 1900. It is important to note that most of the apostolic congregations of women were founded in the 1800s.¹⁹

Latent impulses to mobility, agency and creativity were uncovered in the return to the founding inspirations and subsequent stories of congregational life encouraged by the documents of Vatican II. While the promise had been a long time coming, the contours of active religious life for women in the church in the United States were taking shape and form. A number of related but independent projects – the Transformative Elements of the 1989 Joint Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the Futures of Religious Life Project (1990s), congregational assemblies through the last half of the twentieth century, writings of scholars such as, Sandra Schneiders, Mary Collins, Elizabeth Johnson – articulated viable elements of this expression of religious life. Active religious life in the United States would stress service in a Church universal and catholic, simplicity of life, inclusive community, cultural diversity, persons who are poor and marginalized as focus of

ministry and locus of conversion, and contemplation as a mode of being.

Members of active religious congregations began to move to new frontiers of social and economic chaos, to build with the people new systems and institutions to address the chaos, and to exercise the mobility, agency, and creativity at the heart of their specific expression of religious life. As this movement grew in clarity, questions and concerns of earlier times once again surfaced. While there may be some consolation in knowing we walk in the footsteps of our foremothers, the multi-layered implications of the blessing of the old adage on occasion feel a bit daunting: “May you live in troubled times.”



NOTES

1. Sandra Schneiders began writing about the phenomenon of religious life in the 1980s. She has published two books in an anticipated trilogy (*Finding the Treasure* (2000) and *Selling All* (2001)). Most recently, she is the author of a series of articles on ministerial religious life and the subject of an interview in the *National Catholic Reporter* (2009-2010).
2. Book Two, Part III: Canon 573: Life consecrated through profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living, in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved. By a new and special title they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's Kingdom, for the honor of God, the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory. §2 Christ's faithful freely assume this manner of life in institutes of consecrated life which are canonically established by the competent ecclesiastical authority. By vows or by other sacred bonds, in accordance with the laws of their own institutes, they profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. Because of the charity to which these counsels lead, they are linked in a special way to the Church and its mystery.
3. “Lumen Gentium” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, SJ, editor, New York: The American Press, 1966, p. 74.

4. Johannes Metz, *Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church*, New York: Search Press Ltd., 1978, p. 25.
5. The Leadership Conference for Women Religious web-site (<http://www.lcwr.org/lcwraboutus/lcwrall.htm>), 10/24/10.
6. Anne Clifford, CSJ, "Women Missioned in a Technological Culture" in *Claiming Our Truth*, Washington, D.C.: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, p. 37.
7. John Lozano, CMC, *Ministerial Spirituality and Religious Life*, Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1986, p. 25.
8. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1991, p. 41 and 55.
9. Patricia Wittburg, *Pathways to Recreating Religious Communities*, New York: Paulist Press, 1996, p. 61-62.
10. Schneiders, Sandra, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form" in *The National Catholic Reporter*, January 2010.
11. Sandra Schneiders in *Turning Points in Religious Life*, Carol Quigley, IHM, editor, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987, p. 31.
12. John W. Padburg, SJ, "Memory, Vision and Structure: Historical Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Life in the Church" in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church*, Robert S. Daly, SJ, editor, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, p. 72.
13. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992, p. 6. Frederick Jackson Turner asserted his thesis in an 1893 essay ("The Significance of the Frontier in American History"): "the existence of an area of free land, the continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Shortly thereafter, he stated a corollary of that central concept: "American social development has been continually beginning over again and again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life...furnishes the forces dominating American character." Turner defined the frontier variously as a *place* – "the meeting point between savagery and civilization;" as a *process* – "American social development...beginning over and over again;" and as a *mindset* – "a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines."
14. James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion*, vol. 1, *Religion in American Life*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 6.
15. Thomas W. Spalding, CFX, "Frontier Catholicism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 77 (July 1991), p. 474; Christopher Kauffman, *Ministry and Meaning*, –New York: Crossroads, 1995, p. 97.
16. Material gleaned from Elinor Dehey's *Religious Orders of Women in the United States*, rev. ed., Hammond, Indiana: W. B. Corkey, 1930, p. 364-66.
17. Cardinal Franc Rode, in his address at a Stonehill College symposium on "Apostolic Religious Life since Vatican II" (September 27, 2008), speaks at length of continuity and discontinuity in relation to apostolic religious life. While this paper cannot discuss in detail the theory of continuity and discontinuity as applied to religious life in the United States, suffice it to say that Cardinal Rode's assertion regarding the post-Vatican renewal of apostolic/active religious congregations that "Read with the hermeneutics of rupture and discontinuity, the 'return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes' tended to be interpreted in light of 'adaptation to the changed conditions of our time' rather than the other way around." needs to be challenged.
18. "The decades between 1890 and 1920 constituted a period of reform activity that historians have dubbed them 'the Progressive Era'. In this age, millions of Americans organized in voluntary associations to devise solutions to the myriad problems created by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration....One especially remarkable aspect of progressivism was the full participation of American women...women...exercised what they saw as their rights as citizens to shape public policy and create public institutions." (<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/pwwmh/prog.htm>) 10/23/10.
19. Sandra Schneiders in *Turning Points in Religious Life*, p. 35.

A Visitation Re-visited

A Reflection on the Challenges and Opportunities of Our Time

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.

Recalling the reactions to the announcement of an apostolic visitation of women's religious congregations in the United States is a good place to begin a reflection on the challenges and opportunities of our time. In my recollection the reactions ranged from scorn and rage on the one hand to fawning acquiescence on the other. From "we'll do the minimum to comply with this outrageous demand" to "let's see how we can outdo one another in praising the wisdom of those who instigated the investigation." Between these extremes, of course, there were countless thoughtful, measured responses. As time has passed, these have tended to prevail.

In the initial announcement on the LCWR website (2/20/09), the national board registered surprise and a modest hope that "Our participation in the visitation can be beneficial to US religious life, the church and the world." The communication from the board went on to say:

We also seek understanding of how the visitation will augment the significant discernment and study processes already inherent in our religious life. Our serious commitment to intense prayer and reflection, as well as to processes of corporate learning and analysis, have long served to make women religious keenly aware of our individual, communal and ecclesial strengths and challenges. As women religious well know, any opportunity that calls for greater reflection on our lives can be an occasion for the celebration of achievements and an examination of areas for growth. We hope that the visitation can offer that type of experience.

Fast forward to August 2009, the LCWR assembly in New Orleans. Not surprisingly, there was considerable time given to discussing the visitation as well as the separate inquiry being conducted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith into LCWR's position on various doctrinal issues. As the LCWR press release indicated, leaders noted "that while their orders have always been fully accountable to the church and plan to collaborate with the Vatican in these studies, they request that those conducting the

inquiries alter some of the methods being employed." Among the expressed concerns were a lack of full disclosure about the motivation and funding sources for the studies, and the anticipated lack of access to the reports to be submitted to the Vatican. "The leaders noted that this study of their lives has drawn national and international attention and provided them the opportunity to explain the substance and focus of religious life, not only to those conducting the probes, but also to the public."

The press release also referred to another agenda item from the assembly, namely, a report by Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C., executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, and Sister Mary Bendyna, R.S.M., executive director of the Center for Applied Research for the Apostolate (CARA) on the findings of a national study on religious vocations conducted by their two organizations over the previous two years. In my recollection approximately an hour and a half was given to this report and at least a day to the discussion of the visitation and doctrinal inquiry. I remember wishing the time allotments had been reversed: the CARA study presented solid findings; the investigations involved speculation and strategy. I mention this because I want to challenge the earlier LCWR assertion that "significant discernment and study processes are already inherent in religious life," and, by implication in the leadership conference.

But first, let's situate ourselves in a wider context. The challenges and opportunities women religious face today are experienced within a world and a church that is extremely polarized. Animosity and distrust seem endemic. Let me just cite a few current examples. Cable news shows abandon civility and even concern for truth telling as they ridicule and bait public officials. A congressman shouts out during a presidential speech on national television: "You liar!" Tea party rallies threaten our two party system. In the absence of any national consensus on how to deal

with immigration, Arizona enacts a law sure to enflame racism.

Within the church the situation in places is even more painful. Each day brings new examples: bishops refuse communion to public officials; new clerical abuses are uncovered; in one diocese torn apart by parish closings, I was told the bishop travels with a bodyguard. An interpretation of *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Ministry* recently led to one of our members being excommunicated. The vitriol expressed over differing opinions of health care reform is especially painful because it is so personal. Complicated and sensitive issues are reduced to sound-bites by the media. The bishop in Greensburg, Pennsylvania announced that religious congregations whose leaders endorsed the reform bill can no longer promote their recruitment events in his parishes or in the diocesan newspaper: "An environment of dissent and public opposition to the positions of the U.S. Catholic bishops does not provide an appropriate seedbed for vocations."

A recent commentary in *Commonweal* (June 18, 2010) posed the question: "What makes the USCCB and its legal and legislative staffs so confident that they alone are competent to understand the new law? Is there a possibility that the USCCB might be wrong? Evidently not. 'Making such moral judgments, and providing guidance to Catholics on whether an action by government is moral or immoral, is first of all the task of bishops, not of any other group or individual,' the committee chairmen write. If you disagree with the bishops on highly technical legislative and legal questions, the statement suggests, you are guilty of causing confusion and wounding Catholic unity."¹

A statement by the president of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (Mother Mary Quentin Sheridan, 3/18/10) to her members indicates that religious life itself is not exempt from the poison of public disparagement. She wrote, "Previous statements from groups like Network, the CHA, and the LCWR directly oppose the Catholic Church's position on critical issues of health care reform." Differences in prudential judgment have been escalated to doctrinal heresy.

What does all of this have to do with our topic? I am not suggesting that the Sisters of Mercy are guilty of such attitudes or behaviors. Despite the poisonous environment "union and charity" continue to be part of our congregational DNA. But I wonder if our desire not to breach union and charity doesn't sometimes keep us from having the penetrating conversations that might deepen our communal identity and address our lack of new members. I suspect that we are not alone in this and that LCWR's confidence that congregations are regularly committed to intense prayer and reflection, as well as to processes of corporate learning and analysis, may be somewhat overstated. For that reason, I'd like to address the challenges and opportunities before us under three headings, indicating some of the questions and – no surprise – linking them to the question of new membership.

