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Dear Sisters, and Mercy Readership,

The theme of this issue, “Women of Mercy, Women of Hope,” is inspired by the Institute’s three-stage contemplative dialogue process that engaged all members in a common discussion. The first season was devoted to “our relationship with the institutional Church”; the second, to “vibrant community;” and the third to “new membership.” The writers of these *MAST Journal* articles have all been participants in the Institute dialogue process calendared by their respective regional communities.

Where does one theme end and another begin? The points for discussion were developed by an Institute committee and disseminated on-line to each Sister for download. In years past, each Sister would have received these printed resources in a thick, 9”x12” white envelope. Today, the “packets” come via e-mail and we download resources as expression of our care for the environment. The on-line resources for Women of Mercy, Women of Hope included theological articles related to each topic, as well as reflections on each theme and its connection with previous considerations—a very organic flow. These Institute preparatory materials laid the foundation for our “contemplative dialogue.” As a follow-up to local discussions, Sisters posted on-line reports on each theme. These reports in turn were summarized by the Institute committee as part of introducing subsequent themes. The integration demonstrated that however geographically dispersed Sisters are, we now enjoy virtual as well as physical bonds that unite us across the Institute. Is this unification through cyber-connectivity a 21st century re-articulation of that classic doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ?

Mary Aquin O’Neill’s essay on “Women in the Church” was included as an on-line resource for “our relationship with the institutional Church.” Its clarity seemed worthy of retrieval from a cache of articles, to be perpetuated in print here. Her anecdotes illustrate the ironic tension over the church’s official affirmation of women’s dignity, but its simultaneous, official rules of exclusion for women’s bodies. Where do women’s bodies “belong” in church settings? Where are their bodies permitted to be? When will the presence of women’s bodies be accommodated if they protest? What is the rationale for excluding women’s bodies?

Patricia Talone’s “Staying at the Table,” treats the most fundamental test of women’s loyalty to the institutional church. When there are arguments among the family members, do you stalk off, leave the table and cut ties? Or do you find a reason to stay in place because the relationships are too precious to abandon, and tensions worth the effort to resolve? She deftly integrates Sisters’ comments from reports summarized by the committee for Women of Mercy, Women of Hope.

Barbara Moran’s book review of an anthology, *Faith and Feminism*, reminds women of faith that the inequality they face is a universal problem. Religious institutions have not resolved internal debates on the role and status of women in their congregations. No matter what continent they live on, or whether they are Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Muslim—women need to assert their dignity as persons consciously and constantly. Women of faith are related as a sisterhood struggling to hold together belief in God and belief in themselves.

Marilyn King, in “Jesus’ Vibrant Community,” set out to address the second theme in the sequence of Women of Mercy, Women of Hope. Outlining the project of Jose A. Pagola’s *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, she reviews the gospels to retrieve a portrait of Jesus before he became “Lord” in post-resurrection interpretations. How did the historical Jesus gather his disciples around him? What values did he inspire in them? How did they respond? How did they gradually grow in their convictions as messengers of God’s reign? What can we learn from this dynamic of community building?

Three essays in this issue were presentations at the 29th Annual MAST meeting in June 2015 in Philadelphia. Doris Gottemoeller put together a panel to acknowledge the Vatican’s Year of Consecrated Life—2014-2015. This panel treated themes so closely allied with “Women of Mercy, Women of Hope” that we must simply acknowledge that these talks are all of a piece with the Institute’s guidance toward our reflection on institutional church, vibrant community and new membership.

Katherine Doyle’s “Cherishing the Past” opens up a kind of head-shaking-in-wonderment set of memories. From her perspective as archivist, she reminds us that our foundresses initiated a legion of ministerial services with very few sisters and meager resources. What animating vision got them through many seasons of opposition and hardship? Katherine’s research shifts our attention from values that sustain “vibrant community” to individual Mercy women who, at a specific time and place, launched vibrant communities of service.

Doris Gottemoeller’s “To Live the Present Passionately” requires a commitment, like that of our foundresses, that is rooted in our hearts, engages our minds, and manifests itself in multiple ministries. This outreach to those in need is shared with our sisters in community and an ever-widening circle of colleagues. Our passionate dedication endures through any challenge—including the five-year ordeal of the Vatican’s visitation of U.S. women religious, and investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Doris’ essay elides the themes of institutional church and vibrant community.

Rayleen Giannotti, speaking from her years as novitiate director, writes “To Embrace the Future with Hope” using the image of “bridge” to coax our imagination into willingness to take next steps—in both our personal lives and in our Mercy Institute. Like a gifted motivational speaker, she maintains the attention of readers through her choiceful quotes from poets, theologians, congregational leaders, and sociologists—a creative integration.

We hope readers will find these essays timely—and an offering that honors, supplements and responds to the Institute’s Women of Mercy, Women of Hope congregation-wide contemplative dialogue process.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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

Women in the Church: From Patriarchy to Partnership

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

150th Anniversary Celebration, Merion, PA, March 19, 2011

Before I begin, let me extend my affectionate congratulations to all in the Merion Mercy circle on the life and service given generously over 150 years. It is only right that we should consider the theme of women in the Church in this context, for the Merion Sisters of Mercy have witnessed to the fidelity, the courage, and the selfless devotion of women in the Church, of the Church, and for the Church.

I will begin this afternoon with three stories that illustrate the first part of the title: patriarchy. To these accounts, I will contrast the example of Jesus and the early theology of Church—evidence for a genuine comfort with partnership. This will lead naturally into the question, “what happened?” From there, I will recount a fourth story that I believe points us in the right direction for restoring the vision and the practice of partnership, which is what I believe we should be striving for in the Church.

My brush will necessarily be broad and I ask your indulgence. You have heard that, for the last 18 years, I have worked at a theological center for women. I assure you, after listening to women of the Church there, I can multiply these stories. My point is that the tales told here are illustrative of a continuing form of social evil that prevents the Church from being all that she can be. While my focus this afternoon will be on the Catholic Church, I by no means think that other Christian communions have eradicated this social evil of patriarchy, even if they are currently ordaining women.

Narratives of Patriarchy

I heard the first story from an Italian sister I came to know and love while I was working in Jerusalem

in the 1980's. Her religious name was Sister Marianora. In 1958, she founded the first Christian university on the continent of Africa in Asmara, Ethiopia (now Eritrea). Because she was a personal friend of Pope Paul VI, her university was given what is known as pontifical status and Sister Marianora was given the title, “rector,” as was usual in pontifical institutions. Given that special relationship between Holy Family University (as it was called) and the Holy Father, the university would naturally appear in the *Annuario Pontificio*, the annual listing of institutions related to the Vatican. When one of the good monsignori was editing the *Annuario*, he discovered—to his horror—that a woman was rector of a pontifical institution. As Sister Marianora told me the story, the monsignor said, “This cannot be.”

Women cannot be recognized as having real authority in this Church. It would cause the Church to lose face in a world where men rule.

So I asked her, “Sister Marianora, what happened.” With an angelic smile, she told me how they solved it. Her baptismal name, under which she was listed, was Eleonora. The good monsignor simply took a pen or a quill or something and changed it to Eleonoro.

Mind you, the reality did not change—at least in one sense. Sister Marianora still did all the work of rector. Only the appearance—and, of course the historical record—changed. This story came to me seven centuries after the name of Junia the apostle was changed to Junio for, I suspect, similar reasons. Let me speculate on a few. Women cannot be recognized as having real authority in this Church. It would cause the Church to lose face in a world where men rule. It might eventually put men under the authority of a woman, which would violate the theology of headship that has become sacrosanct in some circles. Since all the other rectors are ordained men, naming a woman

rector might lead to the expectation that women can be ordained or to the realization that you don't have to be ordained to run a pontifical university. If nothing were done to prevent it, the whole system would eventually be challenged or collapse.

The second story takes place only a few years later, at the Second Vatican Council. Women were not included among the observers first invited to attend the Second Vatican Council. While male observers from other Christian Churches and/or communions were included from the beginning, it was not until the third session that Catholic women auditors were admitted and not until the end of the fourth session that Protestant women were present in their own right. (They had previously been there as wives of male observers.)¹

Pope Paul VI was the one who broke with tradition and included twenty-three women as officially invited auditors for the first time in history. Still, the women were shut out from the place where the real work was being done. It was the coffee bar that became the greatest informal power broker at the Council. Pope John had warned the curia that there had to be a place for the Fathers to have their cigars and cigarettes; otherwise, he said, the aula would be filled with smoke. A coffee shop was established and, in short order, some clever wag named it "Bar Jonah." But when a woman, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, was led to

Bar Jonah and introduced to several bishops, once again there was consternation: they might as well have said, "This cannot be." The next day a separate coffee bar was set up for the female auditors behind the door behind the main altar to the right end of the basilica. Sister Mary Luke said, "There we could munch our Italian cookie and have our cup of coffee in obscurity behind the red velvet curtains. That gives you a good picture of what was happening and how unworthy it was."²

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Not to be outdone, the women called their area "Bar-None." Carmel McEnroy, the Sister of Mercy who wrote the book on the women of Vatican II, comments that bishops who tolerated women's presence in the formal context of the aula found it too close for comfort to be rubbing shoulders with them over coffee and relating to them as peers. "The greatest barrier, she writes, "was and continues to be male-female relations, rather than the clergy-laity divide." The exclusion of women from the coffee bars meant that they could not influence the bishops in the ways that male Protestant observers did throughout the time that the Council was in session. In my estimation, a direct result of this segregation of the sexes in the place where friendships were formed and burning issues discussed was that the bishops developed a sensitivity to ecumenical concerns while the concerns of women got no hearing. In fact, there

is evidence that proposals that would advance women in the Church, such as the revival of deaconesses, were met with chauvinistic scorn.³

I am very aware of the clerical sensitivity to the "separated brothers" that coexists with a lack of same where faithful women of the Church are concerned. This leads me to my third story. For six years I served on a bi-lateral dialogue with the Southern Baptists. For the first three years, I was the only woman among a dozen men, all of them ordained: bishop, priest, or minister. In the second round, two more women were added: Eljee Bentley of the Southern Baptists and Rita Forbes, Maryknoll sister. During this second round, some of the Southern Baptist men asked if we could meet at Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Monastery in Conyers, Georgia, for they were interested in Trappist life. Warned that we women would not be allowed to stay overnight at the monastery, we graciously agreed to stay elsewhere on this occasion. Imagine our

surprise, then, at what happened when we went into the chapel for Mass. I was the first in and was kneeling in prayer when a habited monk came along and insisted that he escort me out of the chapel. He told me that women were not allowed in the body of the Church; we must sit in what was a sort of balcony at the back of the chapel. Eljee got and accepted the same treatment. Rita was so angry that she went back to her room and skipped Mass. There I was, born and baptized into the Catholic Church, a vowed woman religious in that same Church, looking down to see Southern Baptist men, once considered heretics, being warmly welcomed into the sacred space while I was relegated to the rafters.

