

# The *MAST* Journal

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## Concerns of Pope Francis

<b>Pope Francis: Apostle of Mercy</b> <i>Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mercy: The Beating Heart of the Bible</b> <i>Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M.</i>	<b>8</b>
<b>Nightly News and Gospel Joy</b> <i>Marilyn King, R.S.M.</i>	<b>16</b>
<b>“Mercy” In the Thinking of Walter Kasper and Pope Francis</b> <i>Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.</i>	<b>19</b>
<b>Closing of the Year of Consecrated Life, Diocese of Metuchen</b> <i>Marie Michelle Donnelly, R.S.M.</i>	<b>23</b>
<b>Scarlet Letters and Yellow Stars</b> <i>Margretta Dwyer, R.S.M.</i>	<b>25</b>
<b>It Commenced with Two: 25 Years After Founding Mercy Family Center</b> <i>Sarah Ducey, R.S.M., Ph.D. and Mary M. Malik, Ph.D.</i>	<b>29</b>
<b>“Getting Up Again” for the Revolution of Tenderness and Love</b> <i>Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.</i>	<b>32</b>
<b>Pope Francis and Changes in the Tribunal Process: A Canonist’s Experience</b> <i>Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.</i>	<b>40</b>
<b>Devotion of St. Francis: Our Lady Undoer of Knots</b> <i>Mary Scullion, R.S.M. and Will O’Brien</i>	<b>45</b>



Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,



General enthusiasm for the papacy and inspiration of Pope Francis is reflected in this issue on “Concerns of Pope Francis.” Perhaps a better summary would be “embracing the themes of Pope Francis” because each writer takes up a recent papal document or directive, or the practical implications of one of those documents. This issue of *The MAST Journal* functions as an apostolic demonstration piece for the Sisters of Mercy—what impact is the teaching of Pope Francis having on our theological reflection, our particular spirituality, our outlook on the world’s needs, and our ministries?

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., offers an overview and summary of the teachings of Pope Francis, summarized in 10 themes. Her synthesis surveys various documents also cited by writers in this issue: *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel, 2013), *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (2014), *Mitis Iudex* (Gentle Judge, 2015), *Misericordiae Vultus* (Face of Mercy, Opening the Jubilee Year of Mercy, 2015), *Laudato Si’* (Praised Be—Care for Our Common Home, 2015) and *Amoris Laetitia* (Joy of Love, 2016).

Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M., writing from New Zealand, offered the text of her recent talk, “Mercy: The Beating Heart of the Bible,” which she presented as part of an interfaith panel which featured representatives of Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. Her article surveys the theme of Mercy in Genesis, Exodus, Prophets, Psalms, Wisdom, and the New Testament. Readers could easily use this article as the basis for a personal retreat on the theme of God’s mercy.

Marilyn King, R.S.M., was actually the first writer to submit an article for this issue, a presentation she gave at the March 2014 Detroit Education Day. A practical theologian, she was inspired by *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) to face the depressive effect of watching the nightly news. She takes up an urgent personal question: How do I stay hopeful, committed to service of God’s people, trying to speak in a joyful voice “in loving dialogue with others” ---when the weight of the world’s pain feels so heavy?

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M. takes up the subject of “Mercy in the Thinking of Walter Kasper and Pope Francis.” Walter Kasper, a German theologian, wrote an influential book on mercy in 2012 (*Baumherzikeit*). It was translated into English as *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2014). However, Pope Francis, as Cardinal Bergoglio in Argentina, must have been familiar with Cardinal Kasper’s book shortly after its original publication because he cited its importance soon after his election as Pope in 2013. Sharon outlines similarities in the theological perspective of the German theologian and the Argentinian Pope.

Marie Michelle Donnelly, R.S.M., was invited to address women and men religious in the Diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey, at the conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life. She cited the three aims of the year drawn from Pope Francis’ *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* of November 2014, namely, looking at the past with gratitude, living the present with passion, and embracing the future with hope. Her talk memorializes celebrations all over the world as the Year of Consecrated Life ended, coinciding with the Synod on the Family, a timing which links those two distinct vocations in the Church.

Margretta Dwyer, R.S.M, a clinical psychologist and academic, does not directly address Pope Francis’ teaching in *Amoris Laetitia* (Joy of Love), but her article dealing with sexual offenders within the family talks candidly about the reality that sexual abuse is a family issue, not just an ecclesial scandal. Sexual misconduct is not perpetrated by an offender who has no relation to anyone else. Margretta deals both instructively and compassionately with problematic sexual behavior, the inevitable involvement of family members, and she debunks some myths about sexual offenders and their treatment.

Sarah Ducey, R.S.M. and her ministerial partner Mary Malik, Ph.D. co-author an article, “It Commenced with Two.” Their narrative records the ministerial history of founding Mercy Family Center in New Orleans,

Louisiana. The inspiration to found Mercy Family Center reflects the papal inspiration to focus on the family and its needs. The 25-year history coincides with Pope Francis' Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Family Center offers services to both the poor and the more prosperous in educational support for children, treatment of children's learning difficulties, as well as mental health services and trauma care for all family members.

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M. gave a presentation at an Assembly of the Mid-Atlantic Community, and we provide her text of " 'Getting Up Again' for the Revolution of Tenderness and Love." She calls attention to Pope Francis' focus on the words "tender," and "tenderness" in his recent writings. She then sees that this papal focus echoes Catherine's similar emphasis in the Rule and her oral instructions. She proposes several practical translations of that tenderness into Mercy ministerial life: Spiritual reading, organization of community almoners, appointment of a coordinator of merciful volunteers, and personal and communal conversion of our life-style to doing with less.

Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M., is a canon lawyer and Director of the Tribunal in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Ohio. She kindly provides *MAST Journal* readers a description of Pope Francis' dramatic intervention in the process by which canon lawyers handle requests for annulments by divorced Catholics in tribunals all over the world. His revisions have streamlined time and simplified procedures. But how to understand a reform of what may feel like completely unfamiliar terrain to most readers? Victoria shares her experience of collaboration and dialogue with various Vatican officials, and readers will enjoy a newsy "inside scoop" from one of our own. Appended at the end of her article for *MAST Journal* is an article she wrote for her diocesan newspaper on justice and mercy.

Mary Scullion, R.S.M, and Will O'Brien close this issue with an article on "Devotion of Pope Francis: Our Lady Undoer of Knots." It's a first person account of how a committee of the World Meeting on Families convened in 2014, in anticipation of the Pope's visit to Philadelphia in 2015. The committee constructed a public art project by creating a grotto that was covered with cloth strips representing "knots." People in homeless shelters, prisons, community centers, churches, synagogues and mosques were solicited to write their "knot" or personal struggle on the strip of cloth. Then, tens of thousands of those "knots" were tied to the grotto structure. There was an on-going ritual in which one person untied and read a knot, and offered a prayer for that person or family. This ritual was linked to printed prayer cards which memorialized a favorite devotion of Pope Francis, Our Lady of Undoing Knots. Pope Francis blessed the grotto, and later, those 150,000 strips of cloth were used as part of insulation for a residence for homeless and low-income persons.

We trust that this issue will provide readers with a treasure of prayer, scriptural resources, theological up-dating, and ministerial inspiration in the spirit of our beloved Pope Francis.

Yours,

*Eloise Rosenblatt*

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



# Pope Francis: Apostle of Mercy

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.

It's very tempting to just let Pope Francis speak for himself. His writings are so quotable, his remarks so arresting, that we could just enjoy a collation of these. Two apostolic exhortations focusing on "joy" and a Jubilee Year of Mercy—the Sisters of Mercy have never had a better friend in Rome.

We planned this morning as a way of celebrating the Jubilee Year of Mercy by taking a look at how some of our principal ministries exemplify the call to be and do Mercy. \* By way of leading off, I've compiled a list of ten interrelated points which illustrate the pastoral insight and zeal of the pope. They are drawn from all of his principal writings, not just the Declaration on the Jubilee Year. In the discussion which follows, we'll look to everyone to fill out the picture of how we exemplify Mercy and the pastoral vision of Pope Francis (and perhaps what we have yet to do).

In order to relieve the suspense, let me list the ten points, and then I'll address each one very briefly.

1. The predominance of joy
2. The meaning of Mercy
3. Becoming a welcoming church
4. Change in the church
5. Role of the laity
6. Contribution of religious
7. Love in the family
8. Concern for the vulnerable
9. Living in a global church
10. Responsibility for our common home

As you listen to these points, you'll probably think of other examples and insights. I hope you'll be ready to share them in our general discussion.

## Predominance of Joy

*Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel—EG) and *Amoris Laetitia* (Joy of Love—AL) These titles certainly set the tone for this papacy. But my favorite reference comes near the end of the encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'* (LS) in: "Let us sing as we go!" (LS §244). After reciting some ninety pages of

challenges in caring for our common home, all the evils attendant on our abuse of Earth, that is his invitation to us. He adds, "May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope." So the song he invites us to sing is not a dirge or a lament, but a song of joy.

The theme of joy pervades *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel, 2013, EG), his exhortation on the topic of the new evangelization. In it he invites "all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unflinchingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for

him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord' (EG §83). With boldness and originality and even some humor, Pope Francis goes on to lay out his plan for an evangelizing community. As he says, "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (EG §6). He says further, "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!" (EG §10). Speaking about the evangelizing role of the church he says, "One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, sourpusses" (EG §85). Joy is a hallmark of this papacy, and Pope Francis invites us to share that joy.

## The Meaning of Mercy

This is a topic which deserves a whole day or more, but let me just cite a few passages from *Misericordiae Vultus* (*The Face of Mercy*, 2015, MV), subtitled, "Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year." It opens with the declaration, "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith." Later: "The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a 'visceral' love. It

gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy” (MV§ 6). Later: “It is the beating heart of the Gospel” (MV§12).

Later, after reflecting on some of the parables that are especially vivid depictions of God’s love, he asserts that “Mercy is the very foundation of the church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love” (MV, §10). Francis’ reflections on mercy all underscore the joy that it brings to the giver and the recipient. Being merciful is “a program of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace” (MV, §13).

### Becoming a Welcoming Church

These reflections flow right into the next: becoming a welcoming church. In the years before Francis became pope some church leaders seemed to be calling for a smaller, purer church. Let’s eliminate those who are half-hearted in their practice of their religion and focus on the fervent and the faithful, they said. If the church gets smaller, it might be a good thing; forget about the Easter and Christmas-only Catholics! Pope Francis turns this around 180 degrees. He describes a church which goes forth radiating joy, whose doors are “open to all” (EG §46). Specifically, the doors to the sacraments should not be closed for simply any reason. In *The Joy of the Gospel* he condemns a “narcissistic and authoritative elitism” which threatens to turn the Church “into a museum piece.” (EG, §§94-95)

In his interview in *America* magazine: “This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal Church to a nest protecting our mediocrity.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Pope Francis is a realist. He acknowledges our “pain and shame” at the actions of some members (EG, §76). He describes the

“bureaucratic, unwelcoming approaches” some church members have employed in administering parishes and dioceses. In a telling example he says, “When I perceive negative behavior in ministers of the church or in consecrated men or women, the first thing that comes to mind is: ‘Here’s an unfruitful bachelor’ or ‘Here’s a spinster.’”<sup>2</sup> The style of preaching which emphasizes some teachings out of proportion to others also comes in for criticism (EG, §38). For example, “If in the course of the liturgical year a parish priest speaks about temperance ten times but only mentions charity or justice two or three times, an imbalance results.” Instead, Francis emphasizes the integrity of the Gospel message, where all truths are united in a harmonious whole and each illuminates the other.

### Change in the Church

This is a topic which engages everyone. Some of what prevents the church from being seen as a welcoming community are outmoded customs and structures. Some customs may be beautiful and have deep historical roots, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. There are rules and precepts, Francis suggests, which may have been effective in their time, but are no longer useful in directing peoples’ lives (EG §43). He doesn’t give specific examples of what he means, I suspect, because customs and rules vary in different countries and cultures, but we could probably create our own list.

It’s not only the rules and customs which need re-examining and renewal, but also the pastoral workers who teach them. The pope has some strong words for clergy, pastoral associates, and catechists (EG §§78-83). Specifically, he criticizes an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity, and a cooling of fervor. “And so the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape: ‘the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and deteriorating into small-mindedness’, (EG §83). A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into “mummies in a museum” (EG § 83). The saddest thing of all is that they have allowed themselves to be

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robbed of the joy of the Gospel and the passion for evangelization. In another place he says that the first reform must be the attitude of the ministers of the Gospel. “The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials.”<sup>3</sup>

Moving on, the pope’s vision includes a renewal of ecclesial structures, from the parish to the central structures of the universal church and ultimately to the papacy. The current “excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the church’s life and her missionary outreach” (EG §32). As he said in an address to CELAM, there is a need for greater appreciation of local and regional elements, for increased collegiality and solidarity.<sup>4</sup> It may be time to change the methods associated with the synods of bishops. Presently they are advisory to the pope, but without any authority beyond that. The offices of the Roman Curia should be at the service of the pope and bishops, but sometimes they are seen as institutions of censorship. “It is amazing to see the denunciations for lack of orthodoxy that come from Rome.”<sup>5</sup> (One can only think of the censorship of the LCWR.)