Ecclesial Identity

There are numerous references to our ecclesial identity in our Constitutions. We were founded to serve the mission of the church in the world (§1), in our prayers we intercede for the whole church (§4), we carry out our mission guided by consideration of the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church (§7). We are constituted by, within, and for the Church. Undeterred by her differences with individual pastors, Catherine McAuley never doubted the importance of seeking ecclesiastical approval, and many of her closest confidants were clergy. Because of our pontifical status, the whole process of becoming a new Institute was vetted and approved by the Congregation for Religious. We became an Institute on July 20, 1991, when CICLSAL's representative, Sister Bette Moslander, CSJ, read the official proclamation from Rome.

Part of the tension of our time is that many of the Church's leaders and representatives have failed us. The settlements for clergy abuse in a five year period in the United States totaled \$1.8 billion. As the light of truth shines on Europe and beyond, the cancer of abuse is seen to have been embedded there as well. The founder of the Legionnaires of Christ has been exposed as a fraud and charlatan. And apparently the money he made

available to certain Roman officials bought him protection.

It's this same church that is now investigating us (and excommunicating one of our members)! We will not survive this unless we have a deep understanding of and commitment to being church. The church is a visible community of saints and sinners, but it is also the extension in time and space of the Body of Christ. The communion of followers of Christ needs our gifts and our witness now more than ever. Our default position cannot be that we are proud to be members of the Sisters of Mercy, but not members of the Catholic Church. Do we believe this and claim our membership even when we think we can't bear one more public revelation of how church members have failed?

Ministering to New Needs in New Ways

How often have you heard or made the comment, "Sister X is looking for a job"? Perhaps she has just re-located to a new city, or resigned from a position which she held many years but is no longer able to maintain with the same energy, or been released from a position as a result of loss of funding. In any case, she has begun to search for a new position. A few decades ago, this comment – and the reality it describes – wouldn't have existed. "Jobs" were "ministries," and the task of identifying a new ministry would have had significant input, if not direction, from a congregational leader. At the same time, many of today's most fruitful ministries didn't exist at that time or were in their infancy. Examples are low-income housing, justice advocacy, and parish administration. The passing years have seen a proliferation of new ministries and of new approaches to traditional educational and health care roles.

Where is the challenge and opportunity in all of this, and where are the underlying tensions? I would argue that the ministries which are the most fruitful and the most deserving of support and enlargement are those which are identifiably ecclesial and corporate.

One could argue that whatever we do becomes a work of the church, because of our underlying identity with the church. This

argument gains strength if the work is a corporate endeavor of the Sisters of Mercy. At the very least, it should be obvious to an interested observer that the sister serves in the role in virtue of being missioned to it by her community and that it is consistent with our commitment to serve the poor, sick, and ignorant in light of the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church. Further, her presence there contributes in a positive way to the public perception of the corporate mission of the Sisters of Mercy.

Our openness to ministering in new ways applies to our sponsored ministries as well. Decades ago the roles of mission integration and chaplaincy barely existed and our commitment to the development and empowerment of lay leadership was in its infancy. Today our dozens of colleges and secondary and elementary schools, hospitals and health care systems, retreat centers, low-income housing and emergency shelters, and other sponsored ministries testify to our enduring concerns and our effective partnerships with the laity.

In the apostolic exhortation that followed the synod on consecrated life, Pope John Paul II called religious to a variety of new works, including new evangelization and the media, as well as to our traditional works. As we discern new ministerial commitments and re-commit to long-standing works, can we be sure that they are shared commitments consistent with our ecclesial identity?

Unity of Practice

The more senior among us can remember a time when our unity was manifested in a uniformity of dress, daily schedule, and prescribed prayers. Some of this was no doubt edifying and helped to incorporate us into a community of belief and practice. And some of it was psychologically damaging, encouraging immaturity and a public image of naiveté and irrelevance. For the latter reasons the church mandated change in the form of renewal and adaptation, and our leaders responded with hope and enthusiasm.

But, as with every change, there are unintended consequences and subsequent developments in our shared Mercy life which call

for our attention today. The first I would name is divergence of practice around participation in the Eucharist. In the words of our Constitutions, our union with Christ is enhanced by our participation in the liturgical life of the church (§11). By participating in the Eucharist, daily if possible, we celebrate in Word and Sacrament the Passover of Jesus and are drawn into communion with all creation (§12). The formation program for our Institute, *For the Love of Mercy*, refers in several places to participation in the sacramental and liturgical life of the church as an element of the incorporation process. This is not the place to examine all of the factors, theological and practical, which influence our practice of daily Eucharist, e.g., the identity (and/or the perceived qualifications) of the celebrant, convenience of access, or personal spiritual preferences. Suffice it to say, that what was once a tangible sign of our inner unity is not always the case today.

Another area where our diversity has grown, and where it seems at variance with not only our Constitutions, but also with the incorporation program, is in the practice of community living. Our Constitutions affirm that, "By our life in community and by sharing our faith and mission, we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity. ... Community strengthens us for mission when we listen openly to one another, seek the common good and promote mutual trust." (§18-19) Further, "our vocations calls us to regular communal prayer ... gathering for communal prayer, especially morning and evening, in the spirit of the prayer of the church, assists us to grow in responsiveness to the conflicts and sufferings of the world." (§17) *For the Love of Mercy* emphasizes in numerous places the importance of developing the skills for communal living, e.g., it states that the temporary professed sister demonstrates:

1. An open and respectful attitude toward learning to live community life;
2. The ability to respect the lived experience of the sisters in community, even if it does not easily conform to previous expectations;
3. A willingness to allow herself to grow and be changed by the experience of living in community;
4. A discerning attitude about her call to live in community]
5. Patience in all that is incomplete in the sisters she lives with and in herself;
6. Commitment to regular communal prayer and faith sharing;
7. Commit to dialog and discussion as a community around matters affecting the local community;
8. The ability to challenge lovingly and to allow herself to be challenged in a loving way by others as a part of living community life. (3-85)

The questions all of this raises, of course, are to what extent can the new member expect to find this commitment demonstrated in the wider community? How visible is it to a casual inquirer?

The deeper question is: why do we find it so difficult to engage questions such as these?. The late Cardinal Bernardin, founder of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, recognized that this weakness characterizes much of the Church. The goal of the Initiative is to engage in dialogue about matters in which Catholics differ, in order to produce deeper communion. We acknowledge that this is difficult precisely because we all want to feel safe with those who think like we do. Perhaps the next Institute chapter which is being organized around a question-oriented discernment process will be our breakthrough opportunity. Owning the questions is the first step toward seeking communal answers. I would suggest that we answer the questions by pointing to our practice more than to our words.

Impact on New Membership

Let me turn now to the NRVC Study and what it can tell us about vocations. The study was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and completed in August 2009. Details about its organization, research methods, and results can be found on the NRVC website. Summaries have been published in various journals, so you may have already seen some of the results. The following points are pertinent to our discussion:

- Most new members were attracted to their particular religious institute by its spirituality, community life, and prayer life.
- Many new members identify common prayer, particularly Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours, as what most attracted them to religious life.

- Most new members indicate that they want to live, work, and pray with other members of their religious institute.

There are many other findings involving demographics, educational background, ministry preferences, etc. Yes, having a religious habit was an important factor for a significant number of new members. Comments about ministry or service were less frequently named as influencing their choice of an institute, possibly because many of them are already involved in some church service.

As I ponder this data, it seems to me that, with the exception of the habit, we offer what young women say they are looking for. Are we telling our story, demonstrating our lifestyle, with sufficient clarity and passion? Can we invite and welcome new members, confident that the way of life we are living corresponds to their yearnings and desires? To the extent that we have dealt with the diversity of understanding and practice that I described above, we will be able to attract new members with integrity. This, it seems to me, is the greatest opportunity and challenge of our time.

One place these questions were engaged recently was at a work session held by our West Mid-West community last September. Sister Norita Cooney convened about 45 sisters, mostly from that community, but with a few representatives from the Institute leadership team and other communities, to work out a vocation plan for West Mid West. Participants were mostly younger members and vocation and formation personnel. In a highly structured and engaging process over a day and a half, we created a plan with an 18 month horizon, a three year horizon, and a five year horizon. It was organized around six areas: communication; identity/symbols; early experience in Mercy community; integration into the community; involvement/experiences in Mercy ministry; prayer and Mercy spirituality. This isn't the place to give a detailed account of the process and outcomes (and most of it is on a website), but let me just share a few of my take-aways:

- The task of attracting and inviting new members belongs to all of us. An effective way to stimulate interest can be to invite young women to join us for prayer on a regular basis. This wouldn't be a special prayer service designed for the occasion,

but inclusion in something which is evidently part of our way of life.

- Our many high schools and colleges give us an unparalleled advantage over many other congregations in terms of access to young women. Apparently Georgian Court has developed a program which is recommended for our other colleges.
- Studying the possibility of adopting a uniform "formal attire," was actually included in the plan under the rubric of identity and symbols.

Efforts like these do give me hope. We are blessed to have an excellent, well-thought-out formation program detailed in *For Love of Mercy*. But our vocation and formation personnel can't do it alone. The challenge belongs to all of us. So let me conclude.

Our Institute has a long and rich history, full of tales of heroism. Our foremothers overcame tremendous obstacles, crossed oceans and continents without any expectation of ever returning to their homes, built institutions on a shoestring, suffered physical hardships, and experienced misunderstanding from within the church and prejudice from without. Have our past achievements led us to expect success or easy victories now? Today we live in a world threatened by terrorism, divided by inequities in resources, ravaged by natural disasters. Our church is tormented by sins within, as Pope Benedict XVI has reminded us, and criticisms from without. And we are an elderly community with diminished energies. One of the challenges of our time is being misunderstood, criticized, scorned. It's not the fury of the Know Nothing Party that burned convents a century ago, but the pain of being dismissed as irrelevant.

Some days we might like to trade our problems for those of our foremothers. But we don't have the luxury of choosing our own time. Our 19th century founders and our 20th century predecessors had no more certainty about the path forward than we do in the 21st century. Like them, we have to listen to the voices of the poor and underserved and act with mercy. Like them, we have to marshal our resources and act with courage. Like them, we have to renew our purpose and act with confidence. God's help is no less available to us than it was to Catherine and Frances.