Still, I was unprepared for what happened next. When I went down for communion, I found that the Eucharist was to be handed to me across a closed half door, making me feel like one of the animals.

Now I'm happy to tell you that the entire group staged a protest the next day: all of us sat in the balcony. As a result, the monks relaxed their rule while we were there and allowed women into the chapel. But this happened in the early 1980's, long after Vatican II. And I wager that the attitudes that shaped this practice have by no means disappeared.

The lethal mixture of patriarchy in the culture and the practice of celibacy has resulted in fear and loathing of the female body on the part of many who represent the Church. In this context, difference in embodiment becomes more important than unity in belief. The stories of the coffee bars and the exclusion from the chapel at Conyers make that clear. As I review the history of Christianity, it is apparent that the glorious teachings about the body, based on

belief in Creation, the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection, have not served to eradicate negative attitudes toward the bodies of women.

Jesus and the Early Theology of Church

For decades now, women scripture scholars (as well as some men) have been painting a picture of Jesus as a man who kept company with women and

was comfortable in their homes, allowing them to provide for him from their means, material and otherwise. Think of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. Here was a teacher who could be challenged by women. Think of the wedding feast of Cana and of the unnamed woman at the well. Here was a healer who could be urged beyond his own perceived boundaries by their needs and their arguments. Think of the feisty Syro-Phoenician mother, desperate to obtain a cure for her daughter, no matter how Jesus

tried to say she was outside the bounds of his care. Here was one who entrusted the news of the resurrection to women, even though they were not accepted as witnesses in the culture of the time. Think of Mary Magdalene.

Dorothy Sayers has a grand quote about him.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and

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praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.

But we might easily deduce it from His contemporaries and from His prophets before Him, and from His Church to this day.⁴

It seems that, for a time, the example and the revelation of Jesus carried over. We know there were women leaders of house churches, women missionaries, women who funded the new movement in ways similar to those who had provided for Jesus in his time. The great Dorothy Irvin has mounted evidence for deaconesses, women priests and even women bishops, though such evidence has yet to be accepted by those who write the official histories.

For me, one of the most exciting pieces of recent scholarship comes from Tatha Wiley, who has offered a very convincing interpretation of St. Paul’s theology of church by drawing on his letter to the Galatians. She argues that, for Paul, baptism was important not only because it incorporated people into the body of Christ, but also because, inasmuch as both sexes received the same initiation rite, there was no differentiation between women and men in terms of their participation in the Christian assembly. Unlike the situation in Jewish communities, wherein only men were circumcised and only the circumcised were considered true and complete Israelites—making women always and everywhere second-class citizens—the new religious assembly founded by Paul recognized no such distinction. As Tatha Wiley

writes, “The common ritual of baptism eliminated male privilege,” making gender equality “a primary feature of the experience of redemption.”⁵ May I repeat those glorious words? Gender equality is—or should be—a primary feature of the experience of redemption.

This is why Paul fought so hard against the Jewish followers of Jesus who wanted to bring the practice of circumcision to the Galatian community—or should I say, to the men in the community. If circumcision replaced or even accompanied baptism, the old hierarchy would be restored with men on top once more. That adult males would even consider undergoing circumcision is an index of how important it was to keep the “old order.” Scholar Hans Dieter Betz explains by saying that extending equality to women “was as difficult at that time as it is at present.”⁶

Paul’s anger at the Galatians and the defense of his gospel, then, was also a defense of the rights of women to full belonging, participation, and leadership in the religious assembly. In the words of Tatha Wiley: “To be precise, then, Paul’s defense was of the equality of Gentile women qua Gentile women in the Galatian assembly.”⁷ In another of those marvelous surprises that scripture scholarship gives us from time to time, Paul’s working out of the revelation given to him becomes the foundation for a “new creation,” a new social order in which women and men share equally in the gifts and the life of the spirit of God. Remember, it was Paul who wrote, in the letter to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27-29).

What Happened?

Already in the pages of the New Testament, we see erosion of the open and accepting attitude Jesus showed toward women, and of the radical equality

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between women and men in the Church espoused by Paul. Gradually, not only the old hierarchy, but even some of the old purity notions reasserted themselves. As Christianity met Greek civilization, disdain for the bodies of women began to receive philosophical underpinnings. Women, being closer to nature due to menstruation and childbirth, were considered inferior on a scale that considered the soul superior to the body. There were times when men raised the question, in all seriousness, about whether or not women are human.

With the spread of Christianity, some things got better for women, especially with regard to marriage. At the same time, however, there was another development that served to underscore the disdain with which the bodies of women were held. As devotion to Mary grew, celibate men praised her at the expense of all other women, insisting that she was an exception to the norms of womanhood rather than an exemplar. I would be embarrassed to read to you some of the things written about intercourse and childbirth in arguments crafted to show why Jesus had to be born of a virgin. As a result, virginity was exalted over marriage, nuns over wives and mothers, and, as Elizabeth Johnson has written, the non-use of sexuality over a healthy, active sexual life: these are problems that persist to our day.

Until very recently, the standard teaching was that a woman's body is inferior (if not defective), defiling, subject to regular periods of uncleanness that render this body unacceptable to enter sacred spaces or to touch sacred things. We know, for instance, that up until the second part of the 20th century, women were forbidden to enter the sanctuary while the sacred mysteries were going on, forbidden the Eucharist while menstruating; forbidden, by the way, to read the gospels at liturgy if menstruating—and this as late as 1972 in the United

States. Women were also kept from the sacraments after childbirth, until such time as a "purification" could be performed. In these ways Christians were socialized to regard the most natural functions of a woman's body as unholy.

I do not deny that individual women, moved by the resoundingly positive things that Christianity has taught about the human body as such, applied these notions to ourselves. That our bodies, too, are temples of the Holy Spirit, that we are created little less than the angels, that we are to glorify God in our bodies, that our bodies will rise—these saving images provided a counter force to the death-dealing image of woman's body as a curse to herself and others. But the general rule of Christian teaching has been as follows: positive valuation of the body in general and of the male body, taken to be the paradigm for the human body; devaluation of the woman's body, conveyed through silence, exclusion from or restricted access to the things considered holy; warnings about dress, comportment, language;

sometimes even expressions of disgust and revulsion at the very way a woman is created. Above all, there must be no association of women with the divine.

I am pleased to say that, except for strict separation of woman from divinity, such things are no longer being taught, at least in official teachings such as the Catechism. It is also true that most of the practices that reinforced the teachings have been done away

with. We now have altar girls, women extraordinary ministers of the Eucharistic, women lectors, etc., as well as women who arrange the flowers and clean the sanctuary. But the attitudes endure. It is still the case that no woman can hold an authority comparable to that which men can hold; that bishops and priests often prefer the company of the "separated brothers" to mixing with faithful women of the Church; that

This theologically justified subordination of women and all that we do is a source of continuing spiritual suffering. To face it will require no less than the discovery of the radical connection between God and women—a connection denied to us for centuries.

monks and other male religious resent the presence of women in their preserves. Recent lectionary translations insist on exclusively male language even where that is not the case in the original text. Here we have another way of keeping women out of the liturgy. The insistence on male imagery for God is especially tell-tale. I remind you of the devastatingly astute insight of Mary Daly: "If God is male, the male is God."

Is it any wonder that thinking women of the Church become soul sick when faced with the reality of our continuing second class status in the Church that we love and believe in, but know to fall far short of its fullness where we are concerned? This theologically justified subordination of women and all that we do is a source of continuing spiritual suffering. To face it will require no less than the discovery of the radical connection between God and women—a connection denied to us for centuries.

Beverley Lanzetta has described what many of us are experiencing in her book, *Radical Wisdom, A Feminist Mystical Theology*.

...many women have reached the limit of their respective religious tradition, realizing that they cannot go forward without a radical accommodation of their truth. Further, women are no longer content to live a lie or continue to deny that no religion in recorded history has been truly and completely open to and inclusive of women. Exhausted by making accommodations for the failings of their religion, women look for new ways to interpret, understand and reconstruct it. It is here that the intensity of impasse often grips a woman's spirit.⁸

For a long time, it was possible for women to avoid accommodating our truth by preserving a wisdom tradition in the private sphere, while avoiding an open clash with official Church leaders. This wisdom tradition was infused with the knowledge that comes from hands-on service of those who are young, weak, alienated, poor, or otherwise marginalized. As women have become dissatisfied with this private/public dichotomy, and as we have

moved into public leadership positions, it has become difficult to avoid such clashes. Recent events bear testimony to this: the stand of the Erie Benedictines regarding Joan Chittister's talk in Dublin; the Visitation of Apostolic Women Religious in the United States, the health care bill, the situation at St. Joseph's hospital in Phoenix—to name a few. It is important in this context to keep in mind what Beverley Lanzetta wrote. It is our truth that we are trying to protect, a truth that the Church needs and that we want the Church at large to receive.

The Condition for Partnership

It is time for my final narrative, which concerns the famous Jungian analyst, Marion Woodman and her husband, Ross. In the course of a filmed interview, they recount an incident that occurred in their married life.⁹ Marion was spending a lot of time in Zurich, pursuing her training in Jungian analysis. On one of her return trips to their home, she was enjoying an evening with her husband when Ross suddenly asked her if she would repeat her vows. Sensing something was up; Marion asked Ross what he would want her to say. He said that he wanted her to say "love, honor, and obey." "And what would obey mean?" she asked. Ross replied, "It would mean that if, for the sake of our marriage, I asked you to stop going to Zurich because the changes in you are threatening to me, you would do it." After a long and thoughtful pause, Marion said one word: "no."

It was an unexpected and electrifying moment for Ross, as he himself admits. Marion says that she could not have answered otherwise without sacrificing herself, her truth. Ross says something equally profound: that was the moment, he recalls, when he began to make a distinction between patriarchy and masculinity. Patriarchy determines that the woman will always submit to the man's will; that the man's judgment will prevail, and the woman's be subordinate. Patriarchy is about power over. Masculinity is about power with. The masculine, like the feminine, is a created energy that is necessary to human life and community. Patriarchy distorts it, depriving human life and community of

what Marion calls “the heart energy” of the feminine.

We who are women in the Church have been socialized to believe that our role is to say yes, no matter the cost. Sister Marianora did nothing to contest the change of name that robbed her of her place in history. The women of Vatican II meekly went to Bar None and accepted their lot. Eljee Bentley and I did not make a scene in the monastery chapel. We are all familiar with the conditioning that makes it quasi-automatic to say “yes,” even to our own oppression.

Marion and Ross Woodman’s story, on the other hand, teaches us why it is so important for women of the Church to be able to say “no.” It is important, not only for the women of the Church, but for the men as well. Patriarchy deforms each sex as well as the relationship between them. It is good for no one, really, no matter how many seeming privileges it brings in its wake. For women, the move away from patriarchy and into partnership, however, requires a good measure of self-confidence, self-direction, and self-risk. This is precisely what we intended when founding a theological center for women. We wanted to establish a place where women could nurture trust in our own experience, confidence in our own insights, courage to risk our own interpretations of the faith received and handed on. We wanted to give women access to the best of the Catholic Christian tradition under the tutelage of credentialed guides, so that no one could challenge our right to be part of shaping a different future.