In the renewal of ecclesial structures which Pope Francis is calling for, he urges us “to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’” He invites “everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (EG §33).

### **The Role of the Laity**

As the pope remarks, lay people are the vast majority of the People of God. “The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service.” Unfortunately, however, in some places “an excessive clericalism” prevents lay people from speaking and acting. “Even if many [lay persons] are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors” (EG §102).

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**Acknowledging the present contributions of women in pastoral roles and in theological reflection, he urges, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the church,” (EG §103) “a specific place of women in those places where the authority of the church is exercised.”**

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The work of the Spirit within the baptized bears fruit in a holiness of the People of God and a certain infallibility in belief. “This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith.... As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful

with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God” (EG §110). Part of the role of pastors is to listen and discern what the Spirit is speaking within the People of God. In the pope’s characteristically optimistic view, “Within the church countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Different currents of thought in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, enable the church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God’s word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But, in fact such

variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel” (EG §40). The experience and reflection of the laity are indispensable to this development of doctrine.

In listening to the faithful, the pope urges a greater role for women. Acknowledging the present contributions of women in pastoral roles and in theological reflection, he urges, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the church,” (EG §103) “a specific place of women in those places where the authority of the church is exercised.”<sup>6</sup> We probably all saw in the recent press that he has approved the idea of a study of women in the diaconate.

### **The Contribution of Religious**

As a religious himself, it should be no surprise that Pope Francis called for a celebration of a Year of Consecrated Life in his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* (2014). We’re all familiar with the three aims of the year: to look to the past with gratitude; to live the present with passion; and to embrace the future with hope (“*Part I: Aims of the*

*Year of Consecrated Life*” §1, § 2, § 3). A few words on the latter, taken from the apostolic letter, indicate the depth of his understanding. “We all know the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: decreasing vocations and aging members, particularly in the Western world; economic problems stemming from the global financial crisis; issues of internationalization and globalization; the threats posed by relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance.” (*Apostolic Letter*, §3) But he adds an encouraging word: “It is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with so many of our contemporaries, that we are called to practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: ‘Be not afraid . . . for I am with you.’” (Jer 1:8) (*Apostolic Letter*, § 3) He also has special words of encouragement for the young.

In his closing words of the letter he quotes his own intervention at the 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life, as well as a corresponding passage from *Vita Consecrata*. “Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church. For this reason, precisely as a gift to the Church it is not an isolated or marginal reality, but deeply a part of her. It is at the heart of the Church, a decisive element of her mission, inasmuch as it expresses the deepest nature of the Christian vocation . . . it belongs absolutely to the life and holiness of the Church.” (*Apostolic Letter* § 5). These are challenging words for all of us, old and young!

### Love in the Family

There has been enormous publicity over the past three years on the Synod on the Family, with its two sessions. The resulting apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*, AL) has something for everyone: those who wanted a more pastoral vision, especially for those in “irregular” marital situations, and those who were afraid long-standing teachings would be breached. In 254 pages and nine chapters the Pope treats the biblical basis of marriage and

family, the experiences and challenges of families today, the vocation of the family, love in marriage, welcoming new life, the education of children, pastoral perspectives. One commentator has remarked that chapters 3, 4, and 9 might well be bound in a separate pamphlet for young couples, dealing as they do with spirituality of marriage and family life. Chapter Four, in particular, is an extended reflection on the Pauline passage in 1 Cor. 13 on the qualities of life: love is patient; love is at the service of others; love is not jealous, etc.

Pope Francis’ approach to irregular situations epitomizes his pastoral sensitivity. He notes that neither the Synod nor his Exhortation contains “a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable in all cases” (AL § 2). What is possible, instead, “is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of

particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases,’ the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily be the same” (AL § 227).

He concludes this long-awaited section on divorce, remarriage, and similar issues with a renewed call to pastors to propose the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur. At the same time, he says, “from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances—psychological, historical and even biological—it follows that ‘without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear,’ making room for ‘the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best’” (AL § 236).

### Concern for the Vulnerable

In *Joy of the Gospel*, Francis urges us “to go first to the poor” (EG § 48). While the Gospel message is for everyone, he envisions a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security . . . caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.” Leave behind outmoded structures and habits that

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make us feel safe, he says, while people are starving at our door (EG § 49). “How can it be,” he asks, “that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” (EG §53).

We can see Francis’ love and empathy for the poor in his own behaviors, his choice of a living situation, the cars he chooses to use, his outreach and physical presence to the poor in multiple settings. He shows us that love for the poor is not something which can be achieved in the abstract, without actually seeing, touching and conversing with those in that situation. He asks, “When you give alms do you touch the hand of the person you are giving them to, or do you toss the coin at him or her?” Appealing to our deepest identity, he says, “the church is not an NGO, and when the church becomes an NGO she loses her salt, she has no savor, she is only an empty organization . . . the value of the church is living by the Gospel and witnessing to our faith.”<sup>7</sup>

### Living in a Global Church

As the first pope from Latin America and the first non-European in many centuries, Pope Francis epitomizes the global church. Early in his pontificate he appointed a personal council of nine cardinals drawn from around the world to advise him.

In his first apostolic exhortation he has a section on the People of God as a “people of many faces” (EG §§115-118). He says, “we would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as mono-cultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural. Hence in the evangelization of new cultures, or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or

ancient it may be, together with the Gospel.”

### Care for Our Common Home

Finally, Pope Francis describes environmental issues as “care for our common home,” the subject of his first (and only encyclical to date) called, *Laudato Si’ (Praised Be)*. This encyclical widens the subjects addressed in the church’s social teaching. One thing that strikes the reader is his integration of so many themes in his treatment of this topic. The existence of pollution of air and water, biodiversity, technology, the economy (both global and local), individual responsibility and international policy-making, the common good, justice between generations, etc.—all are integrated into a vision of the good Earth given

to us by a loving and provident God. ♦

### Endnotes

\* This presentation was a paper given at the opening of the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology (MAST), held at St. Rafaela Center outside Philadelphia, June 16, 2016. It introduced a panel of speakers, Patricia Talone, R.S.M., Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., and Julie Upton, R.S.M.

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Spadaro, S.J. “A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis,” *America* (Sept. 30, 2013): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> The passage refers to his address to CELAM, the Latin American Conference of Bishops, in Brazil on July 28, 2013, quoted by Thomas Reese, S.J. in *National Catholic Reporter* (Aug. 6, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Spadaro, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> “The Church is not a compassionate NGO” seems to be a favorite phrase used by Pope Francis in a series of addresses, starting at his first Mass as Pope on March 14, 2013, as reported by *BBC News*, “Pope Francis Warns Church Could Become ‘Compassionate NGO’ on 14 March, 2013, by *ZENIT* on June 11, 2013.



# Mercy: The Beating Heart of the Bible

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Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M.

My poor feijoa tree! When I looked at its miserable crop recently – 12 feijoas in total – I decided that once I had picked the fruit I would enlist my brother's help to dig the tree out and throw it away. My patience with it over the past couple of years had run out. Once again it had flowered magnificently at Christmas time and the signs were all there for a bumper harvest but its promises amounted to nothing. What a waste of space in my crowded Newtown backyard! "Enough is enough!" I thought. Fortunately, however, I was reminded of the parable, unique to Luke (13:6-9), about a fig tree soon to be pulled out because it had been unproductive for three years. The gardener complained, suggesting to the owner to be more patient. He wanted another year to look after the tree and fertilise it. Even an unproductive one deserves another chance. So in a couple of weeks' time my feijoa tree will be pruned, re-potted and fertilised – not destroyed.

The point of the parable is, of course, that God's mercy is never exhausted. There's always another chance. As Pope Francis said announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy, "No one can be excluded from the mercy of God." And in his wonderful document of proclamation, *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Pope begins by saying that Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy.<sup>1</sup> So mercy is basically a description of God's nature, God's central attribute. God cannot be other than merciful. Everything in Jesus' life speaks of this mercy. All his actions and words witness to, reflect what mercy is.<sup>2</sup> And Jesus says to us, "Be merciful as God is merciful." So we have to imitate God's mercy. As Ronald Witherup explains so simply, "Like father, like son, like disciple."<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis says that the mercy of God is the beating heart of the Gospel (MV §12). I would like to suggest that it's the beating heart of the entire Bible.

Our hearts too must echo that beating, that pulsing of mercy. We have to develop a rhythm of mercy – a continuous habit that is as natural and as regular as our own heartbeat. We're usually unaware of our heartbeat but if we take our pulse we can feel it. If it should stop then we could be in big trouble.

Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831, lived such a rhythm of mercy. She said:

"Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master, who has said, 'Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me.'"

So Jesus must be the beginning, middle and end of all our endeavours as we strive to do mercy for "the lost, the last and the least" here in Wellington — Bishop Justin Duckworth's phrase. Pope Francis in his Lenten Message, "The Works of Mercy on the Road of the Jubilee," urges us to practise what the Church's tradition calls the spiritual and corporal

works of mercy. These works are not just pious feelings. They are concrete actions – we'll get messy, we'll get our hands dirty, but these works will keep our heart beating with mercy. So mercy is a verb, an action, mercy is something we do.

In this presentation I will first outline a key understanding of mercy from the First Testament; second look at the biblical underpinnings of the works of mercy; and third give a New Testament perspective on mercy.

## First Testament

When we turn to the First Testament, God's mercy, not God's wrath, is writ large throughout. Basically there are four Hebrew words which in

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**So mercy is basically a description of God's nature, God's central attribute. God cannot be other than merciful. Everything in Jesus' life speaks of this mercy.**

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English, translate as mercy (with various nuances): *rahamîm*, *hesed*, *hanan*, and *hus*. This presentation will refer mainly to the first term. The root word *rh* (to show mercy) refers to the tender love of parents towards children and of God toward humans. Generally, the noun *rahamîm* (mercy, compassion, love) denotes a quality of God. It is the completely gratuitous, unconditional, merciful love that we cannot explain rationally. The word *rehem* (womb), comes from *rh*. Thus, the adjective *rahûm* (compassionate, merciful) describes womb love, the kind of attachment a woman has for a child.

It is only ever used of God. So the prophet Isaiah says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa 49:15).

Throughout the First Testament we see the God who creates, saves and judges but underlying all God's activity is a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The first two adjectives – merciful and gracious – never describe people, but they describe God in a great variety of settings. For example, the entire formula is found in individual petitions for deliverance and as motivation for national and divine repentance:

"Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing (Joel 2:13).

Scripture scholars constantly remind us, that all biblical language about God is metaphorical. The description of God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger rich in steadfast love and faithfulness" is considered to be a controlling metaphor since this fundamental character informs all of God's actions throughout the First Testament. We first find this moving proclamation in the Book of Exodus(34:6-8):

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,  
"The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
keeping steadfast love for  
the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children and the children's children,  
to the third and the fourth generation."  
And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the  
earth, and worshipped.

This key text is located in a section (Exod 32-34) which describes how the Israelites under Aaron sinned against God by making a golden calf, how God punished their infidelity by sending a plague, how God forgave them, and how Moses acted as mediator in the restoration of the covenant. The

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theophany or experience of God which the passage describes is not so much a description of physical attributes as one of divine characteristics (merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness). And because God is merciful God spreads out the punishment over three or four generations.

Even though Moses doesn't ask for God's name as he did earlier when he had the burning bush experience (Exodus 3:13-15), God gives it anyway! God's name "Lord," is a revelation of God's essential being, God's essence and is clearly identified with God's mercy and graciousness. This identification suggests that mercy is constitutive of the very nature of God. This passage (Exodus 34:6-8) supplies the language Israel will use to speak to God and to speak about God. The rich array of terms – merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving, becomes Israel's most characteristic or typical speech about God. This language will be used repeatedly to describe God both in hymns of praise about God (e.g., Ps 111:4-9):

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established for ever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.

And in prayers of complaint to God (e.g., Ps 86:14-15):

O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Verse 15 appears in different versions in different contexts with different functions throughout the First Testament. It is speech to which Israel turns repeatedly in moments of crisis.