The Grace of a Visitation

Which brings me back to the topic of visitations. Catherine and Frances were tireless in their visits to the fledgling foundations. They traveled by stagecoach and barge and steamship to Cork and Limerick, Chicago and Manchester, and dozens of other locales to teach and encourage the young communities. We are no stranger to visits and visitors.

From a faith perspective, we usually think of the visit of Mary to Elizabeth as the paradigmatic example of a visitation. A pregnant Mary travels through the hill country to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth who is also, unexpectedly, with child. The unborn Jesus is recognized by his unborn cousin, soon to be his herald. The two women greet one another with memorable words that we still pray daily. As beautiful as this meeting is, it is neither the first nor the last significant visitation recounted in Sacred Scripture.

In the Book of Genesis (Chap. 18) three strangers visited Abraham and Sarah and told them that she would bear a son, to her great amusement and skepticism. In another story the prophet Elijah visited a widow and her son who were about to eat their last rations. As a reward for their hospitality their pot was never empty

again. (1 Kgs 17:7-16; Lk 4:25) A visit of a lover to his beloved is celebrated in the great Song of Songs. In the New Testament, the Magi come from afar to visit the new-born king, the itinerant Jesus visited friends and their families, even the socially stigmatized. Paul traveled tirelessly, visiting the new communities throughout the Mediterranean world with messages of instruction, encouragement and admonition.

As we await our visitation, we may think we know what to expect. The apostolic visitation has been largely characterized as investigative, even punitive. But we might do better to be open to surprise, praying that our visitors will bring a message of understanding and encouragement. Whether or not we have a personal opportunity to talk with them, we might think about what we would like to say to them. What do we hope they will ask, since we have thought long and hard about the answers and we want to share our common understanding? Whenever and wherever our visitors come, we will live by the words of our Constitutions, "We strive to witness to mercy when we reverence the dignity of each person, create a spirit of hospitality and pursue integrity of word and deed in our lives." (§8)



NOTES

1. The Commonweal article adds further: "It has long been the position of the USCCB that, while bishops must provide moral guidance, lay Catholics are fully competent to make decisions in the public sphere, whether in the workplace or in politics. Is it now the USCCB's view that the laity has lost that competence? If that is the case, real confusion will surely ensure. And if only the

hierarchy is permitted to assess the merits of something like health-care policy, how are American Catholics to make sense of the approval expressed for the new health-care law in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Rome-based Jesuit magazine whose contents are approved by the Vatican secretary of state?"

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The End of an Era?

Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M.

In the summer of 2010, I heard that a senior sister of another congregation had exclaimed, "It's hell to live at the end of an era." What a perfect expression of our current dilemma. The renewal called for by Rome in the years before the Second Vatican Council has reached its logical conclusion. Now Rome, in an unprecedented move, has embarked on an Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States. To many of us the signals are clear. The men who once found us hopelessly out of touch with modern life and called us to update, now find educated, articulate, and confident missionaries to modern culture insufferable. It reminds me of a comment made by the husband of a woman who attends our theological center – a woman who has found her voice and her sense of direction. To her he said, "You were so much happier before you became a feminist!"

An editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter* of July 26, 2010, compares contemporary women religious *vis-à-vis* the Vatican to abused wives. Some sisters have balked at that comparison, but there is one dimension of it that rings true to me. Women in abusive relationships all too often stay in them because they are determined to change the other. "I'm not leaving because he is going to change," they say. Isn't it time that we ask ourselves whether this is, in fact, what we are doing?

The Visitation is a prime example of the current relationship. Called and designed without consultation, the Apostolic Visitation will issue in a report, not to be shared with the leaders of the congregations visited, but kept for the eyes of Vatican officials. And all of this in the name of concern for the future of religious life, in part because of the drop in numbers of vocations. Meanwhile, the religious men known as brothers have suffered an even more dramatic drop in numbers in the United States, but the solution chosen by Cardinal Rode (who initiated the Apostolic Visitation) is to write a letter praising the vocation of a brother and urging young men to think about joining.¹

I will not rehearse here other problems with the Visitation. They have been covered brilliantly by Sandra Schneiders in her series of articles.² My point is rather that this event should galvanize us. It is time for us to stop hoping that "they" will change; time to take our eyes off of "them." If nothing else, the time, energy, and money spent on this effort to accommodate an unfair and unreasonable investigation (to call it what it really is) should bring us to ask at what cost we will continue to placate those who refuse to enter into dialogue with us about the changes we have found necessary and good for our life and mission. We have important choices to make and a great deal of work to do to prepare for those choices.

This essay will focus attention on three areas: prayer and spirituality; the vow of obedience; and canonical status.

Prayer and Spirituality

Let me say at the outset that the following analysis is dependent on my experience of Mercy life since 1958. It is open to correction and/or augmentation and I hope others will do so.

One of the casualties of the valiant attempt on the part of the Sisters of Mercy to "think with the Church" since Vatican II is our common devotional life. For those of us who entered the congregation before Vatican II, being incorporated into the community meant observing feasts, learning hymns and prayers, and taking on devotional practices that were characteristic of a Sister of Mercy. While the corpus of these practices was not totally consistent across the many groups that made up the Sisters of Mercy at the time (Union and Federated), the directions given in the Constitutions regarding feasts to be observed and prayers to be said formed a solid core of devotional life, some of which required the presence of a priest, but not all. While the Catholic Church provided the texts and readings for the major feasts, the communities themselves developed musical and other traditions (for example, the wearing of the church cloak) that shaped the anticipation, the celebration, and the

memory of the feasts. As I wrote long ago in a poem praising this time,

Mount of memories
of rhythms that the world
and we
know not
having lost the medieval habit of devotion:
 dark arising
 silent vigil
 daily mystery
 monotonal, monochromal offering:
 feasts transforming darkness into light,
 fasts to take us back again to
 where the terror and the truth were known
 as one:

the long and sacred story of our year
turning on wheels of prefaces and graduals and sequences
rehearsed until they sank into our silence and
were home.³

Motherhouses were, of course, the repository for these liturgical traditions and it was seldom possible for sisters sent out on the missions to celebrate feasts in the same way. That is why a chance to return to the motherhouse for a big celebration was looked upon by many with joy. Still, other devotions could be kept wherever a Sister of Mercy was, and so novenas, the rosary, the little office of the Blessed Virgin, and other prayers continued to link sisters and to perpetuate a tradition of devotion which had rich, positive images of women: Mary, the Mother of God; the bride in the *Song of Songs*; Wisdom, etc. Unfortunately, at the time, most women religious had not reached a developed enough consciousness of ourselves as women to plumb the depths of these images. Yet they were there, working on us; and they were available for future reflection.

With the changes brought by Vatican II, heavy emphasis was placed on the Eucharistic liturgy, especially the Sunday liturgy. Other forms of devotion were downplayed, if not ridiculed. An unintended consequence of this change was that the spiritual life of Catholics, including women religious, came to depend increasingly on the presence and power of a priest. (I remember an incident at Vanderbilt University in 1972 when the priest did not arrive for Mass and I suggested to the congregation that we sing the hymns and do the readings. One by one, those assembled left. A Protestant friend who was

present said to me, "My God, you Catholics can't even pray without a priest.")

Moreover, the texts chosen for the new lectionary accent stories about men, eliminate from Sunday readings the most important positive passages where women appear, and emphasize portions of scripture that underline the subordination of women.⁴ By trying to conform our minds to the mind of the universal church, we women religious are subjecting ourselves to readings at liturgy that reinforce the very things we are resisting in the church. Nowhere is this more evident to me in Mercy life than the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Mercy. In the instances with which I am familiar, the Community plans to celebrate on a Saturday, when it is more possible for large numbers of sisters to gather. If the time to celebrate falls after noon, the laws of the church require that the liturgy be the liturgy of the Sunday. On the day that we might revel in what God has done in a woman, and for our community under her patronage, we find ourselves participating in a liturgy that has nothing to do with Mary, making appropriate hymns, prayers and homilies nearly impossible.

Add to this the exclusive language that the current officials insist on for most aspects of the Eucharistic liturgy and you have some sense of why some, perhaps many, women religious find the experience alienating. To date, the Sisters of Mercy have not found a way to address this, much less to decide what to do about it. Yet every time we have "circles" or "loops," the issue of how we can celebrate Eucharistic liturgies together under these circumstances comes up. Meanwhile, as a theologian, I worry that the community as a whole stands to lose the essential meaning of being a eucharistic community, with the elements of repentance, oblation of self, and uniting in one body that such language connotes. I also think it is impossible to incorporate new members into any cohesive spirituality or prayer life under these conditions. There is no indication that the men in charge of liturgy are going to change. The question is, What are we going to do about the problem it presents for us, if we agree that it is a problem?⁵

The Vow of Obedience

Another pressing issue for us concerns our vow of obedience. In what manner does that vow relate to the hierarchical church, or does it? Though it is clear in the vow formula that the vow is made to God, there are some in the congregation who seem to believe that we make a vow to the Pope. (I base this on remembered discussions from chapters when we were struggling with §53 in the *Constitutions*.)⁶ Certainly there are those who think that women religious are responsible to enforce the rules that the hierarchical church imposes (for example, the closed communion rule) and others who do not think that is our responsibility. It would appear that the directions regarding the Visitation have raised some other questions about obedience, though public discussion of them has been muted. It is to be hoped that, when the dust has settled, the fruits of the discussions engaged in by those in leadership would be made available to us all.

Meanwhile, it seems to me that the Sisters of Mercy would be well served by coming to some common understanding regarding the scope and nature of our vow of obedience. We have before us the example of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, who were able to stand by Sister Joan Chittister when Vatican authorities intervened regarding her appearance at a Dublin conference in 2001. The Prioress at the time, Christine Vladimiroff, explained her decision not to order Joan to absent herself from the conference. She did so by an appeal to the Benedictine understanding of obedience, writing as follows:

After much deliberation and prayer, I concluded that I would decline the request of the Vatican. It is out of the Benedictine, or monastic, tradition of obedience that I formed my decision. There is a fundamental difference in the understanding of obedience in the monastic tradition and that which is being used by the Vatican to exert power and control and prompt a false sense of unity inspired by fear. Benedictine authority and obedience are achieved through dialogue between a community member and her prioress in a spirit of co-responsibility. The role of the prioress in a Benedictine community is to be a guide in the seeking of God. While lived in community, it is the individual member who does the seeking.