The African American poet and essayist, Audre Lorde has an important analysis of what keeps women down:

We have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, and that is the way we learn to testify against ourselves, against our feelings. The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques.

What you do is to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out.¹⁰

It seems to me that this quote points to an important dimension of what has been happening in our Church over this past year. Growing numbers of individual women and groups of women have ceased suspecting what is deepest in ourselves. The clear expectation on the part of the patriarchy, in my opinion, was that apostolic women religious would cave in on all the changes we had initiated in our lives, once the Vatican announced an Apostolic Visitation. Instead, leaders connected, communicated, carried on their own discernments, consulted their members, and—in many cases—did not entirely comply with the demands of the Visitation. A similar process was used regarding whether or not to support the proposed health care bill. Now leaders are engaged in deciding how to respond to Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted’s decision to declare St. Joseph’s Hospital in Phoenix no longer a Catholic institution.

While we still shy away from articulating a “no” that is as clear as that of Marion Woodman, we are not automatically saying “yes” when told to think or do something that goes against what is deepest in us. And that is a great step toward the possibility of partnership. Partnership entails a give and take, a mutuality of relationship in which no one person can nullify the insights and the desires of the other. We cannot accomplish this momentous change without a corresponding change in the men of the Church, but we must do what we can to create the conditions of possibility. As Joan Chittister has said, “Patriarchy gives total power to single figures, always male. Feminism says: No! That leaves out the gifts of half the population, and that’s wrong.”¹¹

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Conclusion

I have argued, on the basis of narratives and analysis, that patriarchal structures and attitudes keep the Church from realizing the promise of the new creation wrought in Christ and taught by Paul. I have also shown that moving from patriarchy—with which we have been complicit—to partnership—which we should desire—will require the risk of saying “no” at times. For this resistance to be an act of courage the object of our desire must be worth the risk; otherwise, it is foolishness. I have said that what is at stake is our own truth, which I think worth all the

daring we can muster. I am not naïve about the possible consequences of what I am encouraging. Yet, I take heart from the words of an earlier scholar, Marie Joseph LaGrange. He had written an article that his publisher warned him would get him punished. After a sleepless night, Father LaGrange wrote back, telling him to go ahead with the publication. LaGrange penned these words in his journal: “The Church is so great that she deserves our best, even when we know she will punish us for it.”¹² I hope to be in his company. Thank you. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Carmel McEnroy, *Guest in Their Own House*. Crossroad, 1996:3.

² Ibid.: 102.

³ See Damian Barry Smyth, “The Last Word: Fitting Service,” *Commonweal* (January 28, 2011).

⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* Eerdmans, 1971:68-69.

⁵ Tatha Wiley, *Paul and the Gentile Women, Reframing Galatians*. Continuum, 2005:111-112.

⁶ Ibid., citing Betz: 113.

⁷ Ibid.:102.

⁸ Beverley J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*:76.

⁹ Marion Woodman, *Dancing in the Flames*. A film by Adam Greydon Reid, 2009.

¹⁰ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. Crossing, 1984:102.

¹¹ Maureen Fiedler, *Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling, Women Religious Leaders in Their Own Words*:110.

¹² I heard this story in Jerusalem from Ben Viviano, O.P., who had been reading the journal of LaGrange.

Board Members

The **Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology** publishes THE MAST JOURNAL, begun in 1991, three times a year.

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Staying at the Table: Working Towards Being Church

Patricia Talone, R.S.M.

Ours was a large and boisterous family. While evening meals were regular, nourishing and delicious, they were not always marked by a spirit of serenity. One evening stands out in my mind because those of us at the far end of the dinner table from my parents had been engaging in some under-the-table kicks accompanied by snide remarks. Possessing an adolescent's sensitivity and a red-headed temper, I abruptly pushed my chair back from the table and stood up to make a dramatic exit. My father, a characteristically calm and quiet man, quickly said "Patricia!" When I turned to look at him, he captured my eyes with his unruffled gaze and said "Sit down!" Dad almost never spoke in the imperative mood, so I sat. I'm sure I pouted. After dinner I crept down to the basement to my father's inner sanctum, his workshop. The air was full of the smell of woodchips and wax, and music was quietly playing on his broadband radio. This was where I could talk to him, so I ventured, "Why did you make me sit down tonight? You don't know what they were doing!" He looked up from his meticulous sanding and said to me, "Patricia, we are a family. We don't walk away from those we love. We stay at the table."

Over the past few years, as religious congregations have experienced the Apostolic Visitation and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) endured both ecclesial and public scrutiny, that scene and my Father's words have come back to me many times. They echoed again when considering Sharon Holland, I.H.M.'s presidential address to the 2015 Assembly of LCWR. Sharon, a canon lawyer with years of experience at the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life

and Societies of Apostolic Life, reflected upon LCWR's recent history, noting, "We have experienced the positive value of staying at the table."¹

Remain at the Table

Staying at the table was a theme expressed in the Institute's synthesis report based on feedback from Sisters of Mercy conversation groups conducted throughout the Institute in 2012-2013. It was an iterative process, theological reflection built upon personal and communal experience and shared reflection in articulating ways that Sisters of Mercy can move forward while giving witness to our faith and our vibrant community life.

Staying at the table means remaining with one another, looking at and hearing one another. It demands that we keep the conversation going. Respect for the Church, for the Institute of Mercy and personal dignity all demand that we commit ourselves to a "relationship of partnership," recognizing that we are a vital part of a world church. As women whose lives and ministry have been with and for the people of God,

sisters understand that our consecration and our experience demand that we speak the truth in love and fidelity. Sisters expressed a resolve to work within the Church to affect change, issuing a caveat that the only thing that might hinder that resolve would be a challenge to our deeply-rooted values.

While clearly stating a commitment to remain vital members of the Church community, sisters were not unrealistic about the challenges they might face in their parishes, dioceses and ministries. Many cited the example of LCWR's actions over the past few years, which offers a valuable model for us all. LCWR's actions provide a paradigm of a respectful,

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open, contemplative stance toward challenges – even challenges from the Church we love. LCWR modeled the truth that silence can and often does indicate strength and resolve.

Janet Mock, CSJ, out-going executive director of LCWR, spoke about both the active and passive elements of LCWR's response to God's call. Noting that "passivity is not a word we women religious in general like, much less care to emulate," Janet described LCWR's discernment and ability to know when to be active and when to remain quiet in their dialogue process. Further reiterating the "staying at the table" theme, she noted, "There were people around the table who could hear one another, name the areas of disagreement and ask for clarification. That humility and openness and willingness to learn were movements within the activity of God and indispensable to the whole process."²

Apostolic Mission

Struggles within a family, a community or a church demand analysis and attention, yet they can profoundly sap the strength and determination of those engaged in the struggle. However, Sisters of

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Mercy for the most part keep their eyes fixed upon their initial call. Many of the reports submitted to the Institute expressed a determination to remain focused on our mission. Sisters noted that "the gospel call remains, the faithful response of mercy remains." While acknowledging the real tension and suffering

with the institutional Church, sisters perceived that the ministry of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are more needed now than ever in our troubled world. Replies in this area seemed to call each of us to keep our eyes fixed upon the purpose for which we answered the call to mercy.

Mercy Experience Not Homogenous

Not surprisingly, conversation groups reported that even within self-selected circles, the experiences of individuals varied greatly depending upon variables that included (but were not limited to) age, locale, diocese, education, culture or ministry. Rather than viewing this diversity as an obstacle or chasm, reporters believed that it instead offers an opportunity to truly dialogue with each other in community. Thus, there is a continual calling of individuals toward a deeper understanding of one another's varied experience and perspectives.

While thinking among members of the Institute is not homogenous, it is quite clear that members desire to be responsive to and supportive of their sisters and associates who face difficult challenges within the Institutional Church. Moreover, Sisters of Mercy express a resolution to "create a space where all are welcome, accepted and respected." This sense of inclusiveness manifests itself worldwide in the lives of Sisters of Mercy. Some noted that its origins arise not only from our shared charism of mercy but likewise from the communal experience of ministering with vulnerable people, especially women and children.

Reports also highlighted a phenomenon that is relatively new among religious congregations of women, observing that today many sisters work outside of "official ecclesial organizations." The challenge that this reality presents to us is two-fold. First, it appears that because of this reality, Sisters of Mercy participate less and less in parish and diocesan structures. With this reality, we, as a congregation can then lose influence and power to give voice to our shared commitments, and thus to effect changes within the Church we love and serve. Additionally, it can pose a danger for us in that we and/or those with

whom we serve might begin to think of mercy as an alternative faith or Church.

Serious Questions Remain

Dialogue about the vital topic of the relationship between the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy and the Roman Catholic Church demands far more time, attention, and listening than the carefully prepared sessions held in 2013 were able to provide (or that this article can cover). The work continues at many levels in each of our lives. Many respondents noted that far more questions than answers remain for us to ponder together. Some remarked that the seriousness of the topic requires ongoing contemplative prayer and dialogue. Others requested that the Institute develop structures through which we might address our ecclesial concerns. Many expressed a desire that we, as mercy, risk being a “prophetic voice for justice and mercy” particularly for the equality of women in the Church. Still others called for members to revitalize the early Christian notion of “house churches” to include broad faith-sharing, education and dialog both within and beyond the Institute, while some issued a clarion call for members to gird ourselves in preparation for hard choices we may be called to make around conflicts in the Church.

Contemporary Asceticism – Living with the Dichotomies

One group asked how we can “rock the boat” regarding the Institutional Church without “falling into the water?” Like the Homeric myth of attempting to sail between Scylla and Charybdis,³ contemporary religious women sometimes feel as if they are “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” Like Homer’s hero, Ulysses, what remains for us is to keep our eyes fixed upon our goal. Tennyson’s poem

depicts Ulysses challenging and motivating his friends, reminding them that they are “one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will.”⁴ He could have been speaking to us as well.

Some early Sisters of Mercy, reflecting the asceticism of their times and locales, intentionally sought out hardships or penances to purify their souls, seeking conversion and deep holiness. It seems that the deepest asceticism of the modern day is for each of us to live with the dichotomies we face

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within ourselves, within the Institute and within the Church. It takes an iron will and a deep asceticism to remain in dialogue and stay at the table. This is not to deny the reality of the pain and suffering that many of us have and do experience. How, then, does one remain faithful to a Church that may also have been a source of anguish? The answer to the question lies in the heart of each believer. But it might be helpful to

see how others have been able to sustain such challenges.