As well as the golden calf episode, two other crises evoke God's mercy and everlasting love: the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721

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BCE characterised in terms of a marriage and divorce metaphor (Hos 2:2-23); and the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE characterised again by divorce imagery (Isa 54). The divine oracle in response to each crisis (Hos 2:19-20; Isa 54:7-10), the speech that resolves each crisis uses the same language as the first oracle: *rh*m (mercy) and *hesed* (everlasting love).

The moving proclamation becomes a creedal recital throughout the First Testament, e.g., Ps 103:8; 145:8; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13. And Jonah,

the reluctant prophet, must have really had the phrase drummed into him. He tries to flee from God precisely because, as he says, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2)! Jonah was devastated to learn that the dreaded Ninevites had experienced this merciful God. To Jonah's way of thinking, surely such a God belonged only to Israel!

Thus, Exodus 36:6-8 is a key text in helping to articulate the very character of God throughout the First Testament. It is deeply entrenched in Israel's memory and used time and time again in different circumstances. This merciful God is the God who over and over again gives people another chance.

### God's Merciful Conduct in Genesis

Although the word "merciful" is not found in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, God's mercy is writ large there too. God makes clothes for the first couple to protect them after their expulsion from the garden. God marks Cain the murderer for his own protection. God makes a new beginning with Noah after the flood. But again the people forget who they are and alienate themselves from one another and from God. Yet the God of mercy never abandons them, instead gives them another new beginning by calling Abraham and Sarah. This merciful God, the God who over and over again gives people another chance is captured beautifully in Deuteronomy:

Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them (4:31).

And in the Book of Wisdom:

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent (11:23).

The prophet Hosea provides a moving portrait of a distraught, almost heart-broken but fiercely determined God:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;



my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath (Hos 11:8-9).

The First Testament for Christians ends with Malachi's promise that God would send the prophet Elijah (4:5). Thus God's mercy has not ended.

### Works of Mercy

It is in the First Testament, too, that we find the biblical underpinnings of the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty and burying the dead. ("Corporal" means "of or belonging to the body".) The corporal works of mercy then refer to acts of mercy that relate to physical needs.

The prophet Zechariah repeats a message found throughout the First Testament:

Thus says the LORD of hosts:  
Render true judgments, show  
kindness and mercy to one another;  
do not oppress the widow, the  
orphan, the alien, or the poor; and  
do not devise evil in your hearts  
against one another (7:9-10).

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The author of Sirach writing to encourage Jews to maintain their traditions in an increasingly Hellenistic world (4:1-5) advises:

My child, do not cheat the poor of their living, and do not keep needy eyes waiting. Do not grieve the hungry, or anger one in need. Do not add to the troubles of the desperate, or delay giving to the needy. Do not reject a suppliant in distress, or turn your face away from the poor. Do not avert your eye from the needy, and give no one reason to curse you.

Some of the traditional works of mercy are found in the prophet Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them? (58: 6-7)

In the above passage then we find three: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked.

We find the other works practised by various people. Perhaps they had developed a mercy beat, a mercy rhythm to their daily lives? In the Book of Genesis we find Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel giving drink to the thirsty Isaac at the well outside the city of Aramnaharim (Gen 24:18).

In the days of the divided monarchy King Ahaziah of Judah visits the sick King Joram of Israel who is recovering from battle wounds (2 Kings 8:29).

And we can find an example of visiting the imprisoned. The second time the prophet Jeremiah is imprisoned he is thrown into a muddy cistern (Jer 38:6). Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian servant, successfully pleads with King Zedekiah of Judah for Jeremiah's release. He visits him and throws some old clothes and rags down into the cistern for Jeremiah to put between his armpits and the ropes and pulls him out of his prison.

The seventh work of mercy, burying the dead is found at the end of First Book of Samuel. The inhabitants of Jabish-Gilead bury Saul and his three sons under a Tamarisk tree after they are defeated by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31:11ff). Burying the dead is also found in the Book of Tobit together with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked.

Finally, we have the beautiful account in Genesis of a weeping Abraham, a stranger in a foreign land trying to buy land from the Ephron, the Hittite, to bury his wife Sarah. Abraham is unwilling to accept the field of Machpelah with a cave and trees as a gift from the people of the land and insists on buying it for 400 shekels of silver (Gen 23).

We find six of these corporal works of mercy in the well-known Parable of the Sheep and Goats towards the end of the Gospel of Matthew. The kings say:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. And the king will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matt 25:35-36, 40).

Pope Francis, like Catherine McAuley before him in 1833, reminds us that these are the criteria upon which we will ultimately be judged.

### **Spiritual Works of Mercy**

The spiritual works of mercy are less well known. We are urged to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. Such practices will foster our mercy rhythm of life.

Again we find their underpinnings in the First Testament. The prophet Isaiah tries to counsel King Ahaz of Judah to remain firm in faith. The king is under intense pressure to join a coalition against the dreaded enemy, Assyria (Isa 7:1-9). The faithful King Jehoshaphat instructs the ignorant in all the cities of Judah (2 Chron 17:7) about the meaning of God's law. Brave Samuel admonishes Saul for failing to obey God (1 Sam 15ff).

The prophet Jeremiah comforts a sorrowful and exhausted Baruch, his friend and secretary, with a message of hope (Jer 45:1ff). Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers and forgives them for trying to kill him (Gen 45:1-5). David bears wrongs patiently when Shimei, son of Gera, repeatedly curses and throws stones at him for trying to take back the throne usurped by his son Absalom (2 Sam 16:5-14). Finally, we see Abraham praying for the living and dead of Sodom (Gen 18:22-33).

By this stage some of you will be saying, "What about the women of the First Testament? Surely they were engaged in works of mercy? Apart from Rebecca you have mentioned only men!"

### **Women as Practitioners of Mercy**

Well! Who can forget those remarkable women who played such a crucial role in Moses' very survival (Exod 2:1-10)? It was the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother, Jochebed, his sister Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh who sheltered, clothed and fed him and admonished those trying to kill him. Without their works of mercy Moses would not have survived.

It was Huldah, the prophet from whom Hilkiyah, the high priest, sought counsel to verify the Book of

the Law found when cleaning up the Temple (2 Kings 22:13-16). It was Deborah, the prophet and judge to whom people would come for advice (Judges 4:4-5). It was Tamar who admonished Judah, her father-in-law for failing in his duty (Gen 38). It was Judith who chided the rulers, for putting conditions on God. She reminded them of God's actions in the past and exhorted them to trust in God. (Judith 8:11-13). These are but a few examples of explicit works of mercy.

Many more implicit ones could be found. For example, I am sure there would have been much "comforting of the sorrowful" by and among Naomi, Ruth and Orpah in the Book of Ruth on the deaths of their husbands and sons.

And if we jump forward at this point to the New Testament we meet the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus asks for a drink (John 4:7) and the feisty Canaanite woman who admonishes Jesus (Matt 15:21-28). It is the faithful women, who early in the morning take the oil and spices they have prepared, to anoint the body of Jesus (Luke 24:1). Finally, we have the story of Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles (9:36-43). The only New Testament woman called a disciple she is remembered for works of mercy – she makes clothes for the widows of Joppa. (Her ministry must have been respected by the whole community not just the widows because at her death two men are sent to get Peter.)

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### **Mercy Toward the Earth**

Shortly, many of you will be engaged in the corporal works of mercy and perhaps some of the spiritual ones too. With the current ecological crisis, we have to ask what does it mean to do these works of mercy in the light of care for our earth? The prophet Hosea writing in the 8th century BCE paints a horrifying picture of environmental degradation resulting from human behaviour which could very well describe our current situation:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore, the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with

the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing (4:1-3).

Perhaps the land, the animals, the birds and the fish are part of “the lost, the last and the least” today, asking for mercy from us. Throughout *Laudato si'* Pope Francis challenges us to broaden our horizons to include the natural world, our common home.

Throughout the First Testament then, mercy is a very rich concept indeed. It is closely associated with womb love, compassion, loving kindness, faithfulness, tenderness, grace, favour, steadfastness, forgiveness, loyalty and pity. While it is a divine attribute or quality, those receiving God's free gift must in turn be merciful to others especially to those most in need, “the lost, the last and the least” in all of God's creation.

### New Testament

For Christians the clearest model of mercy is, of course, Jesus. His actions often speak louder than his words because he expresses mercy in specific, concrete actions. We see him eating with sinners and prostitutes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming all manner of outcasts, teaching his sometimes obtuse disciples, and patiently answering questions. Jesus' mercy is remarkable for its inclusiveness. He heals and comforts all-comers without distinction, Jews and Gentiles. Of the ten lepers who cry out, “Jesus Master have pity on us, the one who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan, an outsider (Luke 17:16). In the Gospel of Matthew, it is a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:22), a social and religious outsider, who calls out to Jesus as Son of David for mercy. Similarly, Jesus tells his listeners that the tax collector, who prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” went home justified (Luke 18:13-14). Thus Jesus personalises his mercy. It's never generalised but clearly demonstrated in his daily encounters with specific individuals and groups across society.

As poet James K. Baxter puts it:

“Truth” - he said, and - “Love” - he said, but his purest word was - “Mercy”<sup>4</sup>

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**Jesus' mercy is remarkable for its inclusiveness. He heals and comforts all-comers without distinction, Jews and Gentiles.**

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Two words in particular are used in the New Testament to denote mercy or compassion: *eleos* (mercy) and forms of the verb *oiktiro* (to be sympathetic). These words describe the compassion of God, as well as the compassion that Christians should have for one another. Thus Jesus says “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Neither *eleos* nor *oiktiro* is ever used with reference to Jesus.

The word that the New Testament writers use to describe the compassion of Jesus is *splanchnon*. Originally it referred to the lower part of the body, especially the womb or the loins. Later it came to refer to profound feelings or emotions. Except for its use in three parables, when it is used as a verb, it is only ever used of Jesus. Thus Jesus is moved with compassion (we might say “gutted”) at the plight of the blind men (Matt 20:34), the leper (Mark 1:41), the boy with the demon (Mark 9:22) and the harassed and helpless crowds (Matt 9:36; 14:14). Out of compassion Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes (Matt 15:32) and raises the widow's son from the dead without her even asking (Luke 7:13).

The verb form of *splanchnon* is used in the well-known parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:27). In the first parable God is characterised as compassionate. The second parable provides a model of how Christians should treat one another while the third parable refers to both God and Christians (18:33). The Samaritan “sees” and is “moved with compassion” in the same way as Jesus “sees” and is “moved with compassion” for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13). It's an overwhelming, gut wrenching, passionate emotion that comes right from the very depths of his being. Compassion (*splanchnon*) then is a divine quality that, when present in human beings such as the Samaritan, the hated enemy enables them to feel deeply the suffering of another and furthermore, to do something about it. It never remains just at the feeling level – there is always action. However, as Veronica Lawson points out, “The present ecological crisis calls us to new ways of being neighbour...”<sup>5</sup>

The word most often used in the New Testament for compassion or mercy is *eleos* indicating emotion

aroused at the undeserved suffering of others. When this word refers to God it signifies steadfast love or covenantal fidelity. For example, Mary in her *Magnificat* praises God whose “mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50, 54). Similarly, Zechariah’s *Benedictus* praises God who “has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant” (Luke 1:72). Later in this canticle God’s mercy is described as “tender” (1:28).

The Church uses these two beautiful hymns in its evening and morning prayer respectively. Ronald Witherup describes them as bookends of mercy consecrating each day in remembrance of God’s merciful actions.<sup>6</sup>

*Eleos* is also used to describe God’s attitude to sinners and implies new life or rebirth (e.g., Eph 2:4; Titus 3:5). The author of the First Letter to Peter puts it this way:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).

Those who were sick begged Jesus for *eleos*. The early Christians included the word in some of their formulas for greeting and blessing (Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2).

In Luke’s three memorable parables of a lost sheep, coin and son (15:1-32), Jesus shows us a God with a “lost and found” department. With reference to these parables, the New Zealand bishops remind us in their recent pastoral letter, “Be Merciful” that indeed nothing in creation is to be excluded from God’s mercy: animal, mineral, or human.<sup>7</sup>

Mercy is not a private matter. We need to tell others about the mercy we have experienced. After freeing the demoniac Jesus entrusts him with a mission: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you. (Mark 5:19). The Lectionary will remind us on Friday that “the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). Jesus’ command “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36) is basic to an understanding of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Likewise,

the beatitude “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matt 5:7) clearly connects the receiving of mercy with being merciful to others. Jesus wants works of mercy rather than piety (Matt 9:13; 12:7). We see this most clearly in the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:21-46).