Sister Joan Chittister, who has lived the monastic life with faith and fidelity for fifty years,

must make her own decision based on her sense of Church, her monastic profession and her own personal integrity. I cannot be used by the Vatican to deliver an order of silencing.⁷

Clearly, the Sisters of Mercy cannot claim a similar understanding of obedience. But we have, in the course of writing and understanding a new *Constitutions*, come to insights into our vow of obedience that deserve to be clearly articulated and agreed upon. Though there is acknowledgement of the duty to obey "those who exercise legitimate authority according to these *Constitutions*" and the reality that the vow of obedience can be formally invoked (§27), the longer paragraph (§28) emphasizes a communal search for God's will and "responsible obedience" that entails informing one's mind, preparing hearts for dialogue, and listening to one another in love. The cross that is to be thus embraced often looms precisely in the tension between these two paragraphs and these two approaches to the vow.

In a much longer essay, I have argued that the original rule reflected more of a "Johannine" approach to life in community, that is, an approach that emphasizes the mutual love of the community members as the bond of union, rather than emphasizing rules or the authority of those in leadership. By my analysis, conformity to the hierarchical understanding and practice of religious life became enshrined among us beginning with the 1955 *Constitutions* (for the Sisters of Mercy of the Union).⁸ I cannot speak about what happened in the independent communities, but I would like to believe that they retained more of what breathed through Mother McAuley's rule. As I wrote:

Despite all she had to endure to become a Sister at an advanced age; despite the arduous task of getting a rule approved – a reading of Catherine's original ... is quite revealing. One is hardly aware of the church [in the sense of the hierarchical structure within which the rule subsists]. The original rule is suffused with admonitions to an internal unity based on love for one another and an external service to the poor and to distressed women of good character based on love for the Christ the sisters would meet in them. In her magisterial study of the tradition of Mercy, Mary Sullivan points out that Mother McAuley was careful to avoid unnecessary clerical or ecclesiastical supervision that could intrude upon

the direct responsibility of the members of the Institute. She also notes that Catherine placed the vows and other intra-institutional matters in a supportive rather than a primary position. In Catherine's ordering of the chapters of the rule, priority is given to the schools, the visitation of the sick, the admission of distressed women, the perfection of ordinary actions and employment of time, and union and charity. In addition, Catherine's rule contains special prayers, lists of feasts, devotional practices and ways of preparing for ministry that are peculiar to the Sisters of Mercy.

Only where the life of the community touches the larger church, obviously in matters concerning the sacraments and the chain of authority, does there appear mention of priests and bishops. The original document is surprisingly non-parochial. That is, the religious life of the community is lived within the circle of committed members and extended to those under their care. To my mind, what emerges is a very Johannine picture: a group of women bound to each other not so much by legal association nor even by religious vows, but by the union of heart and mind that makes them one body. That union is directly connected to their devotional and apostolic life.⁹

Perhaps if we could recover this vision of our life together, we could adjudicate the conflicts that arise between the opposing interpretations of obedience that are alive and well among us.

Canonical Status

My final point is carried essentially by questions that the Apostolic Visitation has raised. Given all that has been stirred up by this experience, is it time to explore and decide, for our own time, whether or not we want to retain canonical status? Sometimes, the idea of going "non-canonical" is spoken out of frustration, or as a threatened action to be taken in response to some action on the part of church authorities. But, as far as I can see, it has never been seriously studied. We need to know what that would entail, why we would see it as a value, what we would stand to lose, and how it would affect our life together. I also think we would have to face, with what Sister Wendy calls "unprotected prayer," the real consequences of the changes we have made over the last thirty years or so.¹⁰ Do we still fit within the expectations of the universal church for

consecrated religious? Have we moved in the direction of claiming and celebrating the "lay" aspect of our vocation to the extent that we need to make sweeping changes in the way we relate to the structures of the Catholic Church?¹¹ I don't have the answers to these questions, but I think that one of the possible results of the struggle with and over the Apostolic Visitation, and the rising consciousness of ourselves as women, is that we will determine to come to the answers together—for the sake of that very church and for the future of the life Mother Mary Catherine McAuley inspired. To that end, I close with a poem/prayer by Anne Porter:

I thank you for that secret praise
Which burns in every creature,
And I ask you to bring us to life
Out of every sort of death

And teach us mercy.



NOTES

1. This was reported in the *Tablet*, though I have not been able to recover the article.
2. *National Catholic Reporter Online*: <http://ncronline.org/news/women/religious-life-prophetic-life-form>
3. This is the first stanza of "In Mulieribus," *Sea-Change* (Spring, 1985):10. The poem was written in 1979 to honor Mount Saint Agnes, the motherhouse of the Baltimore Province of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union. The second stanza attempts to capture the hope in what transpired over the years of dramatic change.
Mount of many subjects
taught to bow and bend and kneel before
today I see you in the sun
and praise your motherhood.
Unmystified
suffering the seasons' pain
without the ministries of
caretaker,
superior
or priest.
Exposed to elemental things
to daily flow of people on their way.

Emptied, detached from treasure long preserved
your beauty now is natural and needs but
simple care.

Only the young and the dead live with you
in this time without a name

but you send forth
 out of habit
 a power that is more than nature knows
 and many daughters rise to stand and walk.

4. See the article by Ruth Fox, OSB, "Women in the Bible and the Lectionary," *Liturgy* (May/June) 90, 1996, also available at <http://www.cta-usa.org/reprint6-96/fox.html>
5. I have not given consideration to the *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy* because, valuable as it is, it is based on the cathedral office and does not, to my mind, continue the devotional traditions of an earlier time of the Sisters of Mercy. For example, there are no references to the *Song of Songs* and only two instances in which the rich feminine imagery of *Wisdom* appears on a reading. The readings from *Revelations* nowhere include female imagery and there are no readings from the passages of the New Testament where Mary appears.
6. The final version only hints at the controversy that preceded it: "As religious, we recognize the legitimate authority of the Pope." *Constitutions*, §53 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.
7. Complete text available at <http://www.womenpriests.org/teaching/vladimir.asp>
8. See Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, "The Ecclesial Experience of the Sisters of Mercy as Reflected in the *Constitutions*," <http://mountsaintagnes.org/uploadedFiles/Resources/Lectures/The%20Ecclesial%20Experience%20of%20the%20Sisters%20of%20Mercy%20as%20Reflected%20in%20the%20Constitutions.pdf>
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. Best known as a commentator on art for PBS programs, Sister Wendy has also written on prayer. Sister Wendy Beckett, *Sister Wendy on Prayer*. New York: Harmony Books, 2006: 38.

On this point of the lay vocation, I highly recommend Chapter 3, "Discourse About the Laity, A Sacred Power," in Ladislav Orsy, *Receiving the Council, Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009: 35-45.

Washing Beets

They were small ones,
 no tops, really;
 Plants all to root,
 some poked above the ground.
 I pulled them easily and quickly,
 just enough for harvards.

(yes, he likes them that way, I said)

The sun lit up the yard
 in the late summer afternoon
 Resplendent,---full of ease and contentment.

I loved it so, being there
 Bending over my pan of dirt chunked beets,
 Filling the pan with too hot water from the
 warm summer hose.
 I poured it out and cooled the beets,
 Rubbing away the nourishing earth.

And then—it was so quick—I wasn't sure,
 I heard a sighing
 In the leaves—of the poplar tree.
 There were so many leaves and there was no wind.

Listening to hear it come again, I heard it come;
 Cool sighs of the spirit wind,
 Stirring a stinging wetness from my eyes,
 I rinsed the beets again.

What was I to do with myself, the beets and those inside?

I'll tell them, I thought, of this thing
 I do not comprehend,
 And they will understand.

Ingrid Solli
 September, 1989

Reflections from Latin America

Deborah Watson, R.S.M.

Tomasa, a Quechua woman, sits propped against an Inca wall in Cusco, Peru. Her hands are busy with the weaver's rapid back and forth motions as she balances the loom that is attached to her feet, producing just the right tension to create her beautiful design in alpaca wool.

As I watch her, I remember the request to write some reflections from Latin America on the challenges being faced by religious in the U.S., and my thoughts leap immediately to the image used by one of Latin America's foremost theologians of religious life. Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B. has likened the intrinsic tension between the charismatic and institutional aspects of religious life to the Peruvian weaver who often attaches her small loom to a tree, or as in my recent experience, to her own body, thus producing the necessary creative tension.¹

That same August day in Cusco, pondering this image, I pause above the scattered stones of the Koricancha – the ruins of what was once a golden garden depicting in miniature the glories of the flora and fauna of the Inca Empire. And I was struck by the complex fabric of Latin American society and the unique tensions experienced by religious in this society.

So in these few words I would like to explore that societal background and offer some thoughts on contrasts and connections with religious life in North America, especially as lived by women's Congregations. There is no doubt that religious life is in varying degrees of crisis throughout the world. "Today the diagnosis is practically universal: Religious Life is undergoing an unprecedented crisis of identity and meaning which affects even its possibility of survival."²

As I reflect on this crisis from a Latin American context and with reference to the current tensions in US religious life, my thoughts cluster around three themes: institution/charism; prophecy; and the notion of law.

Reacting to a community of faith that had become overly accommodated to the values of 4th century decadent urban centers, our forefathers and mothers in the consecrated life left the cities

of the new Christianized Empire to live a radically evangelical life. From the beginning, and throughout subsequent history, new forms of consecrated life have emerged in charismatic response to the gospel of Jesus and the needs of the times. But throughout this same history, religious life has been susceptible to an institutionalization that has all too frequently muted its fundamental charismatic call.