Yves Congar, Dominican theologian and ecumenist, faithfully served the Church through more than ten years of Vatican censure. His writings were restricted, he could not teach publicly, and he was banished from France. He was not reinstated to his native land until the pontificate of John XXIII. In 1994, shortly before Congar died, John Paul II named him a Cardinal. In his later years, Congar credited the Church with sustaining him throughout his tribulations, stating, “The Church has been a ... peaceable place for my faith and my prayer. And why not? ...Assuredly, there is a lot of narrow-mindedness and immaturity, many botched works in the Church ... But all that, as heavy a burden as it may be for us to bear, is of no importance when it is balanced against what I can find and actually do find

in the Church. The Church has been, and is, the hearth of my soul; the mother of my spiritual being. She offers me the possibility of living with the saints: and when did she ever prevent me from living a Christian life?"⁵

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., echoed similar sentiments when asked after a Fordham lecture why she stays in the Church. Smiling wryly and pausing before answering the query, Elizabeth said, "Deep down, I am in love with this community ...I believe the truth of the Gospel, it has caught my heart ..."⁶

Both of these giants of the 20th and 21st Century use deeply familial terms. "The hearth of my soul. "The mother of my spiritual being." "It has caught my heart." For me they echo my father's words of so long ago. "We are family; we stay at the table." ♦

Endnotes

¹ Sharon Holland, IHM. "LCWR Presidential Address: Attitudes of Heart and Mind." p.5. At lcwr.org

² Janet Mock, CSJ. "Surprised by Joy: Springs from the Great Deep Illuminating Religious Life." p.3. At lcwr.org.

³ Scylla and Charybdis were mythical sea monsters lying in wait for ships trying to traverse between Sicily and mainland Italy.

⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson. "Ulysses," in *Tennyson*, A. T. & Day, A. (1991): 66-70.

⁵ Yves Congar. *Blessed is the Peace of My Church*. Trans. Salvator Attanasio (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1973): 102-3.

⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ. "The Truth About Mary Magdalen Could Open Doors for Women in the Church." Fordham University, April 14, 2015. Available on YouTube.

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** will hold its next **Annual Meeting at St. Raphaela Center, Haverford, PA, June 17-20, 2016**. 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 of the Americas by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

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

Dues can be paid by check, payable to **MAST** and sent to association Treasurer, Marilyn King, R.S.M., The Laura, 1995 Sam Browning Road, Lebanon, KY, 40033-9162. E-mail mheleneking@windstream.net.

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, over the years, taken on responsibility 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.



Jesus' Vibrant Community

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

Introduction

During these post-Chapter years when we have been called to reflect on and share with each other the process of Women of Mercy/Women of Hope and, in particular, when we were engaged in Part II, "Vibrant Community Life", I read an engaging book by Jose A. Pagola entitled *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*, (Convivium Press: 2009).

The goal of this author is to paint a comprehensive picture of Jesus of Nazareth, using available historical sources. With remarkable scholarship he sifts through the post-resurrection accounts of the life of Jesus, both within the New Testament and from other records of the early Christian era. In a variation of the Quest for the Historical Jesus studies, he peels away the theological overlay from these post-resurrection narratives and he pursues the questions: What was Jesus like before the resurrection? How was he understood by the people of his time? What was his world like? What was he looking for? How did he communicate with others in an age when the spoken word and gesture were the only means of communication for the majority of people?

This article is an outcome of my reading this book with the question: How did Jesus live community? Pagola often uses the category "family" in his description of the historical Jesus. He traces the way Jesus lived in binding relationships with others, family and beyond. He notes the kind of relationships he sought out later in his life were not from people who were of the same ilk as he, but in whom he found a commonality of mind and heart. With this understanding of family, I read this book substituting the word

"community" for Pagola's word "family." What follows are my insights from this reading.

Jesus' Family Life in Nazareth

Jesus was born into a family, unique yes, but a family. He was born into a small rural village in Nazareth, population 200-400. It was so small that in a list of populated places in Galilee Nazareth was not even listed in the 45 towns named! However, its smallness made the extended family the center of life. From this extended family that lived so close to one another, came one's identity. Because Jerusalem was some distance away, the faith life of these families was nourished not by temple worship, but in the homes, especially on the Sabbath. This was a family day without many of the restrictions placed on it by the Scribes in Jerusalem. Nearly all the village--men, women and children--attended the village synagogue

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on that holy day to hear the Word of God read and listen to reflections given on those passages. Each day began and ended with a confession of faith in God, "creator of the world and savior of Israel." The day was punctuated with blessings for everyday gifts. This is how Jesus learned to pray.

For the first thirty years of his life he lived in this community where everyone knew everyone else (or thought they did!), where groups of three or four families lived in homes around a patio in which there was a common stove, shared tools, a place to play for the children and for adults to chat in the evenings. Weddings and religious festivals lightened up the ordinariness of life with days of eating, drinking, dancing and singing. Other than this, we know very little of events in Jesus' life

during this period, probably because not much happened!

Jesus Leaves His Family

When Jesus was about 30 years old (a mature man in a society when the average life expectancy was around that age), Jesus left his home. This was a decision very unusual in his culture, as was his celibate status. So contrary to custom was this action that his family thought he had lost his mind. The only possible reason for this choice they could think of was that he was looking for another family, for to live alone was unimaginable.

What was Jesus looking for? Not to live alone as a hermit (he was in the desert only 40 days), nor membership in an enclosed community like Qumran. He found himself drawn to the growing number of followers of his cousin, John the Baptizer. After hearing him preach about a renewed people of God, Jesus was baptized by John and joined his group of disciples. There he met some men of like mind: Andrew, Simon, and Philip. Was this his new family?

A New Family

After the death of John the Baptizer Jesus' vision of family sharpened. His focus switched from renewing the people of God through baptism for the forgiveness of sins to a proclamation of new life for all in what he called "the reign of God." He was convinced this was the new family/community he was looking for and was convinced he was called to preach this message.

With this felt call Jesus moved out to the towns and villages to tell others about the Reign of God. He invited others to "change their vision" (*metanoia*) from a life circumscribed by the Law to a life bound only by the loving mercy of God. Some he called to leave their homes, just as he did, to walk the roads along with him. Strikingly he begins this life ministry

in the small towns by the lakeshore of the Sea of Galilee where the marginalized Jews lived, those who were ruled from distant Rome and the priestly elite of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus taught them that God is offering now a full life for everyone, not just the select few. The reign of God is here. God's reign, God's intention for the life of everyone is to be found in the here and now. It is the ultimate good news.

Jesus taught that this new life in God is relational. God is loving and merciful. All people are invited to share in that love. That love is especially directed to the poor and troubled and disenfranchised. So much so that they were to be the first called to experience the loving embrace of God's family. To visibilize this call to participation in the new family when Jesus cured the sick he not only healed them of their physical maladies, but, by so doing enabled them to return to the communities from whom they

had been ostracized because of their supposed "uncleanness." Both by his example and his words he taught that the love of God they have been given is so deep that it enables them to love even their enemies.

The "family circle" of Jesus was quite diverse: some (the "Twelve") who literally left their homes and family and lived and traveled with Jesus; some who supported the disciples with hospitality in their homes; some just followed him for a while to listen to his teaching and then returned to their homes, touched deeply by his words and example. The biggest shock was that Jesus welcomed women into his intimates.

The family Jesus grew up in was, according to the custom and law of the day, patriarchal. However, Jesus called both women and men to be his sisters and brothers in the new family of God. In fact, he showed special honor to women whom he defended against discrimination. In a debate that occurred among his disciples about who was the greatest, Jesus

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countered by saying the greatest is the one who is dependent on their forgiveness of others. How serves. He later commends a woman who washes his feet as one who gives such an example.

From what can be gleaned from both biblical and non-biblical writings, the Twelve were of quite different temperaments, social status, and marriage situations. It is not unimaginable that there were times when living together was quite challenging. It is not too much of a stretch that Jesus' new all-encompassing commandment, to love one another as he loves us, was formulated in the daily company of these twelve men. Only their belief that what Jesus preached about the Reign of God—that the love and mercy of God was being offered here and now—was the glue that could hold them together, even beyond denials and betrayals.

Life in community is a challenge, without a doubt. But Jesus repeatedly drew a picture of community in the Reign of God as one filled with joy, the joy of the shepherd with his lost sheep, the joy of the woman who found her lost coin, the joy of the father embracing his returned son. Jesus gathers with his community around the festal tables of many of his followers and around the Paschal Meal table with his Twelve (though it is very possible women were there, too).

Interwoven with and underlying all the activities of Jesus' new family was rootedness in the God who was at the center of their lives. Just as Jesus grew up with the practice of daily prayer in his Jewish family, it is supposed that morning and evening prayer was part of the routine of his new family. But there was something special about his relationship with God that his followers picked up. How could they learn about that relationship? "Lord, teach us," they asked. In his reply Jesus taught them to call on God as their father, to pray that his reign be realized, to recognize their dependence on God for their lives, to admit their need for forgiveness and to realize God's forgiveness

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many times did they repeat that prayer!

The disciples of Jesus also noticed how he would periodically go off by himself to a lonely place to pray. But he would always come back to his people with new vigor. They learned from him the strength that praying in solitude gave to the continued teaching about the Reign of God.

The prayer of Jesus was probably at its highest intensity at a time when the family of his followers left him alone, when his new family seemed to

dissolve—except for the women, and even they were at a distance. He even felt his Father had abandoned him. Yet, he continued to pray and to forgive, unto death.

A Christian Family

Jesus' community abandoned him, yes, but they did come together after his shocking death to wonder what was to come next. Their wait was not long. On the third day after he was buried, as they were gathered together in mourning and confusion, Christ comes to them. He embraces them, eats with them, and forgives them. The broken family is united in the vibrancy of the resurrection.

Even when Christ appears to individuals the community dimension enters into their relationship with him. He tells them to go tell others about their encounter. They immediately run to share the good news. The communal experience of the resurrected Christ changes them from cowards to proclaimers of the good news about the Reign of God to the whole world. On Easter morning the story of the historical Jesus moves beyond itself to the account of the Jesus revealed as Christ and Lord. The community of the historical Jesus is now newly alive in Jesus' followers.

"A Vibrant Community"

Having listened deeply to the God who speaks in each of us...we are led to deepen our Gospel-based

spirituality through passion for service and vibrant community life. (Chapter Declaration, 2011)

Just as Jesus enfleshed God-centered community with his followers by word and example, God has spoken to us about community in the life of Jesus. As Sisters of Mercy in the 21st century we continue to look for ways of enfleshing this core teaching of Jesus. How do we today visibilize the reality of the Reign of God alive in us?

We can take comfort in the realization that even Jesus had to grow in his understanding of what kind of community he was being called to by his Father. But as his understanding became focused, certain key elements of community emerged. In particular these were incorporated in the “life form” of the apostles.

Some of these elements were:

- Community was centered on Jesus.
- Although there were a number of ways to be part of Jesus' community, from the beginning there were some whom he asked to leave all and follow him.
- This community was composed of very diverse kinds of people who in living together learned that love for one another was the key to preserving community.
- Some community time was given to prayer both together and apart.

- The mission of the community was to proclaim the Reign of God, especially to those who were poor and marginalized.

Are these characteristics of Jesus' vibrant community clues applicable to us today?