### Paul’s Letters and the Mercy of God

Paul’s letters provide us with a wonderful portrait of a man utterly and passionately convinced of God’s mercy in his own life. This mercy came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From the moment of his call described like a First Testament’s prophet’s call in Galatians (1:15-16), Paul is alive with God’s mercy. He describes how God’s mercy sustains him and his co-workers in their ministry (2 Cor 4:1), how inclusive God’s mercy is (Rom 10:12), and how we must be ambassadors/agents of God’s mercy (2 Cor 5:18-19). He urges us to do works of mercy with cheerfulness (Rom 12:8). He explains to Timothy that because he has received God’s mercy for his past persecution of Christians he can be an example for others (1 Tim 1:13-16). If he can receive mercy for his former deeds, then anyone can. Paul acknowledges that it is God’s mercy that saves us, not something that we do (Titus 3:5).

Finally, Paul’s understanding of God’s gift of mercy and our responsibility to be merciful is beautifully captured here:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God (2 Cor 1:3-4).

As we have seen then, God’s mercy is writ large through the whole Bible. Indeed, it is the beating heart of the Bible. As the psalmist prays:

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old (Ps 25:6).

May that be our prayer too. And may Catherine McAuley’s summons to “Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him,” excite and inspire you, and call forth

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mercy in you tomorrow, as you respond to the needs of “the lost, the last and the least” as Bishop Justin Duckworth here in Wellington has reminded us.

Let the beat go on! ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. Pope Francis, "Misericordiae Vultus." (2015), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html).

<sup>2</sup>. The reader may consult other sources used for this presentation. See Dianne Bergant, “Compassion in the Bible.” In *Compassionate Ministry*, ed. by Gary Sapp, 9-34. (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1993); Walter Brueggemann, "Crisis-Evoked, Crisis-Resolving Speech." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* no. 24 (Fall, 1994): 95-105. Marie Farrell, “The Mercy of the Lord Endures Forever.” *Compass* 49, no. 4 (2015): 6-11; Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion and the*

*Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us.* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1979) ; Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014) ; Nicholas King, "From the Beginning." *The Tablet* (12 December 2015) : 10-11; Alice Sinnott, "Mercy in the Bible." 2014; Mary Wickham, "Exploring the Big M." (2016),

[http://www.mercyworld.org/\\_uploads/\\_cknw/files/2016/M\\_Wickhamrsm\\_Exploring\\_the\\_Big\\_M\\_A4.pdf](http://www.mercyworld.org/_uploads/_cknw/files/2016/M_Wickhamrsm_Exploring_the_Big_M_A4.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>. Ronald Witherup, "The Year of Mercy 1-5." *The Pastoral Review* 11-12, no. 4-6, (2015-16).

<sup>4</sup>. James K. Baxter, “song.” In *Collected Poems*, edited by John E. Weir, 477. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup>. Veronica Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy: Bible Perspectives and Ecological Challenges* (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing, 2015): 147.

<sup>6</sup>. Witherup, op.cit.

<sup>7</sup>. Catholic Bishops of New Zealand, "Be Merciful" (2016).



*“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:35-36, 40).*

# Nightly News and Gospel Joy<sup>1</sup>

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

Do you watch the news? I do, but only out of a sense of responsibility to keep informed about events in our world that affect God's people and creation; in other words, to be aware of the "signs of the times." But I find so much of it to be depressing. Or, do you cringe when you reflect on the line from our 2011 Chapter Declaration that acknowledges our complicity in the sins and injustices in the world? Again, I do.

That is why I found Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, to be a document that lifted my spirits in a world in which there is so much suffering and confusion and misdirection. In this document Francis assures us that in the darkness of our world today there is "the gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ's cross [that] constantly invites us to rejoice."<sup>2</sup> He continues to say that the gospel invitation excludes no one (§3) and "cannot be taken away from us by anyone or anything" (§84).

## The Present Reality

This papal document puts a positive light and a hope-filled spin on our present-day culture and society. Yet, it also reminds us that we have a "grave responsibility" to scrutinize the signs of the times (§51). The "signs" named by Francis are strikingly similar to the "scandals" named in our Chapter Declaration. Some examples of these scandals highlighted in *EG* are:

## The Increase in the Impoverishment of People

In an "economy of exclusion" (§53ff) and a new idolatry of money, humans are regarded mainly as consumers (§55ff). Financial systems rule rather than serve; money and power are supreme (§57ff). The economy turns "to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded" (§204).

## Increased Violence and Racism in All Its Forms

The inequality that is caused by poverty spawns violence (§59ff) and violence offers only false hopes.

Globalization spawns lack of respect for particular cultures (cf §§ 61-67).

## The Continued Oppression of Women

"Doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence" (§212). Speaking in the first person, Francis writes: "I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking" (§210).

## Unjust Immigrations Laws

"Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers..." (§210).

Francis understands the negative psychological effect the troubles of the day cause. He notes, for example, that the pervasiveness of consumerism leads to desolation and anguish, resentment and anger. The situation today leads to a defeatism which turns us into "sourpusses" (§85). The reason? In the ills of the day "God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt..." (§2).

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This discernment begins with an admission by the church that it is partly responsible for the unjust and oppressive climate in today's society.

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## Causes and Cures

In *EG* Francis acknowledges that sociological analysis of the present cultural and economic situation in today's society is very important. Though necessary to understand the situation, sociological analysis does not unmask the causes. It is not enough. "Evangelical discernment" is needed, "an approach nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit" (§50).

This discernment begins with an admission by the church that it is partly responsible for the unjust and oppressive climate in today's society. Sadly, the church has often distanced itself from "the world" and from the people who have been devastated by the lust for power and money. Furthermore, the church has not only distanced itself, but it has not been entirely uninvolved in these sins.

Beginning with this humble admission, Francis offers his strategy for discernment: the shepherd should smell like his sheep. In *EG* he writes that the church needs to get rid of the fear that “its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (§42). The church needs to “be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures...while at our door people are starving...” (§49). The religious teachings of the church have to be “reflected in the teacher’s way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness” (§42).

Religion of its nature is concerned with events and conditions which affect society. “An authentic faith—which is never comfortable or completely personal—always involves a deep desire to change the world...” (§183). Our faith lies on truth and goodness which liberates us so that we become more sensitive to the needs of others and seek their good (§93).

Christ’s mandate to his followers was to make disciples of all nations. God desires the salvation of all, “gathering up all things in Christ: (Eph. 1.10; 181). All Christians are missionary disciples in virtue of their Baptism (§120). We are called and then sent (§121). We are called and sent as a community which is supportive and knows how to rejoice at every small victory (§24). As a community the Church attends to a world wounded by a widespread individualism that sets one against the other. As a community the Church demonstrates that it is possible to live in such a way that all care for one another, encourage and accompany one another (§99). The Church joyfully proclaims that “the salvation God has wrought...is for everyone” (§113).

The missionary efforts of the Church reach out first of all to those who are poor (§198). This calls for an economic system that is a clear alternate to the prevailing system which is based on profit (§204). The problems of the poor are radically resolved “by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality...” (§202). These actions require decisions and programs, geared to better the distribution of income, job creation, and the like. If the followers of the gospel are to live and work for the poor in this world, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, they must adopt a countercultural economic system. This is

basically “the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole” (§204). Those with more have an obligation “to place their goods more generously at the service of others” (§190) with education, health care, just wages, jobs and food (§191).

### Keeping On

Francis recognizes the difficulties in changing the predominate culture to one that is gospel-based. It is understandable to be depressed over the nightly news and to cringe at our complicity in the enormity of injustices of the present age. We can be disheartened by the sins of the Church. We can get painfully aware of our own frailties. Yet, Francis assures us in the words of St. Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12.9; 85). But if we think we cannot hope and

work for peace and justice, Francis reminds us:

“We need to recall that Jesus Christ has triumphed over sin and death and is now almighty” (§275).

“Human beings have arisen time after time from situations that seemed doomed. Such is the power of the resurrection” (§276).

“Lowering our arms momentarily out of weariness is not the same as lowering them for good” (§277).

“Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire us more than his life, which compels us onwards” (§3).

If we need assurance that our evangelical efforts are effective, Francis tells us that when our recipients break out in joy, we know the gospel has been heard (§21). In return, when we have effectively given the gospel message by word and deed, we find, in turn that the joy given is a joy received (§84).

### Evangelization and the Spiritual Life

And so we are called do something for our world. When the dignity of the human person and the common good are threatened “a prophetic voice must be raised” (§218). This is not a voice preaching

**If the followers of the gospel are to live and work for the poor in this world, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, they must adopt a countercultural economic system.**

from an ambo or holding forth in theological discussion. It is a voice that speaks in loving dialogue with others. Only when we are arm-in-arm do we build a new world. Francis cautions those who believe that prayer is enough. We must get our feet dirty.

Nevertheless, loving contemplation of the Gospel is “the best incentive for sharing the Gospel” (§264). “In this prayer we realize that in Christ we have a treasure of life and love that is the answer to the yearnings, conscious or unconscious, of all persons” (§265). It is in prayer that we are fashioned into “joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in the life of fidelity to the Gospel” (§168). It is the Holy Spirit that gives evangelizers “the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesia*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition” (§259).

### The Joy of Evangelization

Throughout *EG* Francis challenges us to study the present reality of our world, to understand the underlying causes of its pain, to search out cures from gospel teachings, to realize the implementation of the

“new economy” takes time and is often conflictual (§§222-230). However, it is not these difficulties that are the primary focus of his Apostolic Exhortation. It is the truth that, no matter the challenges, evangelization brings joy—to our world and to the evangelizers. In one sentence Francis summarizes the dynamics of evangelization:

Accepting the first proclamation, which invites us to receive God’s love and to love him in return with the very love which is his gift, brings forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others (§178). ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a joint presentation at the March 2014 Detroit Education Day. Karen Donohue, R.S.M., gave a detailed overview of the present day status and causes of the injustice in our society while this author offered theological insights on this current situation given in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, henceforth cited as *EG*.

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 2. From this point on, any reference to *EG* will be designated by the number of the paragraph in parentheses.





# “Mercy” In the Thinking of Walter Kasper and Pope Francis

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.

Today’s society is experiencing a crisis. Consumerism, self-interest and an indifference to the concerns of the poor are visible throughout the world. Concurrently, the church has witnessed the failure of the Vatican Bank and Curia as well as an increase in sexual abuse and clericalism. In the midst of these events, Pope Benedict resigned.

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected to succeed Pope Benedict. Some Catholics saw his election as a sign of hope for the Church. Four days after his election, Pope Francis addressed 150,000 people in St. Peter’s Square. Commenting on the gospel reading of the woman caught in adultery, Pope Francis said that Jesus didn’t condemn her. Instead, he provided the woman with words of love and invited her into a conversation. Pope Francis encouraged his audience to be open to God’s mercy, to forgive others and read Walter Kasper’s book on *Mercy*. Francis also stated Kasper was a superb theologian and his work will make its mark on our generation.<sup>1</sup>

Who is Walter Kasper and why does Francis think his book on *Mercy* will have an impact on us? This article will address these questions by analyzing Kasper’s theology, his vision of the Church, his influence on the thinking of Pope Francis and the impact both men could have on the Church. Prior to summarizing Kasper’s theology, I thought a brief biographic sketch of him might be beneficial.

## Who is Walter Kasper?

Walter Kasper was born in Germany (1933), ordained a priest (1957) and studied for his Ph.D. with Hans Kung. He taught theology at the University of Munster and Catholic University of America. Kasper served as Cardinal in Germany, co-chaired the Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity, and also served as President of the Pontifical Council. Cardinal Kasper affirms a need to review and implement Vatican II documents in a new way and is known for his liberal views on Church matters. He publicly disagreed with Pope Benedict’s formulation

of the idea of universal Church and the denial of Holy Communion to divorced Catholics.

## Kasper’s Theology

Walter Kasper articulates a Trinitarian theology. For him, God is the source of creation and redemption. The Father is the authority and protector. The Son reveals the Father and brings the reign of God to humanity, while the Holy Spirit is the love between the Father and Son. There is equality of persons in the Trinity despite their dependence on each other.<sup>2</sup> Kasper’s theology is rooted in scripture.