José María Vigil, Claretian liberation theologian, writing on religious life views our time as the most acute example:

Many theologians affirm that Catholic religious life finds itself in a position of institutional captivity. By nature religious life is clearly charismatic and prophetic, yet the official institutional Church has placed them within the ironclad framework of Canon Law, thus depriving them of any possible prophetic freedom. Religious life has been assimilated into the institutional functioning of the Church... A great number of its initiatives have been suffocated and subjected to Vatican control (the elaboration and renewal of their Constitutions, the submission of their publications and other writing, the censure of their theologians (both men and women)... Yet most religious communities feel comfortable with these institutional canonical statutes. Indeed it is an exception when a religious congregation feels that this institutional domestication goes against the very essence of religious life as a religious-cultural movement.³

And so the image of the weaver continues to play in the background as I explore my own experience with a foot in two worlds and I ask myself the questions: How is this tension the same and how is it different? How does the notion of prophecy come into play? How do differing concepts and approaches to law affect one's perspective and response to the current crisis? Assuming that the reader is well acquainted with religious life in the United States, I would like to start from a general and rather kaleidoscopic view of religious life in Latin America that will be very much colored by the years I have spent in both Peru and Argentina.

Consecrated life in Latin America is a complex reality bearing the weight of more than 500 years of tumultuous history in which a fusion of Church and State (cross and sword) persists to this day and exacerbates this inherent tension between institution and charism.

In countries such as Peru, religion, and Catholicism in particular, continues to be highly institutionalized. A judge may deliver corrupt judgments sitting in front of a colonial crucifix, Catholic doctrine is taught in all public schools, and military authorities abuse citizens in the shadow of a representation of Nuestra Señora de la Merced.

Institution and Charism

Other countries, such as Argentina, with stronger connections to Europe, are increasingly more pluralistic and even "post-Christian," with less and less evidence of religious influence in secular matters.⁴ Religious life is typically seen, and rejected, as part of a institutionalized approach to religion from the past.

But within both of these realities religious life can roughly be divided into four groups: the first would be those ultra conservative groups of which the most well known are connected to Opus Dei. They appeal to the educated, monied elite and strive to return to a very hierarchical and esoteric vision of Church. They tend to live and work near their "own" bishops, of which there are many, especially in Peru.

Alongside this group and also very conservative, but with a more "popular" base, are the groups that go out into the countryside recruiting 15 or 16 year olds who want to escape the burden of poverty. These young people are inducted into a pre-Vatican II style of religious life. They do not participate in the formation opportunities offered by the country's Conference of Religious, and they tend to leave their congregations in large numbers sometime after professing vows. We often see these women when they come to us for help in their transition out of religious life. Usually they are traumatized by oppressive structures and treatment, but seeking life and freedom.

However, my sense is that the vast majority of Latin American religious women would be in a

middle group that could be labeled conservative to moderate. These women are frequently struggling to maintain institutions such as schools and health care centers; or holding down a full time job and doing volunteer parish pastoral work on the side. These women typically participate in the country Conference of Religious. But they collaborate willingly in roles subservient to hierarchy and clergy with little or no gender critique. Few of these women have advanced university degrees and many do not have the equivalent of an undergraduate degree. They tend not to show up for events focused on achieving some kind of systemic change.

A fourth group would be those very consciously pursuing new forms or paradigms of consecrated life. These women are imbued with the ideals of Vatican II and the tenets of liberation theology. Many, such as our Mercy community in Argentina, have handed over institutions to other Congregations or to competent and committed laypersons and have moved to the margins of the society both in terms of who they serve and where they live. They are sensitive to issues of gender and ecology and are frequently on the cutting edge of awareness and response to social needs and the fight for systemic change. Most have sought ministry outside parish and church settings so they won't continue to be disempowered by patriarchal structures and a local church situation in which the bishop is frequently very much involved in specific ministries and can call "his" religious by name. Many in this group share the same concerns as their North American sisters and are at least somewhat aware and influenced by developments in U.S. religious life.

Reflecting on how this religious life panorama relates to current thinking and events in the U.S., I am brought to some paradoxical observations. Without doubt, except for those groups and/or individuals that have broken out of the strictures imposed by the institutionalization of religion or by the church as institution, religious life in Latin America remains captive to the institutionalization described above. It has had to confront events not unlike the Apostolic Visitation and the censuring of individuals.

Harkening back to my image of the Peruvian weaver with her loom tied to a tree, these tensions

are produced by external forces. In 1991 the Vatican intervened and appointed the officers for the Latin American Conference of Religious, thereby thwarting the operation of cutting edge policies and plans for a number of years.⁵ Many religious such as Ivone Gebara, the Brazilian religious and ecofeminist theologian, have lived years of enforced silenced. CONFER in Lima, Peru must make very judicious decisions about where to hold its workshops and events due to local episcopal censorship of a wide range of speakers. The Peruvian government recently threatened to expel from the country a British Christian Brother (interestingly with the last name of McAuley) for his defense of the right of indigenous in Amazonia.⁶ And yet I would say that the average religious is less affected by these external tensions than by the internal tensions.

The socio-political context is very different. Most religious in Latin America are not involved in the kind of high-powered specific institutions and "works" that we are familiar with in the United States. In general, religious are very absorbed in direct response to the urgencies of a population where *pan y trabajo* (bread and work)

**In Latin America and the Caribbean
the desire to be prophetic rapidly
translates into a radical and risk-
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and immediate health care needs are the all-consuming preoccupations of those with whom they minister. And there is no Latin American equivalent of the National Catholic Reporter or other journals that might provoke an institutional critique. So, in the end the institution/charism tension is lived very differently and perhaps not viewed with the same clarity as in the U.S. due to this very different institutional tapestry.

There are some more explicit attempts to deal with the interior tensions between institutionalized religious life and our charismatic roots. The last issue of CLAR's bulletin is devoted to the theme of identity and undoubtedly the individual country conferences will pick up on that.⁷ Also, much of the theological literature has been dealing with the refounding theme.⁸

Risk of the Prophetic

However, for me it is the area of the prophetic where real interchange can take place between the two Americas. As I read the keynote from the LCWR in August 2010 and followed some of the blogs, I was acutely aware of how the sense of prophecy is different in North and South. Perhaps the rhetoric is the same, but the reality certainly isn't. And I was struck by how paradoxical it is that southern hemisphere religious women frequently, so bound by the old structures of Christendom alluded to above, often possess a more vibrant sense of the prophetic than their North American neighbors. In Latin America and the Caribbean the desire to be prophetic rapidly translates into a radical and risk-taking courage that has dramatic, often iconic, consequences. Almost every Sister, no matter where she stands with regard to feminist issues, relationship with the church, or "liberation theology" has at some level been transformed by the repeated clarion call dating from the Conference of Bishops in Medellin in 1969. This was repeated as recently as 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil. Living in a social context of great poverty, she struggles daily with the challenge of living a preferential option for the poor *hasta las últimas consecuencias*.

(Religious life) is called to be ... radically prophetic, capable of illuminating in the light of Christ the shadows of the contemporary world and the paths to new life, and hence what is required is a prophetic witness that yearns even to surrender one's life in continuity with the tradition of holiness and martyrdom of so many religious men and women over the history of the continent. (§220)⁹

I dare to say in almost every Latin American and Caribbean country, religious can name their martyrs – women and men who recently gave their lives in the cause of justice. CLAR has a whole section on its web site devoted to the memory of these courageous women and men. We easily recognize some of their names: Ita Ford, M.M., Dorothy Sanger, S.N.D., Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. ... "Laying down one's life for the poor" are not just challenging words but have been repeatedly a real and literal possibility that can offer inspiration to those making the hard decisions about how to be prophetic. In a North American context one does

not usually get murdered for defending human rights, but one may have to suffer personal and material alienation for defending freedom, compassion, and justice.

Approach to Law

When I visited the United States in the spring of 2010, I was struck by the North American legal approach to the growing crisis in religious life with its heavy mobilizing of civil and canonical resources to resolve issues. I sensed an exercising of legal caution combined with an instinctual resorting to democratic principles and procedures. And I was very aware of how different this would be to a Latin American approach where law tends to oppress, not free, and where democratic principles are still not part of the fabric of society once you scratch the surface.

On the one hand, this North American impulse to seek refuge in the law to clarify and resolve conflicts and to resort to action outside the law only in extreme circumstances makes perfect sense and is a great strength. But it can produce a fear to take radical prophetic positions. The legal mind-set and the hopeful conviction that disputes can be settled in some court of law and/or with dialog are ingrained in U.S. culture. But the prophet acts outside the law. This is a very hard concept for North Americans to accept when law is seen as an avenue insuring protection, clarification and justice.

As I pondered several of the articles on the Phoenix situation involving Bishop Olmsted, Sister Margaret Mary McBride, R.S.M. and St. Joseph Hospital from my simple house on the border between Argentina and Paraguay, I was impressed by such an astute use of canon law.¹⁰ However, I also realized that this approach would have no place in my current context. Even those capable of following the legal argumentation in situations of moral and ethical dilemmas or of conflicts with ecclesial authority would find no meaning in using that avenue when common sense and compassion should be sufficient base for an enlightened course of action. In a Latin American context the person would usually and instinctively

be the priority and so in many circumstances a prophetic stance may be easier to take. For all of the reasons mentioned throughout this reflection, the loyalty to institutional and legal structures would not be the same.

In the end, the tapestry created in the Latin American religious life reality is a more complex weave of institutional and charismatic, the prophetic and legal. This complexity can border on chaos but it can also free charismatic, prophetic gifts. Symbolized by the martyrs of Latin American and the Caribbean, it is a powerful witness and call to courage for our North American Sisters.



NOTE

1. Simón Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., Seminar on Religious Life, Lima, Peru, January 2008.
2. Simón Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., *Tú, Sígueme!*, Editorial Verbo Divino, Cochabamba, Bolivia, 2010, p. 5 (Translation by Deborah Watson, RSM)
3. José María Vigil, C.M. "The Crisis of Religious Life in Europe: A Call to Religious Life Worldwide" KOINONIA, <http://www.serviciokoinonia.org/relat/399e.htm>, p. 3. (Translated by Charles T. Plock, C.M.)
4. Argentina, for example just passed legislation authorizing same sex marriage in spite of heavy church opposition. Cf., Germán Lodala and Margarita Corral, "Latin American Support for Same Sex Marriage", *Americas Quarterly (Blog)* www.americasquarterly.org/node/1728.
5. Leslie Wirpsa, "Rome Ok's History Project on Women Religious," *National Catholic Reporter*, 29 Nov. 2006.
6. Rory Carroll, "Peru to Expel British 'Tarzan Agitator'", *Guardian*, 2 July 2010, <http://Guardian.co.uk>
7. *Revista CLAR*, No. 3, 2010.
8. See for example: Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., *Refundación*, CLAR, Bogotá, 1999.
9. *V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean: Concluding Document*, Aparecida, Brazil, 2007.
10. Ladislav Orsy, S.J., America Online, June 17, 2010

Jubilarian Welcome

Burlingame, California, August 8th, 2010

Toni Lynn Gallagher R.S.M.