Conclusion

In these days of reconfiguring and refounding and reimagining religious life some discussion has taken place about the name we most appropriately give to our way of life—apostolic or ministerial. Arguments in favor of one or the other have been made. Perhaps, though, in light of this study of the intimate new family that surrounded the historical Jesus, the name “apostolic” would be fitting.

In the Final Report on the Implementation of the Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR we find the statement:

“... [the] vision of religious life...is centered on the Person of Jesus Christ and is rooted in the Tradition of the Church. It is this vision that makes religious women and men radical witnesses to the Gospel, [emphasis mine] and therefore, is essential for the flourishing of religious life in the Church.”

Cannot it be said that the vibrant community of the apostles was a “radical witness” to the message of Jesus? Making evident our Gospel-based spirituality through vibrant community life certainly is a radical call to witness to the message of the Reign of God. ♦



Cherishing the Past: Drinking from the Well of Mercy

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

Today we gather together to remember, celebrate and animate Consecrated Life as it is expressed in our Mercy tradition. This Year of Consecrated Life invites us to reflect upon what has been in order to live more fully what is and what will be. Our Mercy Community came into being during a time when the established form of Consecrated Life for women no longer seemed able to meet the most urgent needs of the people of God. Religious communities might have been vigorous in their observance of the shared common life and devoted to the life of prayer and intimacy with God but, due to the structures of the time, had limited options for letting their love overflow in service. Catherine McAuley and other religious founders of the nineteenth century changed that by giving birth to Apostolic Religious Life. We are the daughters of their prophetic vision. It is our heritage and our abiding passion.

The efficacy of this new form of consecrated life is authenticated in the experience of the Church in the United States. Pioneer bishops turned to apostolic religious communities to meet the needs of the widespread, Catholic minority precisely because apostolic religious women, free from the constraints of cloister, could go out and among the people. The changing realities of time and place demanded of our early women a flexibility in interpreting what it meant to be women religious in their day. Because of pressing need we find some lived in tents; some were quarantined with the dying in pest houses; some faced strong and violent anti-papist sentiment, risking danger in their work; some challenged the prejudice of their day by building schools for black children which leaned on their convent to make sure the school would not be burned. All had to make the saving mercy of God real for communities which

were highly diverse-culturally, economically and religiously. From the Catholicity of Europe, they had to cross over into a Protestant or non-sectarian context.

We might well ask: “How did they do so much with so few sisters and such meager resources? How could they endure such opposition and hardship?” Sister Mary Frances Benson, a San Francisco pioneer, summed up the animating vision that led them to such heroic work: “Besides the real thing is to begin for God, and you will surely end for

God...and what more is required?”¹ For us these stories form a sacred memory urging us to live in the pattern of their faith and courage but they also carry a risk...we can be so inspired by the story of deeds that we neglect to tie our sacred story to the inner faith and love that gave it life. Great deeds were matched with great faith and strong bonds of community.

In 1965 Vatican II called all religious to renewal through encounter with their founding stories. It was in the lives and witness of those who have gone before us that we were to find the movement of the Spirit for us. For the past ten years conversations have been underway on how to preserve our cherished story. As we reconfigured to six communities, heritage rooms and centers were designed to preserve local roots and history. At the Institute level that conversation focuses on how to tell the Mercy story at our Mercy Heritage Center in Belmont. Over the past three years eight themes have emerged. These form lens through which our story might be told:

Catherine McAuley—Our Founding Story

Our story begins with Catherine. It is in her interpretation of God’s call that we find our roots. We study her, drink of her vision and emulate her

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virtues but we best not replicate exactly her actions. We live in a different world with different needs. Like the women who planted Mercy in the soil of the United States, we have to interpret Catherine's vision in our own time and place.

Mercy Life/World—The Importance of Spirituality and Community

World Mercy is now an integral part of our awareness and insight. We experience ourselves as part of a global community. Telling our story today automatically means that we celebrate our inclusion in a community that stretches across the continents, responding to needs throughout the world. The challenge of this theme is to tell our story in a way that both points to the works of mercy and to the internal movements that prompt and support that work.

In contemporary society the inner life of Catholic women religious is wrapped in both romanticism and unfamiliarity. Images of sisters surfacing in media often are drawn from the religious life of the mid-twentieth century. As numbers of sisters decline and numbers of unchurched persons increase, the core values of consecrated religious life, its spiritual grounding, inner structure and shared life become more and more hazy. Things like the stages of formation, the meaning of vows and communal living ask of the displays almost an impossible task—making the intangible, tangible.

Into New and Distant Lands: An Experience of Courage and Compassion—1843-1860

During the years 1843-1860 over 62 Sisters of Mercy arrived in the United States coming in seven groups from five Irish convents. When Frances Warde and other Mercy founders arrived in the United States, they quickly discovered a culture vastly different from that of Ireland. They moved into a democratic society, a predominantly non-Catholic world, and one that vigorously believed in separation of Church and State. Like the American Church, the sisters had to learn how to effectively live and minister in this context. The pioneer sisters

had to face nativism, persecution, meager resources and physical hardship. They faced the experience of being a minority immigrant community in the midst of society.

The stories of the sisters
of this epoch abound in
the witness to heroic
charity and the principle
of inclusivity. No one, no
matter how marginalized,
was excluded from the
service given.

Some experiences were hard learnings. Mary Baptist Russell learned the civil authority did not always honor its commitments or pay its debts.² Mary Austin Carroll discovered that racism was alive in the Irish Channel and built her first schools for black children by abutting the school wall directly against the convent's outside wall for protection.³ Mary Teresa Maher learned that relationships with church leadership were sometimes painful when the bishop of Cincinnati claimed as his own the Church of the Atonement, built through the efforts of the sisters.⁴

Mary Theresa Farrell's partnership with Bishop Byrne showed another model of relationship, one of personal friendship and ministerial partnership. Both had to struggle with the reality that the Little Rock Catholic community, which they came to serve, had moved away in their absence leaving only Indians and frontiersmen behind. At his death Bishop Byrne left to Mary Theresa his episcopal ring symbolizing the reality of that relationship.⁵

Even the internal lives of the sisters had to change in the context of their world. The practice of distinctive dress for lay sisters symbolized that type of change. External symbols of class distinction were hindrances in a democratic society and were set aside for the sake of mission.

Healing the Wounds of God's People: 1861-1918 —War, Epidemics, Slums and the Unserved.

The years between 1861 and 1918 were ones of turbulence and change. Sisters were called beyond their schools and hospitals to serve a broken nation. The saga of “Angels of Mercy” during the Civil War testifies to the ways in which sisters came forth to serve the wounded regardless of their race, creed or political affinities. War was not the only crisis. In a time before the advances of modern medicine, epidemics of smallpox, cholera, typhoid and yellow fever asked sister nurses to risk their lives in serving others. For their efforts they won respect, admiration and not a few “free public transportation” rewards.

The stories of the sisters of this epoch abound in the witness to heroic charity and the principle of inclusivity. No one, no matter how marginalized, was excluded from the service given. Needs shaped response. When Amanda Taylor came to Mary Baptist's door asking to stay “even in a coal hole”, the Magdalen Asylum was borne.⁶ When Mary Austin Carroll struggled to fund her outreach to the newsboys of New Orleans, she started a cottage industry of shroud production.⁷

When health epidemics demanded strict quarantine of those who served the sick and dying, sisters embraced the deprivation of access to Eucharist and community for the sake of service.

It is not surprising that contemporary women and men of mercy find the stories of these women inspiring and challenging.

Standing In the Gap—1906-1925 (immigration, poverty) New Immigrants; Urbanization; Serving the Forgotten

The turn of the century brought with it new challenges. The poor became poorer as a strong unregulated capitalism took hold in the country. Waves of immigrants gathered in tenements and hovels. Children were drawn into mines and other dangerous employments just to help feed their

families. In order to reach out to the emergent needs, communities like those in the midlands, moved to follow the routes of railroads or to areas lacking in basic resources. Urbanization tended to situate many Mercy communities in urban centers where education, healthcare and social services were vital. At the turn of the century a pattern of Mercy service emerged that endured into latter years of the century.

Gathering the Threads: 1926-1965—institutional Expansion

School and healthcare system

Role of women in society

Justice issues, civil rights

The decades between 1920 and 1960 saw tremendous expansion of the Church's social network. Concerned about the religious formation of its people and the necessity of assisting immigrants enter into the cultural mainstream, the Church actively recruited women religious to staff its parish schools. Religiously sponsored healthcare systems expanded and sisters found themselves at the heart of the Church's institutional ministries. It was a time of ministerial stability and with that dynamic came a period of stasis in religious life.

Just as ministries moved to large institutional bodies, sisters moved to consolidation. During this time the Union of the Sisters of Mercy was born as well as the amalgamated Sisters of Mercy of California and Arizona better known as the Burlingame community. Sisters were identified as dedicated and holy workers but, in some ways, were separated from their call to prophetic witness.

Without planning to do so, sisters were leaders in creating a sense of women as leaders and visionaries. As well as fostering a deep relationship with God, religious life provided a pathway for women to exercise their talents, abilities and vision. Women religious assumed significant roles of leadership in education, social services and healthcare. Religious

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superiors sought to support those in such a role through the work of the Sisters Formation Conference. Well-educated sisters were seen as essential for the flourishing of the mission. Convent populations boomed. This dynamic continued up until the post-Vatican II years when the emergence of vigorous lay ministries provided an alternative mode of discipleship.

Recognition that justice is a constitutive element of the Gospel is a third thread of this epoch of Mercy life. In reaching out to those most in need, sisters began to focus not just on direct service but also on systemic change. Whether engaged in the struggle for civil rights during the 50's or looking to the interconnections of poverty and economic systems, there was a reclaiming of the prophetic voice speaking to the gaps in word and deed.

1966 to Present: A New Moment, a Renewed Spirit

The call of Vatican II to reclaim the spirit of our founders brought great change to the lives of apostolic religious women. Recognizing that Catherine's vision was to address unmet needs of the most vulnerable, many sisters moved from institutional ministries to those on the edges. Shelters, literacy centers, housing projects, immigrant communities and other ministries serving the economically poor were once more primary focus points for Mercy presence. Just as this movement happened, numbers of new members declined significantly. More and more sponsorship and partnerships with laypersons became a vital part of carrying on the Mercy mission.

Internally the lives of sisters changed as well. Once housed in large convents, community life now was experienced in small group living. The habit of past years was replaced by simple dress. Identification with one Mercy community gave way

to a sense of Institute and of World Mercy. All of this is still emerging, still being shaped and reshaped by the movement of the Spirit.

You can make a difference

No story of Mercy would be complete without the invitation to become part of the story. Mercy Associates, Companions in Mercy, Mercy Volunteer Corps members and myriad partners are invited to claim their own call as person of Mercy, called to the same hope, the same mission. The seed of one story is catalyst for many others to grow.

As much as these themes excite our storytelling imagination, they challenge us to look deeply into what gaps may reside within them. When you begin to design a visual display, you are both shaped and limited by the concrete artifacts, journals, and photographs, which are accessible. It is easy to show our works but how do we capture our life...How can we effectively portray how we support each other in times of darkness or struggle? How do we articulate the realization that we are not alone? It is here that we are confronted with the question: "What truly constitutes Mercy Consecrated Life?"