Biblical texts reveal a compassionate and merciful God. The Hebrew Scriptures sometimes portray a vengeful and angry God, while the New Testament describes God as gracious and merciful. However, the Hebrew texts also emphasize God as compassionate and merciful.<sup>3</sup> Both descriptions give witness to the same God because mercy and justice are one in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> God’s mercy serves God’s justice.<sup>5</sup>

The language used in scripture and God’s response to human failure reveals God’s essence to be mercy.<sup>6</sup> The most important understanding of God’s mercy is reflected in the Hebrew word *hesed*. It means unmerited, loving kindness and divine grace. *Hesed* refers to God’s free and generous turning toward the human spirit with love.<sup>7</sup> God’s interaction with the human spirit has been operative throughout salvation history. For example, God freed the Israelites from the Egyptians, gave them a guide in the commandments at Sinai, but they were unfaithful. Despite their failings, God showed them mercy and gave them a renewed covenant.<sup>8</sup>

Stories of God’s mercy are reflected in the New Testament. In the Gospels, Jesus brings the good news to the poor through his discourse on the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12), the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) and the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) as well as his personal encounter with suffering people.<sup>9</sup>

God’s mercy mirrors the Trinity and is a common theme in scripture. Jesus’ mercy embraces

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everyone, no matter their ethnicity or social status (Gal 3:28). Through his words and actions, Jesus calls each of us to be compassionate and forgiving of others. Kasper's theological tenets have shaped the themes he emphasizes in his vision for the Church.

### **Kasper's Vision for the Church**

Kasper seeks a Church that is open to reviewing and reclaiming the spirit of Vatican II. He encourages Church leaders to focus more on mercy and less on severity when dealing with people.<sup>10</sup> He advocates for more collegiality within the Church, and respect for other religious beliefs. He considers the possibility of permitting the reception of Holy Communion to remarried Catholics. In 1993, he and two other German bishops permitted the reception of Communion to remarried Catholics in their respective dioceses. This practice was revoked the following year by Cardinal Ratzinger. Walter Kasper hopes Pope Francis will be able to endorse some of these changes.

### **Who is Pope Francis?**

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1936, ordained a Jesuit priest in 1969. He served as Jesuit Provincial (1973-9) and was later elevated to Bishop and Cardinal of Argentina. Buenos Aires was known as the Paris of South America because of its beauty and wealth, even though one third of its residents lived in poverty. Jorge Bergoglio grew up in an urban atmosphere where he confronted both poverty and violence.

During his tenure as Provincial, Father Bergoglio shared people's common knowledge that the government was torturing and murdering community leaders who addressed the social causes of poverty. In the wake of Vatican II, liberation theologians in Latin American began to interpret Jesus' message of freedom to mean believers were expected to work toward changing unjust economic and political structures. Bergoglio disapproved of priests' direct involvement in politics and discouraged his fellow priests from taking up arms against the government. A few disregarded his warning and two of them were

imprisoned. Father Bergoglio pleaded with the Argentinian's dictator for mercy, which may have saved their lives. They were found several months later tortured but alive. Later, Jorge Bergoglio was also involved in hiding resisters on Church property to prevent their arrest.

The Church of Argentina was criticized for having too many leaders who remained silent during the Dirty War (1976-83). In 2000, the bishops of Argentina issued an apology and asked forgiveness from Catholics for not doing more to assist them during the war.<sup>11</sup> However, the government continued to pass legislation that conflicted with Catholic moral teaching. Cardinal Bergoglio publicly denounced legislation on gay marriages as a work of the devil (2010). The bishops delivered a second apology for their inaction during the Dirty War to Catholics in 2012. Later as Pope, Francis changed his position on gays and said he was not in any position to judge another person.<sup>12</sup>

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**His (Pope Francis) vision for the Church is centered on the Gospel, the good news of a merciful God and a belief that the people are the Church.**

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### **Theology of Pope Francis**

Pope Francis articulates a scripture-based Trinitarian theology. He says the core message within scripture is the merciful love of God manifested in Jesus Christ. Like Thomas Aquinas, Pope Francis identifies mercy as the greatest virtue and claims scripture reveals this truth to us.<sup>13</sup>

In the texts of Hebrew Scripture, Francis preaches we are taught to show mercy to the oppressed (e.g. Ps. 147) and to recognize almsgiving as the exercise of mercy (Tob. 12:9). Likewise, the New Testament calls us "to brotherly love, humble and generous service, justice and mercy toward the poor."<sup>14</sup> Jesus translated this biblical vision, and taught us all these things through his words and deeds. Pope Francis' biblical spirituality forms the background for his understanding of the papacy. His vision for the Church is centered on the Gospel, the good news of a merciful God and a belief that the people are the Church.

### **Pope Francis' Vision for the Church**

Francis is known for his humility, adherence to traditional Church teachings and warm personal encounters with others. Like Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis lives a simple lifestyle and governs by

example. He lives in a modest apartment and visits the slums, migrants and prisoners.<sup>15</sup> His leadership style is one of a servant leader who makes changes in consultation with others.<sup>16</sup> According to Walter Kasper, Pope Francis is following in the footsteps of Pope John XXIII and Paul VI who interpreted the Gospel in light of the signs of the time. Francis has begun to resurrect the principle of collegiality among the bishops, reform the Vatican Bank and Curia as well as proposed a new model for evangelization.

### **Vatican Bank and Curia**

The Vatican Bank was plagued with a reputation for corruption and money laundering. Francis replaced the original governing body of the Bank with five new Cardinals. The new board's mandate is to hold the Vatican Bank to the same standards of transparency as every other banking system. Along with the Bank, the Curia was in need of reform. Francis observed a growing spirit of clericalism and ambition among priests, bishops and cardinals. Taking one step to counteract this trend, Francis discontinued the practice of bestowing the honorary title of monsignor on priests. So he could hear from new voices, Francis appointed nine new cardinals to the Curia. The newly formed Curia was to advise him on Church matters including pastoral questions on divorce, remarriage and the reception of the sacraments. These questions were also addressed at the Bishops' Synods of 2014 and 2015.

### **Marriage and Interreligious Dialogue**

Pope Francis believes that some ecclesiastical rules and precepts that were once effective, may now have lost their relevance, and that situation must be addressed. Two areas that became a focus were family life and interreligious dialogue. In 2014, Pope Francis called for a Synod on Family Life. To prepare for the Synod, Francis asked Walter Kasper to brief the bishops on the problems relative to denying the sacraments to remarried Catholics. The bishops were encouraged to freely discuss all aspects of the issue at the Synod, but did not articulate any common change in the practice. This topic was again discussed at the 2015 Synod.

A second area of evangelization for Francis has been interreligious dialogue. He has been especially interested in the return of Eastern Orthodox Christians to the Church.<sup>17</sup> He met with Patriarch Bartholomew in Turkey to discuss unification.

Bartholomew seemed to be open to the invitation, but no definite plans have been announced. Pope Francis' approach to evangelization reflects the inclusiveness of Jesus, reaching out to everyone, even those who seem to lie outside the immediate community of faith.

### **Interconnectedness of Walter Kasper and Pope Francis**

Walter Kasper's writing on *Mercy* has had a profound influence on Pope Francis. In 2014, Pope Francis wrote *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) which reflects much of Kasper's thinking.

Both Pope Francis and Walter Kasper hold similar theologies and visions for the Church.

Both leaders ground their thinking in a Trinitarian theology expressed in scripture. For each of them, mercy is the central theme woven throughout the Hebrew and Christian texts. Both Walter Kasper

and Pope Francis believe Jesus' life and ministry with the poor is the foundational model for ministry in the Church.

Pope Francis and Walter Kasper advocate a return to the spirit of Vatican II. That spirit entails respectful listening to others. They emphasize the need for priests to minister to people in the marketplace, for collegiality among Christians, and for the faithful to serve the poor through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.<sup>18</sup> They also recommend a review of Vatican II documents in light of contemporary needs. These changes would foster a culture of mercy which promotes equality and peace.<sup>19</sup>

Pope Francis and Walter Kasper share some common beliefs, but they differ in their ministerial focus. Walter Kasper is a professional theologian, while Pope Francis is more the pastoral minister. Together, Pope Francis and Walter Kasper represent a new voice of hope for the future Church. ♦

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Francis, homily at the Charism Mass, March 28, 013. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130328\\_messa-crismale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 133, 141, 143, 216, 268-9.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and Key to the Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> God's mercy is at the heart of scripture. See Kasper, *Mercy*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 49.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-70.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew E. Bunson, *Pope Francis* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Company, 2013), 134-136.

<sup>12</sup> James Carroll, "Who Am I to Judge: A Radical Pope's First Year," *New Yorker*, 23 December 2014, 1-20.

<sup>13</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-exhortations/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-exhortations/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-153.

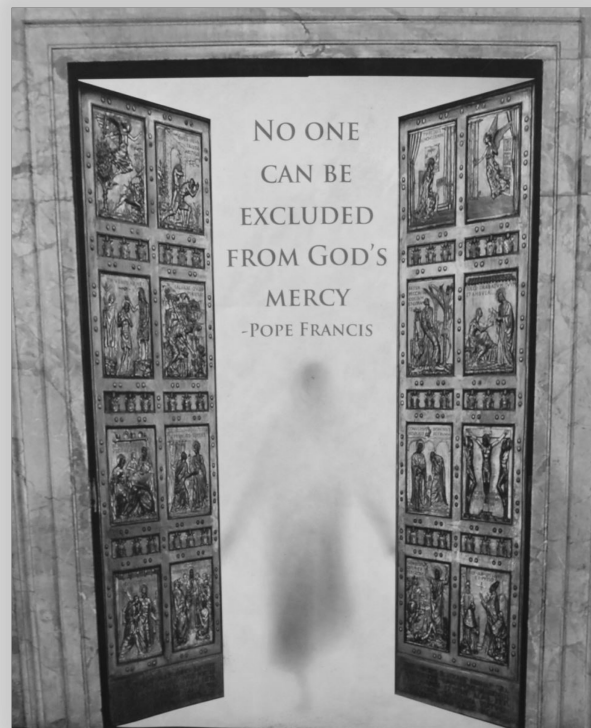
<sup>15</sup> Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America*, 30 September 2014, 15-38.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Smith, "Does Your Organization Show the Francis Effect?" *Health Progress*, (September-October, 2014), 67-69.

<sup>17</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 66-68; Francis, *EG*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Both Kasper and Francis speak about our call to assist the poor. See Kasper, *Mercy*, 142; Francis, *EG*, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Kasper, *Mercy*, 169-171; Francis, *EG*, 179-180.



# Closing of the Year of Consecrated Life, Diocese of Metuchen

*Marie Michelle Donnelly, R.S.M.*

Bishop Bootkoski, reverend clergy, good people of Metuchen, and my sisters and brothers in religious life – especially those celebrating Jubilees. It is a privilege for me to be with you today as we conclude the Year of Consecrated life and reflect on its meaning for us all. When Pope Francis issued his letter of invitation to Religious to “Wake up the World,” he had three aims in mind. Let us see how we accomplished those aims:

First, we were to look to the past with gratitude. Each community was asked to reflect on its history and its gift to the Church, with a special focus on the past fifty years of renewal of religious life – an experience to which our Jubilarians can certainly relate. It was to be a time to retell our community story and to strengthen and celebrate our identity.

Next, Religious were encouraged to live the present with passion. Francis believes that we do this by living the gospel to the full, remembering that Jesus is our first and all-encompassing Love. It is from him that we learn how to love others and to become (as Francis says) “experts in communion.” “Experts in communion” are those who respect each person’s dignity and witness how to live as sisters and brothers in our present polarized society and on our fragile, endangered planet.

The third aim was to embrace the future with hope. Yes, even in the present reality of the diminished numbers and aging of religious in our country. This aim is intended to be a call to deeper trust as we move into a time in religious life that will be very different from the experience of the past, a future that many of us may not even be able to imagine. But what we do know is that God will be with us. So trusting in God’s presence, let us radically refuse to limit the possibilities of what may lie ahead.

At the same time, Pope Francis called young religious to reach out to communities other than their own, to explore how they might work together to

carry out the mission of Jesus in serving the people of God. Who knows where that might lead?

So, how have we done with those three aims? Have we looked at the past with gratitude? Are we living the present with passion? Are we embracing a future full of hope? The good news is that we still have time! After all, we are just beginning the Jubilee Year of Mercy!

In addition to these three aims for the year of consecrated life, Pope Francis also laid out several expectations for men and women religious. Let us briefly consider those. The first is that we radiate the joy and beauty of living the gospel and following Jesus to the full. Francis believes that where there are religious, there should be joy. “A gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom.” It is not by proselytizing that the church grows, but by attraction.

In issuing his mandate to “Wake up the World,”

Pope Francis was calling upon us to be prophets—those who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth. The distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy—the ability to scrutinize the signs of the times and the courage to speak the truth in love, especially to those in power. It is not a popular role to stand in the gap between the gospel and the realities of our time, but it is essential to our vocation.