Welcome! We are so happy you could join us this morning.

Before we begin I'd like to acknowledge the Sisters sitting here who were our mentors and teachers in elementary, high school and Russell College. Thank you for the gifts you have so generously given to us. Sister Mary Jean Meier, our teacher and mentor left Los Angeles to be with her God this morning. We know that she is with us in spirit as we begin our jubilee celebration.

Through those doors you just entered walked young women of 17 and more years of age over 51, 53 and 60 years ago, and through other doors up the hill walked the women who entered the Sisters of Mercy 70 and 75 years ago. We were willing to exchange one life for another and yet, not knowing what to expect, we each trusted a call from God that was...different.

As the doors closed and a new life began with new clothes and funny shoes, we all looked the same. We were given new names for our new life. We sat up here in the stalls facing front and tried to practice silence and learn the ways of prayer and living a life in common where our students would remark, "There was an all-for-one-and-one-for-all life" for us. With a great education, a foundation in spirituality and preparation for our ministry, we became nurses or teachers.

As Vatican II in the 1960's challenged women religious to respond to the growing needs of our church and God's people, we too changed the ways we engaged with people in need. Studying in greater depth the life and ways our foundress, Catherine McAuley responded to those most in need, we left a more cloistered way of life. We became more globally aware, more considerate of our environment, and more respectful of the ways women and children were being challenged. We became advocates, social workers, spiritual directors, leaders in education and hospital ministries. We were careful board members, intent to sponsor the works of mercy

through our hospitals and schools. We were becoming more compassionate listeners and responders to those most in need.

Where we timidly walked through those doors many years ago we now walk joyfully, with a commitment to new needs that must be addressed. We walk with a deep spirit of gratitude for all that has been and will be in our lives for others.

To you who are here, we know that without your presence in our lives, both in prayer and support, this would not have been possible. We feel gratitude for our families and friends and for all those who have showed us the ways of love. Let us remember those Sisters with whom we entered who have gone before us and rest in God's love: Sister Mary Michael Mana, Sister Bernadette Marie Heslin, Sister Alice Maison, Sister Rita May, Sister Madelyn Hall, and Sister Mary Louise Toolan.

And for you who gather with us this morning, we are grateful for your presence in our lives and we pray that God continue to bless and protect you and all those you love. Thank you for coming to celebrate our diamond and golden jubilees with us.



Jubilee Reflections - August 8, 2010

Bernadette Hart, R.S.M.

The Feast of the Transfiguration is normally on August 6, not the 8th. However, we chose to move this feast to today and have it coincide with our Jubilee because today we are celebrating the many changes that God has worked in our lives.

In the first reading about Daniel's dream we heard of the foretelling of Jesus' Transfiguration

...One like a Son of man coming

On the clouds of heaven...

He received dominion, glory and kingship...

His kingship shall never be destroyed.

For some of the Jubilarians it seemed as in a dream that we heard our call; for others of us it was a "maybe I'll just check this out."

In the second reading from Peter we heard of his eyewitness account telling us how Jesus

...received honor and glory from God the Father

When that unique declaration came to him.

This is my Son, my Beloved,

With whom I am well pleased.

And Peter goes on to tell how "we ourselves heard this voice come from heaven" and he reminds us that

You will do well to be attentive to it,

As to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns

And the morning star rises in your hearts.

As we learned more about the choice we made to follow the footsteps of Catherine McAuley and to learn to be Mercy in our world, it was by our being attentive to this light – to Jesus – that we found comfort in the dark places – and waited out until the day dawned and the morning star rose in our hearts!

And finally in the Gospel we heard Luke's account of this event and the powerful impact it had on the three apostles – so much that Peter wanted to stay in that moment and not leave. "But he did not know what he was saying."

And then a cloud covers them – the fog came in – and through that fog they heard these words: "This is my chosen Son; listen to him."

The real transfiguration is seen in our hearts as day by day we learned what it means to be God's beloved – as, indeed, each person gathered

here today can also lay claim. Looking back, there were days when we saw the transfigured Christ and heard God remind us, "This is my Son, my Chosen one, Listen to Him." There were days, too, when the Glory was clouded over and we saw nothing. It was the experiences of both the void and the glory which eventually worked its grace and changed us.

We began our ministries as Sisters of Mercy as either a nurse or a teacher. Over the years, as the world changed and as we did, some of us branched out into other venues. Some moved from classroom teaching to being a principal, and later to the diocesan level as administrators. Some moved into parish ministries when these opened up; one became the associate pastor in charge of the Spanish speaking ministries of the parish. Others moved on to teach at the college and university levels. Still others became librarians, while some moved into retreat work and spiritual direction. One moved from secondary education to become the Community Archivist, learning how to care for and preserve the many historical documents that would keep this knowledge for others who will come after. These changes mostly happened gradually, while some did happen a bit quicker.

The nurses early on were placed in charge of hospital units, and later administrators of floors. One later moved into psychiatric care, helping to start a live-in unit at St. Mary's Hospital. She later also started the first Dementia Day Care Unit there. One got involved in helping the Native Americans in Arizona, and later in the whole United States. She helped educate the non-native population as to the needs and gifts these many tribes have to offer us. A "Sixty Minute" program on the orphanages in Romania later prompted her to move to that country and network with others to change the sad conditions there. To do this of course she learned the language and lived among the people. She worked in an orphanage and then helped create TV ads that would educate the people to look upon these children in a different

light. And, she was 68 years old when she first went there!

Some of us moved into the rural areas in the United States, ministering to those in the Appalachian Mountains and helping to meet their many needs. Others moved into HIV ministry – directly helping people with AIDS as well as their families, and helping to educate the general population so that awarenesses could be changed and dignity restored. Still others have worked in grief care and in hospice, bringing comfort to individuals and their families as they all face this final passage. Some of our group have worked with the immigrant population here in the US as well as in Mexico. This of course meant learning the language in order to help bring mercy, support and aid as needed.

As Sisters of Mercy following in the footsteps of Catherine McAuley, we seek to empower others

– women and children in particular. We seek to relieve suffering, poverty and ignorance wherever we encounter it. And truly, it has been in and through these many ministries, in collaboration with each of you here today, that we have been transfigured and have aided others to do the same. The song “The Circle of Mercy” sums up what we have been about:

In Mercy, we touch the hearts of those who are in misery,

In Mercy, we’re touched by them and feel their strength and courage.

In Mercy, we heal the pain of those who are in sorrow,

In Mercy, we’re healed by them and see the face of hope.

And as Peter said in today’s Gospel,
“Isn’t it good for us to be here!”



Discussion Questions – Apostolic Visitation and Religious Life

(O’Neill) “...and so novenas, the rosary, the little office of the Blessed Virgin, and other prayers continued to link sisters and to perpetuate a tradition of devotion which had rich, positive images of women: Mary, the Mother of God; the bride in the *Song of Songs*; Wisdom, etc. Unfortunately, at the time, most women religious had not reached a developed enough consciousness of ourselves as women to plumb the depths of these images. Yet they were there, working on us; and they were available for future reflection.”

❖ Do you think that most women religious have reached “a developed enough consciousness of ourselves as women”? What is the evidence of this development? What would promote the development of our self-consciousness as women?

(Burns) “...a frontier influence: an ecumenical spirit vis-à-vis Protestants; openness to the plasticity of culture; self-reliance on and trust of individual initiative; emphasis on active virtues (honesty, industry, thrift) over passive virtues (endurance, piety, submission); and an inclination of vowed religious life toward a more active life.”

Active religious congregations of men and women were founded on premises of adaptability, self-determination, and responsiveness to a variety of human needs. These qualities were particularly compatible with the needs of the Catholic Church in the frontier environment of the United States. Their own governance structures and sense of purpose made them particularly effective in environments which required mobility, agency, and creativity.

❖ What virtues for women get affirmed in a frontier model of religious life, in contrast to “endurance, piety submission” of the monastic life?

(Gottemoeller) “This is not the place to examine all of the factors, theological and practical, which influence our practice of daily Eucharist, e.g., the identity (and/or the perceived qualifications) of the celebrant, convenience of access, or personal spiritual preferences. Suffice it to say, that what was once a tangible sign of our inner unity is not always the case today.”

❖ What is your present participation in the Eucharist, whether in a congregational setting or in a parish? Has your participation changed over the last 20 years? With what effect on your spirituality? Can you talk about this with other community members?

(Ross) “We live, then, in the space between the hard realities and the inspiring visions... Somehow we have to hold these two visions together: of hope fulfilled and work to be done. Like the servant of Isaiah, we hold the smoldering wick that is not quenched until justice is established on the earth.”

❖ What do you wish you could change? What keeps you inspired that you can make a difference?

(continued on page 34)

Reflections for the Baptism of the Lord

January 9, 2011

Society of Christian Ethics, New Orleans Louisiana

Susan A. Ross, Ph.D.

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-38

Matt 3:13-17

In January 1969, I traveled to New Orleans for the first time. With four other students, two of whom were from New Orleans and with whose family we would be staying, we drove from our college near New York City. We first stopped in Washington, D.C. for the night and then we drove all the way to New Orleans nonstop, except for meals and the bathroom. I was a *very* naïve 19-year-old, and the fact that our hosts were Creole and the rest of us were white did not strike me as remarkable.

I hadn't mentioned this fact to my parents when I told them where I was going for winter break. It wasn't until we stopped somewhere in rural Mississippi for coffee and to use the bathroom in the wee hours of the morning that the potential danger of our trip even occurred to me. The big neon sign said that the coffee shop was open 24- hours, but when the five of us entered the restaurant, we were told that it was closed. I was about ready to respond in protest, but my four friends took me by the arm, whispered for me to shut up, and we went back to the car. We drove the rest of the way to New Orleans, and arrived safely, although we were nervous every time we saw headlights in the rear view mirror.