As Sisters of Mercy we are all about serving God's most needy people. Compassion moves us, motivates us and our service transforms us. Research into the motivating factors in the selection of a vocation to Consecrated Life have noted that prior to the initial decades of the 20th century, spousal spirituality, the desire to have a life of intimacy with Jesus, seemed to be the primary motive for entering a religious community. In the early twentieth century something changed. More and more women sought religious communities because they wanted to serve...to make a difference in the world.⁸ Convent novitiates overflowed with eager workers for the vineyard but researchers note, that for a significant number of members the desire to serve did not

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necessarily find its root in a deep intimacy with God. It was more rooted in a desire to serve one's brothers and sisters. Becoming a sister was an attractive choice for becoming a woman religious was the primary option open to serve others. It was a life style that called forth the best in women and supported it through shared life and community.

That data partially explains the great exodus of the 70's and 80's, which was so disquieting for us. It was hard to understand why persons would leave just as religious life was becoming more human, relational and open. Vatican II called for a vigorous and active lay ministry, and with the call, the horizon changed. Persons recognized that ministry was not the exclusive realm of clerics and religious. One no longer had to forego marriage and family life to serve in ministry. Ministry was understood to be the natural realm of all baptized Christians. The shift in understanding leaves us with the liminality of the last fifty years. If the life of active discipleship and service is the normal path for all Christians, what makes Consecrated Apostolic life different?

Here the legacy of our mothers calls us to reclaim and articulate not just what we do but who we are. Catherine McAuley pointed that out when she told us that the future of the Institute depended not on the most talented teacher, great nurse or outstanding administrator but, rather, on the humble, loving sister who surrenders all to God and expresses that love with each moment of her life. That simple truth compels us not to speak only of a past of great deeds, but a history of great lovers of God, of courageous women who, having known the mercy of God, enfleshed that mercy to the world.

Our past gives us light and inspiration. Yes, there were elements which we are glad to see disappear from the scene but there are also truths that cry for our pondering. Recognizing that the contemplative way has been reclaimed in our time, how do we witness to the braiding of contemplation

and action in our prayer and life? Our Mothers were willing to leave everything for the sake of God's people. What is this moment asking us to leave or set aside? While corporate ministries marked our past, community retreats and large group living, the shape of Mercy life today has shifted to more individual ministries, private/directed retreats and small group living. Community is not easily visible. How, therefore, do we witness to the communal bonds of sisterhood and oneness of heart that empowered and sustained our Mercy models in times of difficulty, suffering and discouragement? None of these are easy questions but they are ones which arise from our cherished past.

Our Mothers in Mercy were flesh and blood folks. They were limited, wounded, imperfect lovers of God and instruments of mercy. So are we. How will their legacy give light to our present journey? We build on the legacy of those who have gone before us. When history looks back on our time, what will be the ninth theme that will capture our faithfulness to Catherine's charism? ♦

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The Year of Consecrated Life: To Live the Present with Passion

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.

As you began your day this morning, were you filled with passion? As you showered and dressed and reached for that first cup of coffee, were you alive with intense enthusiasm for the day and all that it would bring? Probably not! Then how do we fulfill the expectation of this special year that we “live the present with passion”? Obviously Pope Francis meant something deeper than superficial emotion, something more than an easy excitement.

I would suggest that living passionately requires a commitment that is rooted in our hearts and engages our minds, that is manifested in multiple ways, that is shared with our sisters in community and an ever-widening circle of colleagues and that endures through any challenge. To be and do Mercy passionately involves all of those movements. How are we doing this in the present? That is, right now? For the sake of context, let’s include the last five or ten years. In the next few minutes let’s look at each of these movements, these expressions of our passion.

A Commitment Rooted in Our Hearts and Directed by Our minds

What are we doing that flows from our hearts and engages our minds? Every one of us has responded in faith to God’s mercy and Catherine’s vision and vowed to live a life of chastity, poverty, obedience and service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. I dare say that that commitment has only deepened within each one of us with the passing years. Whether we initially spoke those words 40, 50, or 60 years ago, today we have a deeper understanding of what they mean, having lived them in ever changing circumstances. For example, our ability to translate our early practices of poverty—small permissions and only two changes of clothing—into

contemporary practices appropriate to today’s world speaks of a value deeply rooted in our hearts and thoughtfully implemented in changing circumstances.

In fact, we have implemented change in every aspect of our life, thoughtfully and with dignity, including the very organization of our congregations into a single Institute and the further modifications within the Institute. We understand that these changes are for the sake of preserving our mission and enabling it to flourish in new times and places. As part of writing a history of our Institute, I have had the task of reading 25 years’ worth of Minutes from ILC meetings. The matters dealt with covered a wide gamut, from the most sacred to the mundane.

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The overwhelming impression I took from that review was the generosity of our sisters. We probably all know about the Guyana Accord, developed in 1990, by which our leaders agreed that the financial resources of each regional community belonged to all. But in countless other ways, talent and resources are shared across the communities. For this we can all be deeply grateful.

And we know that more changes await us, as we journey toward One-ness. Undeterred, we face our future from the depths of our commitment and with quiet trust in the fruits of our Institute-wide discernment processes.

A Commitment Manifested in Multiple Ways

In how many ways do we serve the poor, sick, and ignorant? A whole library would be needed to describe all of our ministries! Countless hospitals, clinics, colleges, schools, and other institutional works bear the name “Mercy.” But let’s not stop there. A skeptic might say, “But those all speak of our former glory; there are almost no sisters there today.” In response we might say, citing our Constitutions, “We sponsor institutions to witness to our enduring concerns.” Gifted leaders come and go, specific needs change, but the work of our sponsored schools and other works continue. We know that our secondary schools are currently taking a bold move to create one national Mercy system, with a unified sponsorship model. Our colleges and universities have already gone down this path.

A special book in our library of ministries would have to be devoted to efforts on behalf of our Critical Concerns: anti-racism, care for immigrants and refugees, the promotion of women in church and society, care for Earth, and non-violence. Every issue of *¡Viva! Mercy* includes some story about an effort on behalf of at least one of these concerns. For example, the latest issue has an article by Sr. Rita Parks: “For the Least of These: Climate Change and Conversion,” in which she challenges us to personal and communal conversion. Each of you probably has a personal interest or involvement in one or another of the critical concerns. E.g., at McAuley Convent in Cincinnati where many of our senior sisters reside, almost all of the employees are refugees settled by Catholic Relief Services. Individual sisters tutor them in English and other subjects to help prepare them for citizenship and sometimes for the GED exams.

Other ways in which our corporate commitment is manifested is through the advocacy efforts of our

justice offices at the Institute and Community levels and at the United Nations. And our Mercy Investment Services uses our financial resources to promote systemic change in the corporate world.

Whatever our individual involvement is in any of these ministry efforts, we can say with pride that there is a corporate energy on behalf of “the poor, sick, and ignorant,” that is manifested in multiple ways. Not the least of which is our individual and communal prayer.

A Commitment Shared with One Another and with Lay Colleagues

We do not go alone. Our commitment to a Vibrant Community Life has been renewed again and again, most recently in response to the last Institute Chapter which called us to contemplative dialogue on our life in community as Women of Mercy, Women

of Hope. We had opportunities for individual reflection, shared musings, and larger gatherings around this topic. One take-away I had from the whole process is that our Institute is always calling and challenging us to be more, as well as to do more. We will never entirely realize the ideal of union and charity that Catherine bequeathed to us. We will never fully achieve the “affection and

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mutual respect” that our Constitutions call us to. But every day we get up, dust ourselves off, and begin again, because we are members of a community. In the words of our Constitutions, “we freely respond to a call; we commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ; we profess sacred vows; we respond to the cry of the poor, we seek to relieve misery and to address its causes.”

Furthermore, our commitment is strengthened by the companionship of our Mercy Associates and our colleagues in ministry. How many lay women and men can you name who have accompanied us on the journey of service to the poor, sick, and ignorant?

Their enthusiasm and their sacrifices, their passion, always inspire me, and I'm sure you have had the same experience. I have had the privilege of leading formation programs for lay leaders in our Mercy health system in Ohio and elsewhere, and their sincerity is truly inspiring. The universal call to holiness articulated by the Second Vatican Council is realized every day wherever Sisters of Mercy minister, as we invite others to accompany us.

A Commitment That Endures Through Multiple Challenges

To wind up: ours is a passionate commitment that endures through multiple challenges. Sometimes I think we tend to romanticize the past: our foremothers did such great things; endured such great hardships; overcame such great obstacles; etc.

Remember: we don't get to choose our time. We are no less blessed than they were; God's help is no less available; and God will give us sufficient gifts to meet the challenges of our time. In Catherine's

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words: "It began with two." Today we are many thousands in number, but still animated by the same passion that moved Catherine to write, "our hearts can always be centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back. Oh may He look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feelings."

So tomorrow morning, as you reach for that first cup of coffee, give thanks for the quiet passion that lives inside each Sister of Mercy. Together we give thanks for our past, embrace our present, and look forward to our future. ♦

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The Year of Consecrated Life: To Embrace the Future with Hope

Rayleen Giannotti, R.S.M.

“Wow! Look what God has called us to!” These words came from a good friend as she and I were talking about our movement toward 2023. Some days, consideration of our future, knowing what we know and knowing what we do not know, may very well bring different tones and/or inflections to that statement. In fact, it may sound more like, “WOH! Look at what God has called us to.”

As I pondered this opportunity to speak to embracing our future with hope, I, more than once, wished I could create a DVD. In my imagination, this DVD would somehow capture the energy (the passion) and the hope generated in the conversations to which I have been privy in these last months. My own age cohort, newer members, our sisters in the St. Louis area, other incorporation ministers, those with whom I live in community, and women and men of Mercy throughout our Institute are buzzing about 2023. Of course, because we are Mercy, because we follow in the footsteps of Jesus and Catherine, we are innately realistic. My own realism, of which I believe I have received more than my share and which can easily move me to choosing a more cautious path, has been recently moderated by a story from the life and writing of David Whyte.¹ For me, it has become somewhat of an analogy for what it may call forth in me and in us “To Embrace the Future with Hope.”

Crossing a Bridge

Whyte speaks of walking by himself in the Himalayas, about ten to eleven thousand feet up. His plan was to meet up with his two fellow travelers after taking some time alone. He had taken an alternate route where he arrived at a bridge that was

over a four hundred foot chasm. The bridge itself was in what one might call disarray—one of the steel cables was broken and the wooden planks were both rotting and collected into a pile in the middle; just two cables remained on the left hand side of the bridge.