A third expectation of Francis relates to his perception of religious as “experts in communion.” He asks

these questions: How do we relate to our sisters and brothers within our own communities? How can we enable each member to speak freely, to be accepted with his/her particular gifts and to become fully co-responsible?

We are then called to work together with other religious communities, our lay sisters and brothers in the Church and all people of good will in order to live in the unity God intended. Then in the midst of our ever-changing realities, we are expected to “Go out to all the world.” In that process we are to be agile enough (and I would add, free enough) to repurpose our lives, facilities and ministries in order to meet the

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**The distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy--the ability to scrutinize the signs of the times and the courage to speak the truth in love, especially to those in power.**

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manifold needs of God's people who await us. Francis asks: What is it that God's people are asking of us? To whose voices are we attending? How will we respond? With whom will we stand?

As Francis concluded his call to celebrate this past year, he reminded religious of the good news that we do not have to do all of this alone. He highlighted what he calls "charismatic families." These are people of faith who share the same ideals, spirit and mission as we do. They participate as much as possible with our communities as associates, companions, oblates, and co-workers.

In addition, Francis expressed his gratitude that the Year of Consecrated Life coincided with the Synod on the Family, because he believes family life and consecrated life are both vocations which bring enrichment and blessings for all. They are places where human growth comes through relationships. Families and religious communities are places of evangelization. Each can help the other. I think we can all attest to that truth.

Going beyond our Catholic community, Francis called all of us to an appreciation and support of

other Christian denominations as well as other world religions. This is because journeying together always brings rich dialogue and can open new paths to relationship between peoples and cultures – which these days is proving to be so difficult.

The final message of last year's invitation was addressed to the Pope's "brother bishops." Francis asked that they see religious as "spiritual capital," a treasure-trove which contributes to building up of the whole body of Christ. He asks that bishops support and encourage religious

communities, offer assistance and tender closeness to situations of suffering and weakness, and promote the value of consecrated life within the diocese. It seems to me that the religious of Metuchen have a leader who has answered that call.

So, let us go on from here together in joy. This joy comes from deep gratitude for what religious life has been and done in the past, passion and enthusiasm in our present lives and ministries, and confidence that God will indeed lead us into a future full of hope. ♦

**So, let us go on  
from here  
together in joy.**

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# Scarlett Letters and Yellow Stars

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Margretta Dwyer, R.S.M.

**Family=bonded persons who are there for each other, no matter what**  
**Community=people with a desire to grow, gathered to socialize**

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*Editor's Note:* This article is a professional consideration of sexual offenders which focuses on one aspect of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*, 19 March, 2016–AL), a lengthy survey of the church's concerns about family which followed a Synod on the Family in the year preceding. Issues of family violence and sexual abuse were not high on the theological agenda of the Synod. However, within the vision of what family life ideally may be, the Pope deplored sexual abuse of children, and acknowledged that it is not limited to clergy sexual misconduct. "The sexual abuse of children is all the more scandalous when it occurs in where they ought to be safest, particularly in families, schools, communities and Christian institutions" (AL §45).

Professor Dwyer, a psychologist and researcher in the area of sexual abuse, takes up the attitude of society toward the sexual offender who is a member of a family. She discusses the offender as a person who suffers bias, contempt and shunning because of common social myths about sexuality. The offender indeed has sexual problems, but the resolution of sexual offenses needs to involve the entire nuclear family as well as the family of faith. For a start, ameliorating a hostile, contemptuous attitude toward sexual offenders would be served by the Pope's counsel in *Amoris Laetitia*: "In every situation, when dealing with those who have difficulty in living God's law to the full, the invitation to pursue the *via caritatis* must be clearly heard. Fraternal charity is the first law of Christians" (AL § 306). Is a person convicted of even one sexual offense to be forever labeled, shamed and shunned? "No one can be condemned forever because that is not the logic of the gospel" (AL § 297).

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The "scarlet letter" refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in which Hester Prynne, who has borne an illegitimate daughter, is forced to embroider the letter "A" on her bodice, so that her clothing publicizes the reason she is shunned by her Puritan neighbors. "A" stands for "adulteress."

The "yellow star" refers to the way Jews in Europe during World War II, were required to sew onto their clothes a yellow star, a badge which labeled them as individuals who deserved contempt and punishment because they were members of a despised racial and religious group.

Problematic sexuality touches every family. It is seldom spoken about except in whispers to special friends, never much outside the family and certainly not in church—except when the offender is a priest and parishioners are angry at discovering what the diocesan bishop did or didn't do to deal with complaints about him. People usually speak about a sexual offender with punitive nouns and punishing adjectives. Labeling is hurled out, seeking vengeance, justified by a sense of righteousness—but met, on the other side of this rhetoric, by the desperate and now homeless person. What is this scenario? How does this problem happen? How affected is the family of the offender? Why do we

treat persons with sexual problems as if they had a scarlet letter on their forehead or a yellow star on their jacket?

We make rules for a problematic set of people as individuals. We seem to think that isolating an offender will solve the problem and that, with enough laws about maintaining physical distance, the offender will not disturb our family in any way. Research shows repeatedly that these rules are not effective, but rather have a sorry effect on all families involved. Sexual offenders are the new lepers of our age, marked as no others. We limit where they can live. This population usually ends up homeless or forced to live in motels or under bridges.

I am talking about persons with sexual problems, or as society names them—sexual offenders. Casting the net widely engulfs even adolescents and adult one-time offenders. Of the 840,000 registered offenders with possible sexual problems, only between 13-14% re-offend.<sup>1</sup> Many have offended only one time.<sup>2</sup> One offense does not a sex offender make.

### Problems in the Present Legal System of Classification

To give the diagnosis of sex offender based on one offense is false (see DSM-5).<sup>3</sup>

Casting such a large net makes it impossible for families to be aware of the offender who is truly dangerous to society. The problem with the label “sexual offender” is that all violators, guilty of one offense or guilty of many, are captured in the one net. No distinctions are made.

In some states, a teen having sex with someone two years younger than himself or herself is reported and charged with a sex offense. Sex-texting during one’s teen-age years is not contextualized within a stage of life when sexual experimentation is seen as psychologically normal; instead, sex-texting is classified as a sex offense. A criminal charge is placed on the adolescent’s record, and he or she must now register and report as a sexual offender. With this overly-broad classification, many families get unjustly implicated and have to deal with the “sexual offense” of their minor child.

Rules on housing present a serious problem for families. Rules that are useless leave people homeless by marking many territories where they cannot live. The reality is that 93% or more of offenses are committed by a person known to the victim – a family member, a clergy person, a teacher, a coach—not a stranger. Research demonstrates that residence restrictions do not reduce sex offense recidivism.<sup>4</sup>

Passports are now marked identifying the carrier as a sex offender, making a problem for flying or for keeping a job that requires international travel. But consider this possible scenario: A family is traveling abroad for vacation and is lined up at the airport counter to check in. A teenager can be singled out, and can be prevented, because of his or her passport

marking as a “sexual offender,” from visiting relatives in other countries—a complete disruption of travel plans, and public humiliation of the entire family.

However, this is not the first time a government has marked passports. Also claiming safety as an issue, Nazi Germany marked the passports of all Jews with a “J.” The U.S. government confined citizens of Japanese ethnicity in re-location camps during WWII, preventing them from travel, because they were seen as a possible threat after the U.S. declared war against Japan.

### Difficult Situations

Punishment does not ensure safety. Left without support systems, persons with sexual problems are apt to re-offend. The present laws are not particularly helpful. In addition, these laws for the most part have long-term deleterious effects on all offenders and families. For example, the whole family may lose housing or the father may not find work, making sometimes for life-long

punishment. Community support increases safety. Putting offenders’ pictures on flyers does not help them to find a community support system.

Media airings about sexual offenders can lead to moral panic, which then impels the public to a rush for swift judgment and punishment. More thought should be given to treatment of the offender and support for family members. What myths bring about tragic social effects, such as burning offenders’ houses, putting derogatory signs in their yards, bullying their children at school, or egging their neighbors to ostracize them?

### Current Myths Affecting Families’ Responses

In a previous article, I summed up current myths which contribute to families and society condemning a certain segment of the population.<sup>5</sup> These false assumptions can be summed up in this list:

1. Myth: *All sexual offenders are dangerous.*

False. Small percentages of persons with sexual problems are dangerous and violent. They are the ones who make the headlines in the papers, causing moral panic. Most sexual offenders are not dangerous, but rather very passive and non-assertive.

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More thought  
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family members.

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They do not prey or stalk, but groom persons they already know. They entice by kindness.

2. Myth: *Treatment does not help.*

False. Many are helped by treatment, leaving the recidivism rate at around 13-14% nationally and worldwide. Some who are seriously mentally ill may not be helped.

3. *Ostracizing offenders from family, friends, and community keeps us safe.*

False. One of the main reasons for re-offending is having nowhere to go and no one to turn to. Isolation can and does lead to re-offending. An offender very much needs support systems.

4. Myth: *As one gets older, (s)he is more apt to re-offend.*

False. With an increase in age, the desire to offend lessens. The longer offenders are able to stay in a supportive community, the chances for re-offending decrease.<sup>6</sup>

5. Myth: *Only men are persons with sexual problems.*

False. Many women offend with teen-age boys although there is less offending by women than there is by men.

6. Myth: *Sexual offenders are involved in sex trafficking.*

False. No data has showed a connection. Sex trafficking is a separate issue.

7. Myth: *Those who use pornography will be sexual offenders.*

False. Research shows very little to no connection. Using pornography may have helped some refrain from acting out.

8. Myth: *All persons with sexual problems were sexually abused as children.*

False. Many were and many were not. If a child is abused, that does not mean he or she will be an offender as an adult.

9. Myth: *Because my child was caught masturbating it means he or she has been abused and was taught this behavior by a sexual offender.*

False. Masturbation is a normal process of growing up. No one taught them; masturbation is usually discovered on one's own.

## **Families, Safety, and Need for Education**

The number one question is how to protect family members in a world that markets sex on TV so regularly. Children learn very young that sexy women sell cars and that Viagra is handy when a man needs it. Movies frequently provide explicit portrayals of sexual relations— what TV has left out— leaving society with sexually-aware children and sex-pre-occupied teens listening to teen-sung music lyrics and music videos with explicit sexual references.

Nonetheless, TV, movies, and music videos can provide a good opening to talk about sexuality within a family. Surprisingly children know a great deal, yet have many facts mixed up in their heads. If older family members talk openly about sexuality, there is less chance a child or teen can be groomed or predated by an adult. A person with sexual problems living in a neighborhood is mostly a danger only when parents don't talk openly about sexuality, including educating their children to take proper precautions with adults.

Parents need to be alert to the signs of early stages of sexual predation—grooming or seduction of

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**If parents talk to their  
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their child. These behaviors are quite similar to behaviors seen in normal adult-child relationships. Usually grooming includes gift-giving, taking the child places alone, and/or treating the child as special. Good judgment is required on the part of parents to distinguish grooming from normal, healthy adult-child relationships, which should be encouraged. A good practice is giving a child a code word he or she will recognize when parents send another adult to pick up a child from school, church, camp or a game. If parents talk to their children about appropriate social situations for them when

they are with adults, this encourages the child to have ongoing and open conversation with them. In such a family climate, children are more likely to remain safe because they have been educated by sensible, aware parents whom they trust.

Parents' talking about sexuality does not come easily, as most adults grew up in a time when sexuality was considered a private arena, not a topic for discussion in public. However, media has exploded these boundaries, and sexual conduct is now as public a topic as billboard advertisements on a highway.

### Reflection

How is a spiritually-centered family to react to all of this? Aware that much harm is done to victims, we must ask ourselves, "Who is welcome at the table?" Our faith says that all are welcome at the table. Before making a decision about who is welcome, we must ask ourselves a few bothersome questions. Is the sexual offender someone who is a stranger?

"If it is good for me to have you locked up, let's lock you up. Until I find out one day that it's my own son."<sup>7</sup>

What do I believe inclusion will do if all are welcome at the table? Will it actually make us safer in the end? When I say "all are welcome at the table," what do I really mean? What beliefs am I passing on to my children? Do I believe that persons with sexual problems have an illness? Do I believe that sexual offenders of family members should be isolated and ostracized, or included and supported?