I had grown up in an environment that talked a good game about racism. Although my elementary and high schools were overwhelmingly white, we saw Martin Luther King as a hero. I credit the nuns I had for much of my exposure to social justice issues. We watched the civil rights demonstrations on TV with appropriate outrage at white supremacists, and thought of ourselves as open-minded.

But the reality of racism came as an enormous shock to me. I now understood why my friend Colette never learned to swim. The public pools

in New Orleans had closed rather than integrate. A year later, when our small women's college experienced a takeover of the classroom building by the Black students in a protest for more attention to their concerns, she was one of the students involved. I had had a picture of racial justice that was beautiful and inspiring, but in fact it was very distant. The reality was another thing altogether.

The beautiful readings that we have just heard are incredibly inspiring and one could hardly ask for a more appropriate set of readings for a group of Christian Ethicists: "He shall bring forth justice to the nations." "God shows no partiality." "He went about doing good." "In him God was pleased." These words ought to inspire us to "open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement and from the dungeon." These images present such a clear picture of God's call for justice that I am tempted to say nothing more than, as our late friend and colleague Bill Spohn's book title said, "Go and do likewise."

But there is also a quiet undercurrent in these readings that suggests that things may not be quite so easy. The servant of the first reading is "not crying out, not shouting." The coastlands "wait for his teaching." In the reading from Acts, the section we heard today follows Peter's vision of all the pure and impure foods together and the call for an end to separation between Jew and Gentile, which must have been a very difficult experience for the early church. And while Matthew's description of Jesus' baptism was undoubtedly a profound moment of revelation for those who witnessed it, there were many others who failed to see in Jesus God's pleasure. Certainly his death was no moment of triumph in any traditional sense. In preparing these reflections, I had initially

not paid much attention to the Psalm. Once I did, though, I was struck by the images of vast waters and the flood, certainly images that have quite a power here.

The visions of justice in these readings are meant to inspire us. But if all we are left with is an inspiring vision, we won't be doing what we are asked to do. We have to deal with the realities of injustice, as this city has done, and continues to do, often with few resources, and with the hard work of making these beautiful visions come to life. We also have to recognize all the hard work it takes for these visions to come to reality, all the pain that has been involved, all the suffering, all the injustice that has preceded them. I have no doubt that we ethicists are well aware of the struggles involved in making justice a reality, and I know many among us here who do so much, not only in the classroom and in research, but in working in the grass roots to make these visions a reality.

We live, then, in the space between the hard realities and the inspiring visions. Sometimes the vision seems as if it is almost true, and we rejoice in the progress we make. At other times, a *lot* of other times, we are so aware of all that needs to be done, that we forget the vision of prisoners being

released and the blind being able to see. Somehow we have to hold these two visions together: of hope fulfilled and work to be done. Like the servant of Isaiah, we hold the smoldering wick that is not quenched until justice is established on the earth.

I returned to New Orleans a couple of times after that first trip, when I learned that hurricanes were also drinks. (I had more than a few too many of them!). I heard wonderful music and met incredibly hospitable people, notably the family of my classmate Colette. On those subsequent trips, for conventions or lectures, I had more or less forgotten that first trip and just enjoyed myself.

But this time, in thinking about justice and New Orleans, I couldn't help but return to the memory of that first journey here. I hope that all of us can be as hospitable as her parents were to this naïve white suburban college freshman and that all of us can continue to be inspired by the visions of justice as I was then. These readings assure us that God is with us in the struggle. God has grasped us by the hand, God's spirit and word are with us. Even if we are not able to open the eyes of the blind, at least it might be said of us, that at least some of the time, we went about doing good.



Discussion Questions (continued)

(Watson) "I dare to say in almost every Latin American and Caribbean country, religious can name their martyrs – women and men who recently gave their lives in the cause of justice... We easily recognize some of their names: Ita Ford, M.M., Dorothy Sanger, S.N.D., Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. ... In a North American context one does not usually get murdered for defending human rights, but one may have to suffer personal and material alienation for defending freedom, compassion, and justice."

❖ If we're not engaged in any work that's a risk to our life, is it really authentic to say religious life in North America is "prophetic"?

(Weisenbeck) "Sister Rekha Chennattu called for a radically new paradigm for women religious, saying, 'The time has come for women religious to leave a culture of command and control and enter one built on service and friendship.'"

❖ What practical changes in congregational governance, decision-making, communication, committee appointments and planning process would convince you that a culture of "command and control" was being replaced by one "built on service and friendship"?

(Carroll) "We become conscious of how, directly or indirectly, the decisions we make, the life-style we adopt, the way we vote, and the interests we promote may contribute either to the structures of social sin, or the availability of social grace in our world."

❖ How do you understand the cause-effect relation between what are doing and how that is promoting the availability of social grace in the world?

WISDOM THAT ENDURES

Seeking God in the Signs of the Times: 1980

Elizabeth Carroll, R.S.M.

Seeking God, in classical spirituality, generally implies a personal contemplative stance achieved by separation from the world and transcendence of the ephemeral, changing realities of everyday human life. Seeking God in the "signs of the times" spirituality involves taking seriously the world and God's continual working in the world (Jn. 5:17) in order to arrive at communal as well as personal action which promotes God's design for human fulfillment.

"Reading the signs of the times" names a new way of doing theology, one which particularly assists the practical discernment of God's design for human action. Whereas the metaphor for classical theology was philosophy, the metaphor for "signs of the times" theology is the social sciences, especially history. God's active presence in the world is deciphered through historical experience reflected upon in the light of Scripture and tradition.

The term itself, "signs of the times" comes from Scripture, especially Matthew 16:3, where Jesus reproves those who would test Him: "You know how to judge the appearance of the sky, but you cannot judge the signs of the times." It became theologically meaningful in the articulation of recent Catholic social thought. It is a term legitimated by the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul XXIII, Medellin, and contemporary Liberation Theology. From these sources, the term can be defined as the search for and analysis of significant historical trends which seem likely to endure, with a positive thrust toward the fuller realization of God's design for humankind.

Gaudium et Spes declares: "The Church has always ad the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel."

Of its own work the Council wrote: "

(The Council) gazes upon that world which is the theatre of human history, and carries the marks of human energies, tragedies and triumphs; that

world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker's love, fallen indeed into the bondage of sin, yet emancipated now by Christ. He was crucified and rose again to break the stranglehold of personified Evil, so that this world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment.

A two-fold consciousness underlies this new way of doing theology: a realization of the rapid changes in our universe, and a sense of decisive choice being demanded of this generation. New political, economic, scientific, cultural realities pose new questions to the gospels and to our tradition. The nuclear potential affords an apocalyptic dimension to the movements of peoples rendered desperate by unjust economic, political and social situations.

To see the world as open to the Reign of God is to believe that God reigns not in remote, unmoved splendor, but in dynamic leadership of the people of God as they proceed through travail to fuller realization of their God-given potential. It is to believe that God so loves the world as to send the divine Son Jesus to liberate persons from their addiction to evil and to provide, through his life and work, the norm for human values. It is to believe that people can be helped to discern these values, incorporate and collaborate with them through the continuing mission of God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus.

"Signs of the times" signifies the effect of the dynamic activity of God in human minds and hearts which builds a unity of consciousness among them. This consciousness overcomes "eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear" so that persons and peoples can understand the reality of who they are and what they can do. This understanding might contrast with what the dominant culture says about who they are and what they can do.

The spirituality of the "signs of the times" presupposes a world vision, an ability to see the whole human race as intimately related to God. It

relativizes cultural differences among peoples and concentrates on the unique privilege of human personhood. This is a personhood capable of creating bonds across races and nations and achieving solidarity with all humanity. Christian responsibility for the neighbor extends from the beaten woman before one's eyes, to the "disappeared" of Argentina, to the starving of Cambodia, to the unemployed and exploited of all continents. The technological revolutions of our day break down geographical barriers, and lay bare universal hurts and universal aspirations to dignity, freedom and solidarity. The oppressed are determined to be treated as human beings.

To practice the spirituality of reading the signs of the times, a new asceticism is required. Instead of remaining oblivious to the world, in a spirit of "leaving the world," this spirituality demands several qualities of disciples: alertness, awareness, discernment, envisioning, courage and action. We "read" in a two-fold way: in human experience, and in the Gospel.

With the new mindset which "signs of the times" spirituality provides, we realize how frequently the Lord enjoined us to pay attention: "Watch!" "Be alert!" "Be awake!"

It is important that we be aware of what is going on in our office or school or factory, in our town or city, in other parts of our country, and in the world. Many sources for information exist, with so much data that it can be numbing or confusing. Besides the major TV and radio networks, and prominent daily newspapers (e.g. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*), it is important for us to dip into the less-controlled sources. *The National Catholic Reporter* does valuable service, as do *Center Focus*, *Network Probe* and innumerable other publications dedicated to general and specific justice issues.

Asceticism for a "signs of the times" spirituality begins with the awareness of suffering, especially as it is described to us by those who endure it. We need to hear the oppressed give voice to their pain, and we need to share, in an actual or at least vicarious way, their anguish. With them we move on to analysis—the search for meaning underneath the plethora of information about the issues.

Analysis requires input from history, from the social and behavioral sciences, and especially from economics and political science. Pope John Paul XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* spelled out some large themes to be studied: socialization and the new consciousness of the colonized (or racially enslaved), women, and the poor. Pope John Paul considered this consciousness a grace, and positive evidence of the movement of persons and peoples toward a more wholistic humanness. Closely associated with this analysis is the human rights movement, which is controversial and being promoted in almost every country. This movement includes a demand for civic political rights (largely denied in Communist countries); basic economic rights (food, housing, clothing, denied to many even in capitalist countries); as well as civic, political rights and basic economic rights in many third-world countries.

As the lines of analysis become clear, biblical reflection on these struggles sees them in the context of God's will for human beings, brings to light the inherent dignity of the person, and reveals how contrary to this dignity present structures and myths can be.