He stepped forward as to go across, but stopped as he quickly surveyed what was ahead. For him, this became a significant moment. Here he was, in what he describes as his invulnerable mid-twenties, a rock climber all his life, the one who always went ahead

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easily in full glory.”**

and did whatever was most adventurous and, now, he was not going across this bridge. He speaks of sitting at that place in the Himalayas, staring at that bridge for 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, an hour, an hour and 15 minutes... In that time, he speaks of doing what many of us do when we come to a place in our lives when the bridge is down. He says, “You look at the bridge so intensely that you hope simply by looking at it hard enough that it will spontaneously repair

itself... and you walk across easily in full glory.”

I don’t need to tell you that that is not how the story ends. However, in my realistic mind’s opinion, the true ending is better. As Whyte acknowledged defeat and swallowed his pride, he reached for his pack. He was going to turn around.

At that moment, he saw a small Tibetan woman who was carrying a dung basket; she was picking up dried yak dung for fuel. He describes the woman as having this marvelous face that spoke to him of kindness, compassion and wisdom. Attending to the task at hand, this woman of years didn’t notice David Whyte until she came upon his big western feet.

Seeing his large western boots, she lit up with a big smile. She then looked up at him and bowed, “Namaste” – the God in me reverences the God in you. And he bowed in return, “Namaste.” Before he lifted his head up again, the small Tibetan woman went straight across the bridge.

And without thinking, Whyte picked up his bag and went straight after her.

Bridge to Mercy Future

I believe there’s so much in this story that speaks to our “bridge to the future” moment. One might argue for or against crossing the next threshold, whether it’s the structural changes anticipated by 2023 or the many that we will need to cross before that one. And, as we take a long, loving look at our Mercy reality in the midst of a Church reality in the midst of a world reality in the midst of a growing understanding of our Universe, we may question whether or not we have what we need. Will our next venture enable us to be more about our mission? Considering our demographics, what will we have to offer each other, our Church, our world? What mark will we leave on the pages of the Universe story entitled Mercy?

As those of us in new membership, both ministers and new members, can attest, the “hazard” or liability of engaging the “new” is that one is often left with more questions than answers. The gift of this on-going engagement with the new is that one learns to live into the questions as one depends on what one knows through education, experience and wisdom, both acquired and passed down through the years. It seems to me that it will be what we know that will lead us to embrace our future with hope.

So, what do we know? As I reflected on my conversations, I recalled several “givens” that seemed to surface again and again; and, without argument, have been from our beginning and continue to be “constants” for us.

The Bridge Will Not Reassemble to Its Original State.

We know that no matter how long we stare at what is, we will never go back to what and how we were. As I write this, I imagine some, if not the majority, of you will be offering a prayer of thanksgiving for that. We are older, wiser and more knowledgeable. As we’ve spent these years in Mercy serving a “crucified Redeemer,” we have learned from this Christ we serve how to be Mercy. The community we were and the community we are offers us the knowhow of David Whyte’s Tibetan woman.

We know that God has been and is with us and in us. Well-informed through the guidance and example of the women who have gone before us, we recognize that personal and communal contemplation is essential. Nancy Schreck, OSF, names it as our “most critical work”²

as our deepest truths take time to meet us. “Solitude, prayer and contemplation (are) real pathways to identity and a future of God’s making.”³ To receive Wisdom as our guide, we must continue to “pray, pray, pray... and then trust we have everything we need.” Throughout our history, we haven’t nor can we now disengage our service and all that enables our mission from our interior life. As Elaine Prevallet, SL, maintains, “we must cultivate our inner lives.” She asks, “How can we help each other keep our minds and hearts expanding and at the same time going deeper?”⁴

We know that we are together. We know we will cross the next bridge together. Educated, celebrated, challenged, picked up and brushed off, appreciated, cared for and loved by those who have gone before us and by each other. We are able to challenge any tendency to think that any one of us or even all of us knows what the “right way” is. Together, with others, we have come to know “we are in a transitional time, in terms of both psychological and human development” and that there is a “new global

What mark will we leave on the pages of the Universe story entitled Mercy?

awareness of the interdependence of the whole community of life on the planet Earth which will require changes in both our thinking and behaviors.”⁵

This Is a Time of Imagining

We know that creativity and imagination are as needed at this time, in this place, as they were in 1827 and again in 1831 and again in 1841 and again in... and again in.... Miriam Ukeritis, reflecting on Nancy Shreck’s address to LCWR in 2014 writes, “In this middle space, the landscape is not familiar, the path is nonexistent, and the destination uncertain. The knowledge that we thought would enable us to negotiate this space turns out to be not only inadequate but, at times, irrelevant.”⁶ Taking this a step further, Lynn Levo, CSJ, tells the novices each year at the Intercommunity Novitiate, “We can no longer afford to simply think outside of the box. I say, ‘throw the box away.’”⁷ Can we use our creativity and imagination to co-create new ways to negotiate this middle space? Rubin Alves, a Brazilian liberation theologian, in a poem entitled, “What is hope?” writes:

It (hope) is a presentiment that imagination is
more real
and reality less real than it looks.

It is the hunch
that the overwhelming brutality of facts
that oppress and repress is not the last word.

It is a suspicion
that reality is more complex
than realism wants us to believe
and that the frontiers of the possible
are not determined by the limits of the actual
and that in a miraculous and unexpected way
life is preparing the creative events
which will open the way to freedom and
resurrection.⁸

“Co-creators... We believe God's Wisdom is at play in the Universe, delighting to be with us, the children of Earth...Creative Wisdom dancing on the edge of chaos... Divine desire...”⁹

This Is a Time of Grieving

We know there is much loss to be experienced. Believe it or not, this is by far one of the greater concerns that I have heard expressed by those who fall into the “150 under 70 in the Year 2023” category. In addition to it being “a time to mourn, to relinquish some of the hopes that directed our life, and to consider our current reality, without denial or

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illusion”¹⁰ as Miriam Ukeritis frames it, it is a time to grieve deeply the loss of many of our wisdom women. We know that many of our mentors, teachers, formators, and older sisters have died and will continue to die. Given the demographics and a natural order, some of us will experience the death of the vast majority of our sisters.¹¹ Are we now talking to each other about our sisters whom we miss dearly? Are we sharing the wisdom they imparted? Are we telling their stories and raising up their deep commitments to God and prayer? Can we create places where we can be honest with each other about our sadness and grief? In the end, “may we never speak least about what matters most.”¹²

We Have Good Reason to Hope

Unfortunately, we can easily focus on the challenges set before us. We can stare at our

demographics, our decreasing human and financial resources, as well as other internal and external issues/concerns hoping that they will change. We could become fearful, pick up our pack and turn around. OR... We can respond to the call of Pope Francis and those who have gone before us and practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in Christ.¹³ "For Christians there is also always the future (adventus) which comes toward us from God as a promise. In relation to adventus our question is not, 'When will it happen, if ever,' but 'How can we live now as if the 'form of this world is passing away' and the new creation is already present in our lives (1 Cor. 7:25-31).'"¹⁴ We can pick up our pack and go straight onto that bridge following Holy Wisdom as lived out in Jesus, in Catherine, in our sisters who have gone before us and the many women and men of Mercy who are already living in the joy of the "not yet" as if "it is already."

Years later, David Whyte wrote of his experience in the Himalayas in a poem he titled, "The Old Interior Angel," also known as "Standing at the Edge."

One day the hero
sits down,
afraid to take
another step,
and the old interior angel
limps slowly in
with her no-nonsense
compassion
and her old secret
and goes ahead.
"Namaste"
you say
and follow.¹⁵

Let us say, "Namaste," and follow filled with gratitude and passion as we embrace our future with hope. ♦

Endnotes

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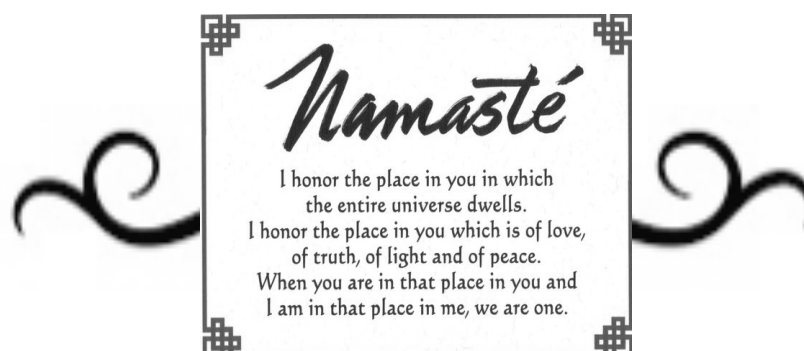
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¹³ Pope Francis, in "Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life," (November 21, 2014), I, §3.

¹⁴ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press): 42.

¹⁵ David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. pp. 52-53.



Review of Faith and Feminism: Ecumenical Essays

Faith and Feminism: Ecumenical Essays. B. Diane Lipsett and Phyllis Tribble, eds. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. Paperback, 288 pp. (List price: \$35)

Barbara H. Moran, R.S.M.

The title of this book will undoubtedly intrigue readers of MAST, and the subject matter is equally significant for all 21st century women who struggle with both theology and practice in church groups worldwide. What may be surprising to some is that similar problems of women's inequality exist in Jewish and Islamic circles as well as in Christian groups. The essays included are part of a lecture series organized by Phyllis Tribble at Wake Forest University between 2003 and 2013, and each one is still quite timely for the present decade. The text is divided into three sections: Biblical Studies, Inter-religious Ventures, and Theology and Ethics. Each section includes several names familiar to most of our readers, and also some new writers who discuss themes of current interest and provide salient conclusions to the questions under discussion.

In the first section on Biblical Studies, a familiar author is Phyllis Tribble herself, who speaks of "The Dilemma of Dominion" in terms of Genesis and the cosmos, providing a well-documented account of the creation story and current concerns with environment and our relationship to the earth we live in and the entire cosmic situation 21st century science is studying. She ends her article with an especially moving comment: "Though abundantly blessed, the cosmos and all therein are not secure from the threat of chaos—a threat both endemic and acquired" (32). So it is that Genesis studies are still quite relevant today. On the whole, the articles in this section provide a current connection to Biblical Studies, so that the entire collection is extremely relevant to modern needs and understandings.

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In the second section, another familiar writer is Mary C. Boys. Her piece is entitled, "Learning in the Presence of the Other: Feminisms and the Interreligious Encounter." Here Boys introduces readers to the importance of reimagining relationships with women of faiths other than Christianity. She stresses interfaith encounter and what she suggests are "thin places." These beliefs and practices, which we Christians may consider quite foreign to both our theology and everyday experience, are still important for us to understand as we grapple with the role of women in 21st century views. Comments on "thick religiosity" are also included, and she explains this term as well-established and generally accepted practices among Christian feminists. So, what are the "thin places" Boys suggests need closer examination? These may be certain insecurities, and dialogue with the "Other" may provide answers to questions Christian feminists, or women from other traditions, never thought of asking. This type of dialogue is not argument but a kind of sharing which leads to better understandings among all participants. She advises, "Like feminism, interreligious dialogue invites us to reimagine relationships." (112).