Pope Francis acknowledges the challenges faced by families in *The Joy of Love*: "When we have been offended or let down, forgiveness is possible and desirable, but no one can say that it is easy. The truth is that family communion can only be preserved and perfected through a great spirit of sacrifice. It requires, in fact, a ready and generous openness of each and all to understanding, to forbearance, to pardon, to reconciliation." (AL §106) ♦

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jon Brandt, "Sex Offender" in *Journal of Research and Treatment Blog* (March 7, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> R. K. Hanson, D. Thornton, L.M. Helmus, and K.M. Babechishin, "What Sexual Recidivism Rates Are Associated with Static 99R and Static 2002R Scores?" *Sexual Abuse Journal* (2015): 1-35.
- <sup>3</sup> Diagnostic Criteria's *Diagnosis and Statistical Manual (DSM -5)* 2013 edition.
- <sup>4</sup> G. Duwe, W. Donnay, and R. Tewksbury, "Does Residential Proximity Matter? A Geographic Analysis of Sex Offense Recidivism," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol. 35 (2008): 484-504.
- <sup>5</sup> Margretta Dwyer, *Understand Offending: Unveiling Myths, Seeking Sexual Health* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Press, 2007):107.
- <sup>6</sup> M. Miner, Court document Case 4:1600654-PJH Document filed Feb. 19, 2016.
- <sup>7</sup> G. Rosenblum, "Interview with Margretta Dwyer," *Star Tribune, Section B*, Minneapolis, Minnesota (March 14, 2013).

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When I say  
 "all are welcome at the table,"  
 what do I really mean?

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# It Commenced with Two: 25 Years After Founding Mercy Family Center

*Sarah Ducey, R.S.M., Ph.D. and Mary M. Malik, Ph.D.*

“It commenced with two.”<sup>1</sup>

Graduate school! What might God do with two young women immersed in the study of developmental psychology, astonished by the immensity of the course readings, the complexity of the statistics, and the depth of the research that would be required to complete this doctoral program? At the time we could not have come close to an answer, but there was one significant factor in what would soon become a research partnership. One of the women was a Sister of Mercy, and the other would learn what it was to become a co-minister. Psychology would meet theology and the gospel message—to care for those who seem to be forgotten.

The year was 1989. A grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health was obtained for a three-year research project by our respected and well-published professor. Collecting the data would require lengthy travel to rural parishes in Southern Louisiana to interview mothers and daughters who suffered poverty. The primary focus of the study was “the cultural and individual psychological meanings that teenage pregnancy has for people in this population” and “the historical, family and interpersonal contexts in which meanings have developed and are perpetuated over generations.”<sup>2</sup> Our dissertation research would contribute to this project in coding and interpreting mother-daughter interviews as well as family environment data as it related to their attitudes and beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

## Despair and Need That We Didn’t Expect

The interviews we were to give would not be brief, but designed to probe deep levels of maternal child attachment based on the work of Ainsworth.<sup>4</sup> We did not expect what emerged. Amidst our questions, that would later be coded in a systematic and quantitative method, we heard stories of abuse

and neglect that recurred again and again. On the breaks between interviews we would debrief and discuss the levels of despair and need that we did not expect. The research participants sobbed; they physically embraced us. Some told us that no one had ever asked them to tell their story. We had expected barriers between ourselves—white, middle class graduate students—and those we were coming to interview who were the descendants of slaves from

Louisiana plantations. But those barriers seemed to melt quickly, perhaps because the women could sense that we really cared about their stories.

These stories remained in our hearts and we discussed them at length in our long drives back to the city. What could we possibly do to help women and children in poverty who had no one to look out for them? What could we possibly do in our own community back in New Orleans? As we traveled and discussed our experiences, the seed of

the idea emerged of mining our soon-to-be Ph.D.’s to develop a clinic to serve the behavioral health needs of the children and families of New Orleans.

It was well known at that time that in the city of New Orleans, there was a great disparity in the quality of service provided in the public school system as well as the mental health system. If families had insurance for mental health treatment and the means to pay school tuition, they could receive a high level of service. Not so in the public schools, where the dropout rate for inner city teens approximated 60%. Psycho-educational evaluation and treatment for children with conditions such as ADHD, learning disabilities, behavior disorders or autism—were virtually unavailable, due to meager funding and long waiting lists.

## Clarifying Our Vision and the Growth of Mercy Family Center

As we discussed our emerging idea, we explicitly stated that our direction was not just to serve those who were economically poor and had no

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The primary focus of the study was “the cultural and individual psychological meanings that teenage pregnancy has for people in this population”...

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typical means of seeking mental health and remedial educational services. Our intent was to provide the same quality of care for children and families, whether they were from economically prosperous families or families who were economically poor. This was a type of inclusion in which all families were to be treated with equal dignity and respect, together as one community. We conceptualized our project in a grant format with the generous help of administrators of the former Mercy Hospital in New Orleans, who later gave us the support to start our project.

Mercy Family Center has thrived since our simple beginning with several staff and one computer in a patient's room of the former Mercy Hospital. Today we have three clinics in the greater New Orleans area, each staffed with psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, administrators and office support staff. We have been blessed to be considered an outreach ministry of the Sisters of Mercy Health Ministry of St. Louis, Missouri, who financially support our mission.

The number of referrals to Mercy Family Center are staggering as we are one of the very few mental health agencies in New Orleans to accept Medicaid as insurance (currently 45% of our youth) or offer fee assistance, or free service. In the early days in Dublin, the number of children in Catherine's care at the House of Mercy grew rapidly. Here in New Orleans the legacy continues. Currently, we serve approximately 4000 children, along with families and adults-- with 13,500 encounters annually.

A couple of years into this ministry, there was a moment when we stood just inside the doorway to the waiting room. What we saw was a young child from the inner city building a Lego tower, together with another child who was the son of a physician. We stood there in awe, and realized that it had all come to pass by God's will, not ours, the same quality of service, the poor and the rich in one community. It had commenced with two, and we were the grateful ones, to have had the privilege of being co-ministers, following in the footsteps of Mother McAuley and her friend, Mary Ann Doyle.

### **Mercy Learning Center and Fleur-de-Lis**

Since that time we have grown and established Mercy Learning Center to facilitate the educational success of children with learning differences. We offer academic tutoring to help these students acquire the necessary oral and written communication and mathematics skills needed for success in school and in life. We have also received grant funding to assist those without adequate financial resources. Mercy Learning Center served over 80 students and delivered 1,500 educational hours in the past year.

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a substantial grant was obtained to create Project Fleur-de-lis, an internationally recognized school-based mental health program that provides individual and group interventions for school age children and their families who have been impacted by traumatic events – violence, man-made and natural disasters, and grief in their community. Project Fleur-de-lis continues to partner with over 60 schools, encompassing over 29,500 eligible students. Project Fleur-de-lis services impact the lives of more than 5000 children and families annually.

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**What we began is  
in the hands of  
many committed,  
compassionate  
co-ministers who  
share our vision.**

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### **Mercy—An Endless Work**

Our story is like many others. What we began is in the hands of many committed, compassionate co-ministers who share our vision. In the words of St. Paul, "Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power of the work within us, to him be the glory..." (Ephesians 3:20-21). We did not know as idealistic graduate students that our ideas were overly optimistic and naïve. Obstacles did not even cross our minds. By the grace of God, and the generosity of the Sisters of Mercy, something extraordinary happened. In this age of seeming social and political despair, it seems all the more remarkable.

The needs of our time have not changed since the founding of Mercy Family Center. The Kids Count Data Center (2015) ranks Louisiana 48<sup>th</sup> in the United States on child well-being.<sup>5</sup>

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our beginning. It is fitting that Pope Francis has designated this year as the Jubilee Year of Mercy. As

Pope Francis has said, “Yes, I believe that this is a time for mercy. The Church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded. She does not wait for the wounded to knock on her doors, she looks for them on the streets, she gathers them in, she embraces them, she takes care of them, she makes them feel loved.”<sup>6</sup>

The work is endless for those privileged to share in it. ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>M. Angela Bolster, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841*. (Cork, Ireland: The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy Diocese of Cork and Ross, 1989): 48.

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Dean, in Collaboration with S.J. Ducey, and M.M. Malik, *Teenage Pregnancy, the Interaction of Psyche and Culture*. Hillsdale: Analytic Press, 1997), p ix.

<sup>3</sup> C. George, N. Kaplan, and M. Main, *The Adult Attachment Interview*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California at Berkeley, California (1985).

<sup>4</sup> M.D.S. Ainsworth, M.C. Blehar, E. Waters, and S. Wall, *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1978).

<sup>5</sup> *Kids Count Data Book* (2015) Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/>. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2016).

## PRAYER

This morning at prayer

a voice spoke to me from behind the altar  
beyond the chapel windows filled with trees  
“Your task is to count the number of leaves  
on all the trees covering the earth”

I smiled

aware of the impossibility of “my task”  
Obviously there are not sufficient numbers  
nor do I have anywhere near sufficient time

for such an impossible task

Later, I realized

that You were speaking to my heart not my head  
in answer to my daily prayer  
to fill me with Your love others

—Patricia Ryan, R.S.M.



# “Getting Up Again” for the Revolution of Tenderness and Love

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.

As we begin this morning I invite you to listen to the powerful promise God offers to each of us, through the words of the prophet Isaiah: <sup>1</sup>

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger  
who announces peace,  
who brings good news  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion  
Your God reigns. (Isaiah 52.7)

Now come with me to Nazareth, to hear Jesus declare in the synagogue that *his* are the anointed feet of that Isaian messenger:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because  
he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed  
go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.  
(Luke 4.18-19)

Catherine McAuley was, of course, not Jesus Christ. Her feet upon the Irish streets were not his earthly feet. She knew she was not worthy even “to untie the thong of his sandal” (John 1.27). And yet by the gift and grace of God’s Spirit, Catherine’s feet *were* Christ’s feet, the feet of his messenger, the feet of one he sent, feet by which he chose to walk the streets and slums of her time and place. In her heart Catherine ardently accepted this call to travel as Jesus’ disciple, to resemble him on the path he trod, and with him to “bring good news to the poor.”

Those who knew Catherine well write of her constant “desire to resemble our Blessed Lord, which was her daily resolution, and the lesson she constantly repeated. ‘Be always striving,’ she would say, ‘to make yourselves like Him—you should try to resemble Him in some one thing at least, so that any person who sees you, or speaks with you, may be reminded of His Blessed life on earth.’” <sup>2</sup> That “some one thing at least” is surely mercifulness.

So as we begin, I set before you the image of Catherine McAuley’s shoes—her humble, strong shoes, her shoes that symbolize not only her daily vocation, but ours as well. May the sight and

memory of these shoes somehow fix in our minds and hearts all that we will focus on this morning.

## Context for the Journey of Oneness

Perhaps the title of my reflections today should be a question: What is or should be the priority Agenda of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and of the Sisters of the Mid-Atlantic Community at the present time? One agenda item has been clearly announced, the “Journey of Oneness.”

The overriding goal of the “Journey of Oneness” is surely not simply a smaller administrative structure for ourselves, as necessary as such housekeeping may now be or become. There would be a certain irony, would there not, in our choosing our own internal congregational “Oneness” as the sole focus of our current concentration—at the very *kairos* moment when Pope Francis is asking us to “go forth” to the “peripheries,” to the “fringes,” and to include all humanity and all created life in our operative Christian concept of Oneness.

Yes, the “Journey of Oneness” must be on our Agenda, perhaps as item two. But with the help of God, and in the words of Pope Francis, I would like to boldly suggest for your consideration a new item Number One: “The Revolution of Tenderness and Love.”

I have said to myself many times over the last several weeks: “Mary, pick an easier focus for the keynote. You’ll be run out of Parsippany!” But somehow I did not feel, and still do not feel, that Christ wishes to let you or me off the hook—not if our first priority is, as we have always claimed and hoped, the Gospel of Jesus. I am also encouraged by the two questions which the Institute Leadership Team and Leadership Conference regard as the “underlying impetus for our Journey of Oneness”:

Who do we, as Sisters of Mercy, wish to  
be for one another and for our world?  
How might we embody the mercy of God  
for a suffering world in more meaningful  
and impactful ways into the future? <sup>3</sup>

So let us try, as best we can, to look at what Pope Francis means when he says we are

"summoned"— "summoned" is his word—to a "revolution of tenderness and love." In *The Joy of the Gospel*, he says: "The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness. (EG, §88). Later in the same exhortation, he says that we need "to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness . . . that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world." (EG, §288)

First, what does Francis mean by "revolution"? He uses many different synonyms: radical change of outlook, transformation, reformation, regeneration, and conversion. In all of these he means "revolution" in the sense of a deliberately chosen, motivated, and pursued conversion; a resolution to set out anew and to embrace and carry the Gospel as we may never have embraced and carried it before. It is not a casual or piece-meal remodeling of some incidental aspects of our lives and mission, but a thorough transformation of our minds and hearts, a thorough renewal of the commitment of our hands and feet--after the example of Jesus Christ in the gospels, after the historical example of the God of tender mercy and love, and, we may say, after the example of the first Sisters of Mercy.