A powerful impetus for conversion arises when we recognize the connection between personal sin and social sin. We begin to see how the structures of injustice result from the accumulation of personal sins. We become conscious of how, directly or indirectly, the decisions we make, the life-style we adopt, the way we vote, and the interests we promote may contribute either to the structures of social sin, or the availability of social grace in our world.

The reign of God, conformity of the human to the divine, already achieved in Jesus, is not yet completed in each of us, his followers. We are pilgrims on the way. To enlighten the way, the Spirit of God permits certain large trends in human decision-making to appear in history. If these trends are actively promoted, with our confidence in God's leadership, they can bring the human race, even in this life, closer to the realization of God's design. This intention will ultimately prevail in the heavenly Kingdom.



Contributors

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. (West-Midwest) is a native of Independence, Iowa. She holds a Ph.D. from the School of Religion at the University of Iowa (2001) with a dissertation titled "Active Religious Women in the Iowa Frontier: A Study in Continuity and Discontinuity." Her background is secondary education. She spent twenty-some years in administrative roles within the Sisters of Mercy, including Vice President of the Institute. In 1988, she was elected to a three-year term in the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Currently she is Vice-President of Mission Integration at Mount Aloysius College, Cresson, PA. She has lectured extensively on the topics of religious life, leadership, sponsorship, and the charism and tradition of the Sisters of Mercy. She has also contributed articles on the Sisters of Mercy for several publications. Currently she serves on the Board of Directors of the University of Detroit Mercy (Michigan), Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women (Maryland), Center of Concern (Maryland), and Call to Action (Illinois).

Bernadette Hart, R.S.M. (West Midwest) has been Director of Religious Education at St. Gabriel Parish in San Francisco, California. With a state life-time teaching credential, she has taught for over thirty years in parish schools in San Francisco and Los Angeles. She holds a reading specialist certificate from San Francisco State University and was named a Master Catechist in the Archdiocese of San Francisco. Her various roles in education have included vice-principal, retreat director, librarian, book-keeper, athletic director, coach for girls' basketball, baseball and track, and director of the Women in Medicine program. From 2001-2006 she was director of vocations for the Sisters of Mercy of Burlingame, and served on the San Francisco archdiocesan vocation board. She has staffed Busy Persons' Retreats in colleges, universities and hospitals. In 2008, she completed the three-year course for Spiritual Directors at Mercy Center, Burlingame. She holds membership in Spiritual Directors International. Presently she is serving as a Personal Contact person for the West Midwest community.

Toni Lynn Gallagher, R.S.M. (West Midwest) received her M.A. in Pastoral Theology at Notre Dame University in Belmont. In addition to life-time credentials for education and administration in California, she holds certifications in pastoral grief ministry from St. Paul, Minnesota, in religion education from Marillac College in Missouri and in HIV/AIDS education from Loyola University in Chicago, Illinois. Her experience includes administration for religion and family life in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, where she authored the religion curriculum handbook. She helped develop the first HIV policy for education of faculties, staff and students in elementary and secondary schools there. Currently she is vice-president of Fordham Group Consultants, educators who provide workshops and retreats that enhance adult understanding of the faith. She is coordinator of BRIDGES, a grief care program for youth and young adults who are dealing with death, divorce, domestic violence, serious illness, incarceration, immigration and disability. Sister has written numerous articles on HIV. She is serving as a Personal Contact person for the West Midwest community.

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M. (South Central) is currently the senior vice president for Mission Integration at Catholic Healthcare Partners, a multi-state health system. She previously served as the first president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. She earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, with a focus on ecclesiology in the work of Yves Congar. She presented the paper in this issue at a public lecture offered during the 24th annual meeting of MAST held in Philadelphia in June, 2010. She is widely published on themes of religious life and renewal.

Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M. (South Central) holds a Ph.D. in theology from Vanderbilt University and specializes in theological anthropology and feminist theory. She had over twenty years experience in higher education, including teaching at Vanderbilt, Loyola College of Maryland, Salve Regina College and Notre Dame University in Indiana, before co-founding the Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women in Baltimore, Maryland. Past Director of the Center, she presently serves as Administrator. She is a popular lecturer, most recently speaking on "From Patriarchy to Partnership" in March, 2011, at the 150th celebration of the Sisters of Mercy presence in Merion, Pennsylvania.

Susan A. Ross, Ph.D. is Professor of Theology and a Faculty Scholar at Loyola University Chicago, where she is the Chairperson of the Theology Department. She received her doctorate from the University of Chicago and has also taught at St. Norbert College and Duquesne University. She is the author of *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality and Justice* (Paulist, 2006) and *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (Continuum, 1998), numerous journal articles and book chapters, and is the co-editor of five books and journal issues. She is the recipient of a Louisville Institute Sabbatical Grant, the Book of the Year Award from the College Theology Society in 1999, and the Ann O'Hara Graff Award of the Women's Seminar of the Catholic Theological Society of America. She is currently Vice-President of the Catholic Theological Society of America (2010-11) and also serves as Vice President and member of the editorial board of *Concilium: International Theological Journal*. She is currently at work on *Seeking Light and Beauty: A Theological Anthropology* for Liturgical Press.

Deborah Watson, R.S.M. (CCASA) holds an M.A. from the School of Theology at Claremont, California. For the last 25 years she has been involved in varied forms of pastoral ministry in Peru and Argentina, primarily with women and children. A short video reflection on those years can be found on You Tube by searching for *deborahrsm* or *Peru and Argentina*. As member of the Leadership Team she helped to guide the unification of our three Institute Mercy groups in Peru. She also served on the Transition Team for the formation of the new CCASA community. Currently, teaming with Estela Gomez, R.S.M. (CCASA, Argentina), Deborah coordinates Ñande Roga Guazú, a small center for women and children in Clorinda, Formosa on the border with Paraguay.

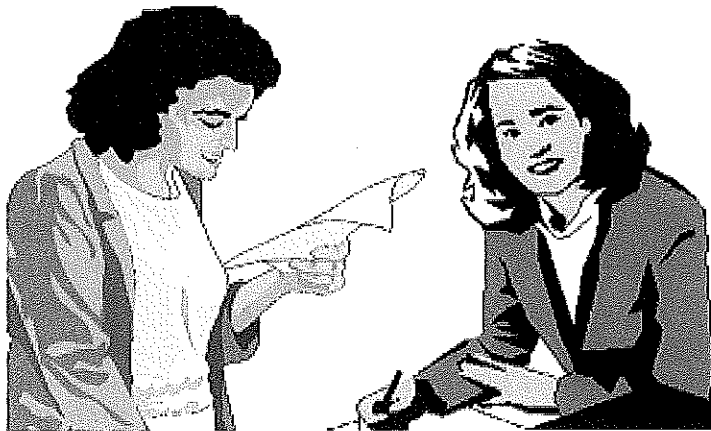
Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, F.S.P.A., Ph.D., J.C.L., was president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wisconsin. She has served a three-year term as President of LCWR from 2008-2011 and was the first FSPA Sister to do so. Prior to her election to congregational office in 2002, she served in the La Crosse, Wis. Diocese in the Office of Consecrated Life, and as Chancellor. Before she studied canon law she taught music at the high school and college levels. She holds a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a master's degree from George Peabody College, Nashville, Tenn., and a bachelor's degree from Viterbo University, La Crosse. In February, 2011, she was appointed by President Barack Obama to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Elizabeth Carroll, R.S.M. (Pittsburgh) was formerly Mother Thomas Aquinas. She held a Ph.D. from Catholic University of America and taught summers at that institution, as well as at Marquette University. Elizabeth Carroll served as President of the Pittsburgh regional community (1964-1974), as President of Mount Mercy College (now Carlow University), as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) from 1971-72, and served on the board of Women's Ordination Conference. In 1978, she urged the formation of a lay volunteer organization to extend the ministerial outreach of the Sisters of Mercy. In 1982, at age 69, she went to work in Chimbote, Peru, educating women, advocating for the rights of the poor, and doing community organizing around such concerns as a project to insure the piping of clean water into the area where she lived. She spent 16 years there. She was published in the fields of theology, women's spirituality and religious life. She died in 2005 at age 92. This essay was originally printed in a collection called *Sisters of Mercy...Seeking God*, compiled by Emily Gorge, R.S.M., in 1980.

Correction to MAST Journal Vol. 20, No. 1, 2010

Proceedings of The CMHE Third Biennial Symposium.

The article *Mercy Leadership: As Nurse, As Global Citizen*, pp. 25-36 was co-authored by Mary Hermann, R.N. Ed.D. and Elizabeth W. Black, M.S.N., R.N., C.S.N. Professor Black holds a Master's degree from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, with a concentration in women's health. She has been assistant professor in nursing at Gwynedd-Mercy College since 1974, and was Director of the ASN Program from 1996-2009. Her teaching areas include nursing research, leadership, trends and issues in nursing, and maternal-child care. She has been leading International Nursing Mission Trips since 2006.



MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

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

MAST has been meeting annually since then, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST held its annual meeting in Philadelphia, at St. Raphaela Center June 18-20, 2010. **MAST's 25th Anniversary annual meeting will be held June 16 – 18, 2011 at College of St. Mary in Omaha, Nebraska.** Members act as theologians in the Church and carry on theological work in their respective disciplines and ministries. They also seek to be of service to the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

For information on becoming a member and being added to MAST's mailing list please contact the association's Executive Director, Aline Paris, R.S.M by e-mail at aparis@csm.edu or by mail at College of Saint Mary, 7000 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE, 68016.

Dues can be paid by check, payable to MAST and sent to the association Treasurer, Marilee Howard, R.S.M at 3920 W. Land Park Drive, Sacramento, CA 95822. Inquiries regarding dues can be e-mailed to mhoward@mercywmw.org.

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

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New Subscription: *The MAST Journal* is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. To subscribe, please fill out the form below or a copy of it. Make your check payable to *The MAST Journal* and send to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST Managing Editor, Sisters of Mercy, 3920 W. Land Park Dr., Sacramento, CA 95822. Email: mhoward@mercywmw.org

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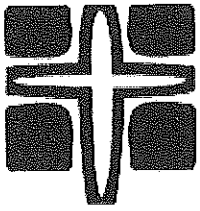
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