The next article, "Speaking from behind the Veil: Does Islamic Feminism Exist?" may lead some readers to the "thin places" Boys has described. This Islamic writer, Hibba Abugideiri, was born in the United States and received her doctorate from Georgetown University. Nevertheless, she adheres to Islamic customs puzzling to American feminists of other religious traditions, such as wearing the "hijab," traditional Islamic women's head-covering. While

American women may find this dress a typical example of what they describe as Muslim misogyny, today's Islamic women may express their religious beliefs in a myriad of forms, and Abugideiri suggests that "...critiques of historical interpretation as well as their own reinterpreted scriptural views are having an impact on contemporary understandings of gender, especially on what it means to be, in Quranic terms a 'believing Muslim woman' today" (116).

Another Muslim author, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, writes on a similar topic, "The Emergence of Muslim American Feminism," and describes attitudes toward Islamic women in the United States during the past 50 years. She discusses problems within the Muslim community as well as among Americans in general, especially since 9/11, and ensuing difficulties with terrorists and other dissidents purported to be Muslims. It has not always been an easy situation for women who are both feminist and Muslim, and their problems can be overlooked by non-Muslims. Many of these Muslim women are looking for gender justice both inside and outside of their own communities, particularly among feminists who accept some if not all of their hopes and dreams.

The next two articles by Ulrike Bechmann examine Old Testament stories from a European and Islamic perspective, with an emphasis on Judaism. "Sarah and Hagar" looks at women, both feminist and somewhat non-feminist, who are involved in cooperative and non-cooperative situations. Bechmann also studies terror and liberation and feminist perspectives. She sees Hagar as an Islamist symbol and target of right-wing groups, but also the subject for biblical hermeneutics and interreligious dialogue. This

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may seem to be a "tall order," but her essay reads well. A second article, "The Woman of Jericho" is sub-titled "Dramatization as Feminist Hermeneutics" and reads as a follow-up to Bechmann's previous piece. Readers will find both articles challenging and somewhat unusual, but certainly worth study. The last section of the book, "Theology and Ethics," seems a more conventional approach, but it also contains some rather surprising suggestions. Elizabeth A. Johnson's "Ecological Theology in Women's Voices," echoes the current emphasis on care of

our environment and stresses feminist contributions with practical and necessary ideas. But Rosemary Radford Ruether's, "Why Do Men Need the Goddess? Male Creation of Female Religious Symbols" provides what might seem to some readers rather startling suggestions

for biblical study. Ruether concludes her article by urging; "It is not enough to seize upon feminine symbolism in Christianity to overcome the masculine. Rather the whole system needs to be symbolically (and socially) reconstructed" (248).

On the whole, each of the 16 chapters in this text is worth reading, pondering, and assimilating, although not every reader may agree with every proposal, at least at the present time. However, the volume as a whole presents a picture of early 21st century American feminism as well as perspectives from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South America and Japan—a wide representation of the role of women in religion and academia. It deserves a place on Mercy readers' bookshelves, especially those of us who have hoped, prayed, and worked for expanding women's roles in our Roman Catholic Church. ♦



Discussion Questions

(Doyle) *When Frances Warde and other Mercy founders arrived in the United States, they quickly discovered a culture vastly different from that of Ireland. They moved into a democratic society, a predominately non-Catholic world, and one that vigorously believed in separation of Church and State...they faced the experience of being a minority immigrant community in the midst of society.* Is religious life today like “being a minority immigrant community”? What did Frances Warde and her Irish-born Sisters do, and how do you imagine they adjusted, to “make it work” in the United States?

(Giannotti) Rayleen Giannotti uses the image of a bridge to cross into the future “on the other side.” Have you ever experienced dread, uncertainty, immobility or resistance as you faced a transition in your ministerial setting, or your personal life? What considerations, events, or persons got you “across the bridge” at that time?

(Gottmoeller) *Our Institute is always calling and challenging us to be more, as well as to do more. We will never entirely realize the ideal of union and charity that Catherine bequeathed to us. We will never fully achieve the ‘affection and mutual respect’ that our Constitution calls us to. But every day we get up, dust ourselves off, and begin again because we are members of a Community.* Do you feel you “measure up” to the challenge of our charism and our Constitution? How do you practice self-compassion when you fall short? Would you have these regrets if you were not a member of this community?

(King) In considering the theme of “vibrant community,” Marilyn King describes “certain key elements of community” that were incorporated into the “life form” of the apostles: Centering on Jesus, some asked to leave everything to follow him, diverse people living together in love, time for prayer together and prayer apart, and a mission of inclusion especially to the poor and marginalized. Which of these “key elements” of a vibrant community life has been most challenging for you? Which ones easier?

(O’Neill) *As I review the history of Christianity, it is apparent that the glorious teachings about the body, based on belief in Creation, the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection, have not served to eradicate negative attitudes toward the bodies of women.* How would you explain, in ordinary believer’s terms, “the glorious teachings about the body” implied in each of these doctrines? What about the “body” in the Eucharist? What is the difference between a “man’s body” in each of these doctrines, and what is implied about a “woman’s body” that is different from a man’s in Christian tradition?

(Moran) Do you know any women who are Protestant, Jewish, Muslim or belong to another faith group--who are also concerned about inequality of women, similar to challenges facing Roman Catholic women? What is it about being a woman of faith that exacerbates the experience of inequality between men and women in society?

(Talone) *Respect for the Church, for the Institute of Mercy, and personal dignity all demand that we commit ourselves to a 'relationship of partnership,' recognizing that we are a vital part of a world Church.* What helps you remember that you are part of a “world Church”? And how does this consideration take the edge off wanting to “leave the table” where family members are arguing, and eat somewhere else?

California State Senate Prayer of April 23, 2015

Michelle Gorman, R.S.M., Chaplain to the Senate

Let us recall that we are in God's presence.

Today is Shakespeare's birthday so I would like to read his description of mercy from *The Merchant of Venice*. In the play, the words are intended for Shylock, the Jew, but they more aptly apply to the Christians who were anything but merciful to Shylock. May we resist the temptation to demonize others, no matter who they are or what they profess.

(Act IV, scene 1)

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown....
But mercy is above this scepterèd sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings.
It is an attribute to God himself.
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*



Merciful and gracious God, the major world religions attribute mercy to you and view it as a strength rather than a weakness. Even when we must administer strict law, may we proceed from a heart of mercy and compassion with deep respect for the dignity and reality of the other. May we always season our justice with some sprinkles of mercy—for we know that we too are in need of your mercy. Amen.

Contributors

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M. (West Midwest) is serving as newly named director of the Institute Novitiate. Previously, she served as Pastoral Associate and Director of Adult Formation for Holy Spirit Parish in Sacramento. A native Sacramentan, she obtained her B.A. in history and a master's in Educational Administration from the University of San Francisco and an M.A. in Liturgical Studies from St John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Katherine served in community leadership from 1994-2004 and was Director for the retreat house, Mercy Center Auburn. She has been engaged in retreat work and spiritual direction for over twenty-five years. Katherine has served as community archivist and historian as well as in Mercy Spiritual Ministries Outreach, a ministry that combines retreat work, spiritual direction, adult faith formation and writing. She is the author of several publications including *Like a Tree by Running Water, the Story of Mary Baptist Russell*.

Rayleen Giannotti, R.S.M. (Northeast) is currently serving as one of the Institute's novitiate ministers in St. Louis, MO. Born in Fall River, Massachusetts, she holds a B.A. in Politics from Salve Regina University and an M.Ed. from Boston College. She completed some additional study of administration in education at Creighton University. Prior to incorporation ministry in the Institute, Rayleen primarily served as an educator and pastoral minister with teens; she also engages in spiritual direction and retreat ministry whenever she is able. She has a special interest in nonviolent communication through contemplative dialogue; and is working toward deepening her practice in it.

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M. (South Central) has recently retired from serving as senior vice president for Mission Integration at Catholic Healthcare Partners, a multistate health system. Recognized for her organizational talents, she has held many regional positions of leadership. She was elected the first president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. She holds an M.A. in chemistry. She earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, with a focus on ecclesiology in the work of Yves Congar, O.P. She is widely published on themes of religious life and spiritual renewal. She was a keynote presenter at MAST's public lecture in Philadelphia in 2010 and in 2015. The paper in this volume was part of the panel she organized for the 2015 meeting.

Marilyn King, R.S.M. (West Midwest) received her Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union with a dissertation on Thomas Merton. She also has a background in teaching math and science. She is co-founder of The Laura, a retreat-house setting in Kentucky that combines contemplation, study and service. She teaches some courses at a local Catholic college, but is mainly a rural theologian, teaching in parishes to ordinary people who lack the cultural and educational advantages of urban residents. She performs many services to the Institute as a theologian, and coordinated the program Opening Worlds of Mercy. She serves on the editorial board of *The MAST Journal*, as Treasurer for the organization, and is a regular contributor of articles.

Barbara Moran, R.S.M. (West Midwest) received her Ph.D. in English literature and linguistics at Catholic University of America with a dissertation on “The Effects of Variation in Direct Address in Four Ancrene Riwe Texts”—documents outlining a way of life for women who lived as hermits associated with parishes in medieval times. She retired from teaching English at University of San Francisco in 1997, and began docent training and volunteer touring at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco that same year. She still serves in a support status. She also volunteers in the library and Spiritual Care department at Alma Via senior residence in San Francisco as well as assisting at Marian Oaks and Mercy Convent as a Eucharistic minister. She has facilitated a Catholic women’s book group for twenty-five years, and recently discussed Jimmy Carter’s *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power*. In September 2014, she attended Mercy International’s 20th Anniversary celebration in Dublin.

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, speaking on “From Patriarchy to Partnership” in March, 2011, at the 150th celebration of the Sisters of Mercy presence in Merion, Pennsylvania. She is a regular contributor to the *MAST Journal*.

Patricia A. Talone, R.S.M. (Mid-Atlantic) is vice president, mission services, for the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA). Prior to joining CHA, she served as vice president for mission services and ethicist for Unity Health, St. Louis, a subsidiary of the Sisters of Mercy Health System, St. Louis. Patricia serves on the board of the Mid-America Transplant Services, and served for more than 10 years on the board of the National Catholic AIDS Network. She, likewise, serves on the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Radiology. She authored *Feeding the Dying: Religion and End of Life Decisions* (Peter Lang, Inc., 1996) along with numerous articles in health care and theological journals. She lectures extensively both nationally and internationally on mission and health care ethics and was honored as the 1994 Lindback award winner for distinguished teaching at Gwynedd-Mercy College. She received an honorary doctor of humane letters from University of Scranton in 2005 and one from Misericordia University in 2011. Her teaching experience is extensive; she has taught at every academic level, from third grade through graduate school. She holds a B.A. from Gwynedd-Mercy College, an M.A. from St. Charles Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, and a Ph.D. in theological ethics from Marquette University, Milwaukee. She spent one semester in 1996 as a Visiting Fellow at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University. From 1988-1997 she was associate professor of humanities at Gwynedd-Mercy College, while also serving as ethics consultant for Mercy Health Cooperation of Southeastern Pennsylvania.



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