### God's Tenderness in Writings of Francis

As Francis said in his homily on Divine Mercy Sunday, "We are called to become living writers of the Gospel, heralds of the Good News. We do this by practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.... By these simple yet powerful gestures...we can accompany the needy, bringing God's tenderness and consolation."

For Francis, and he hopes for us, this is a *kairos* moment. If the year of reflection on consecrated life taught us anything, it taught us to "be watchful," to notice that today is a new time: a time to "question what it is that God and people of today are asking of us." As Francis counsels, "No one can feel excused from . . . responding to the new demands constantly being made on us, to the cry of the poor."<sup>4</sup> If this moment is an "authentic *kairos*" for the Sisters of Mercy, it is a time for setting out anew, a time for re-

igniting our original consecration, a time for renewing the vitality of our original founding and the wholeheartedness of our original compassion and tenderness.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis uses the word "tender" or "tenderness" at least eleven (11) times. In *Laudato Si'* he uses it nine (9) times. In *Misericordiae Vultus*, announcing this Jubilee Year of Mercy, he uses it six (6) times. Clearly, tenderness is a central and necessary attitude in his understanding of the present vocation and mission of the church.

For Francis, the word "tenderness" embraces all that he and we mean by the words "mercifulness," "compassion," "loving kindness," "consolation," "sympathy," "solicitude," and "empathy." In *Laudato Si'*, Francis defines "great tenderness" as "a mark . . . of those who are . . . fully aware of reality and ready to love and serve in humility" (§242). For him, as indeed for Catherine McAuley before him, the human expression of God's

tenderhearted mercifulness is the whole reason-for-being of the church and of the Sisters "of Mercy."

### Catherine's Use of "Tenderness"

In the Rule Catherine composed for us as Sisters of Mercy she too uses "tender" or its derivatives at least ten (10) times. She speaks of our animating our "zeal and fervor by the example of . . . Jesus Christ who testified on all occasions a tender love for the poor and declared that He would consider as done to Himself whatever should be done unto them."<sup>5</sup> She speaks of Jesus' "great tenderness for the Sick"<sup>6</sup> and of our need for "great tenderness" toward the dying.<sup>7</sup> She asks that we have "tender concern and regard" for one another<sup>8</sup> and a "tender devotion" to the heart of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

She says that we "should frequently revolve in mind how tenderly[Jesus]cherished Holy Poverty"<sup>10</sup>; she counsels superiors to "tenderly comfort and support the dejected if there be any such"<sup>11</sup>; and she advises the director of novices to "endeavor to . . . fill their hearts with the tenderest pity and charity for the Poor."<sup>12</sup> Finally, she urges that sick sisters be consoled and treated with "the tenderest charity."<sup>13</sup>

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Moreover, in a compiled manuscript of Catherine's oral instructions to the first Sisters of Mercy—a manuscript on which I am currently working—Catherine uses the word "tender" or "tenderness" at least six (6) times. Speaking of the tender charity of Jesus Christ, she says: "No less did this charity manifest itself by works: comforting the afflicted, healing the sick, showing the greatest tenderness for them, and evincing as much anxiety for their relief as if His own happiness depended on theirs." <sup>14</sup>

It is not that we Sisters of Mercy have never been or are not now tender-hearted and merciful. But conversion and transformation into true followers of Jesus Christ is not a once-and-for-all event—at our baptism or later at our final profession of vows. I am not automatically a tender Sister "of Mercy" because I have a silver ring on my finger, a Mercy cross around my neck, or the letters "RSM" after my name.

Perhaps the sheer magnitude, variety, and current visibility of worldwide human suffering can harden our hearts and deaden us to inaction. We can even envy Catherine McAuley because she did not have television or the internet, or even a minimal grasp of climate science. She did not have to see children's bodies washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean. Yes, unprotected women and barefoot girls daily rang the doorbell at Baggot Street, but she did not have to hear hundreds of thousands of desperate people in Central America and the Middle East pleading for asylum and refuge from their fear. Yes, she daily carried food and turf to the hovels of dozens of poor people in Dublin, but she did not have to witness massive hunger, food waste, water scarcity, and destruction of agricultural land on a worldwide scale. Catherine connected the rich with the poor, as Joanna Regan beautifully reminded us, but she did not have to try to move the leaders and legislators of the whole Northern Hemisphere to realize and pay our collective debt to the poor of the Southern Hemisphere.

Yet all this is, in fact, the wide prophetic Revolution of Tenderness to which we as Sisters "of

Mercy" are now called to give our lives—not once in a while, not here and there, not by occasional words or acts of mercy, but always.

So let us pause and take a long, serious look at our understanding of our Mercy "mission" in this world. As Pope Francis has said:

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a *part* of my life or a *badge* I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something that I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. *I am a mission* on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. (EG, §273)

### Mission of Sisters of Mercy

As Sisters of Mercy we too *are* a "mission on this earth," not part-time employees of the Gospel. When Catherine McAuley said that the spiritual and corporal works of mercy "constitute the business of our lives," she was talking about our very being and character. <sup>15</sup> As she said, "How kind and charitable and merciful ought not 'Sisters of Mercy' to *be*" (CMcATM, 181). She saw us as women who embody God's Mercy, who enflesh it, women who "go forth," women who are "sent" — to the "peripheries," to the "outskirts," as Pope Francis says.

Our renewed "going forth" will take great creativity and self-donation. It will take imagination and new self-metaphors. Just think of what it would do for us, personally and communally, if we woke up each day thinking of ourselves as mobile field hospitals headed out to where the wounds are the worst.

I know your Critical Concerns Committee has specific proposals for you. I have some too. However, before I share them, I want to remind you of the power of new beginnings, of the new strength and energy that are generated simply by starting worthwhile new projects. Catherine herself knew and felt the reinvigoration attached to new efforts, new works, new foundations, especially if we don't

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Yes, unprotected  
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girls daily rang the  
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of thousands of  
desperate people in  
Central America and  
the Middle East  
pleading for asylum and  
refuge from their fear.

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worry them to death by endless planning and preparation!

As she said in early 1841:

"[There's] nothing like foundations for rousing us all." <sup>16</sup>

"Nothing like foundations for bringing forth." <sup>17</sup>

"Hurra for foundations, makes the old young and the young merry." <sup>18</sup>

"Here am I again . . . as usual, weary of foundation work—and ready for more." <sup>19</sup>

So if you want to rouse yourselves for the Revolution of Tenderness and Love; if you want to feel again the energy of "going forth"; if you really want to feel "young" again, and help the young be "merry"; if you are truly "ready for more"—here are three specific proposals and one corollary to consider:

### Spiritual Reading

1. My first suggestion is easy, but necessary. It will animate the inner conversion we will need if we really wish to participate in the Revolution of Tenderness and Love to which we are called—the only revolution that will ultimately, with God's help, overcome the indifference, violence, and selfishness that currently afflict this world.

We, all of us, will need to read, from cover to cover, and meditate on, Pope Francis' *Joy of the Gospel* and his *Laudato Si'*. And we probably ought to also read Walter Kasper's *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* and his smaller volume, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*. We will read these books because we want to renew and update our understanding of God and of Jesus Christ, and our understanding of the Gospel and the Reign of God that is now in process and will one day culminate in the embrace of all humanity and all created life in God's merciful love.

Then we will pray differently—not simply to obey our *Constitutions* or to comfort ourselves—but

as eager disciples of Jesus Christ who truly want to follow him in his merciful oneness with all God's suffering people and who beg his guidance, strength, and gift of tenderness.

### Creation of Mercy Community Almoners

2. Let me explain. In the Vatican there is a priest, actually an archbishop, called the Papal Almoner. This role has existed since the Middle Ages, but when he appointed Konrad Krajewski to the post in August 2013, Pope Francis completely re-designed the role. He told Krajewski he wouldn't need a desk because it wasn't a "desk job," and he didn't want him to "stay behind a desk signing parchments." (Someone else could sign the papal blessings for which people make donations to the papal alms.) Francis told Krajewski he wanted him "always among the people," out there on the streets giving away papal alms to those in need.

So Konrad Krajewski has been doing just that—giving warm clothes and blankets to homeless people sleeping near St. Peter's Square, replacing the wallet and cash stolen from an old woman living in northern Italy, paying overdue electricity bills, handing out international phone cards to refugees who survive the shipwrecks off Italy's shores, and bringing three homeless men and their dog into Domus Sanctae

Marthae to have breakfast with the Pope on his birthday. (One fellow said: "It's worthwhile being a vagrant because you get to meet the pope"!)

Krajewski's also the man who installed, and his office manages, showers for the homeless who sleep near St. Peter's, and he has recruited barbers and hairdressers who donate their services on Mondays. Certainly we have some imaginative Krajewskis among the Sisters of Mercy.

So why could we not commission teams of Mercy Almoners to regularly walk the streets of the poorest areas of our major cities—offering Jesus' tenderness through kind words and alms, buying food or coffee for hungry people, handing out hats and mittens in the winter, responding to requests for help elicited by newspaper ads and posters in public places, and consoling those we meet by sitting

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around bus terminals, police stations, or hospital emergency rooms? Yes, I know some of this sounds vulnerable and risky, but smart people can take steps to avoid the worst risks. And yes, we should teach people "how to fish," and we have ministries that do just that; but sometimes a man or woman simply needs an immediate "fish," offered with tender words.

So think about sending out Mercy Almoners. At the Vatican, the papal alms come from the proceeds of the papal blessings (the parchments) and from raffling off unneeded gifts given to Pope Francis: for example, a blue racing bike, a video camera, a new leather briefcase, a silver pen, and an authentic Panama hat.<sup>20</sup>

Surely we have, in our own bedrooms and in the cupboards of our convents, new or nearly-new items that we do not need: gifts received, artworks we have made or acquired, things we once thought we needed, excess stuff that could be sold. I can envision a huge "Mercy Bazaar for Poor People" in Philadelphia or Brooklyn, or Dallas. Remember, raffles and bazaars advertised publicly were teachable moments at Baggot Street, and they are part of our original "charism" as Sisters of Mercy!

### Coordinator of Merciful Volunteers

3. My third proposal is the appointment of a Coordinator of Merciful Volunteers – *not* volunteers from outside the Community who will come into our convents to help *us* out, but Sisters of Mercy, ourselves, who will "go forth" to people and places of suffering where a merciful presence and tenderness are needed.

The Coordinator will search out and keep track of the names and addresses of

- people in nursing homes who are rarely if ever visited;
- lonely people who need tender, encouraging notes and phone calls;
- poor children in our various schools whose families need all sorts of basics;
- prisoners in local jails who need merciful human contact;

- families of murder victims and other local tragedies who need human support;
- and others in nearby scenes of human suffering who need to know that they are not alone.

The Coordinator will then ask individual Sisters of Mercy, who have the time, to visit these people, and she will arrange transportation if necessary.

This Merciful Volunteering could start small, but with imagination and generosity it could and will grow. We may not carry baskets of bread and turf as they did in Dublin in the 1830s, but with God's help I am sure we will carry something helpful, not the least of which will be our tenderness and love.

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*In Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis culminates all his theological, scientific, sociological, economic, and political analysis in a plea for personal conversion of our lifestyle.

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### Communal Conversion of Life-Style

4. My final proposal is a corollary to the other three. It is a really tough one, so now is your chance to escape to the drinking fountains. I am speaking of the personal and communal conversion of our lifestyle.

In *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis culminates all his theological, scientific, sociological, economic, and political analysis in a plea for personal conversion of our lifestyle. He talks about the virtues that must characterize our oneness with all created life on this planet and especially with the poor whose home we have degraded by our indifference, possessiveness, and consumerism. He speaks of reverent awe, humility, and sobriety, all leading to his call for "a change in lifestyle" (§206).

Francis uses the word "lifestyle" or synonyms for it at least two dozen times in *Laudato Si'*, always in the context of urging us to examine our lifestyle. As Sisters of Mercy of the Americas we have been saying ever since 1991 that our commitment "to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world, especially women and children" calls us "to continual conversion in our lifestyles and ministries." We've been saying that for twenty-five years! Maybe it is time for us to put our words into practice.

Are we personally and communally caught up in consumption, consumerism, and wastefulness? Have we succumbed to an exaggerated sense of what's

"necessary" for ourselves personally and for our communities, and to an expanded sense of what's "enough"? Have we fallen victim to the dictates of "fashion" and what's "new"? Do we overuse items that harm the environment? Have we bought into the supposed necessity of every gadget and trinket that can be produced and advertised? Is our appearance and our manner of life out of whack with our declared mission? Pope Francis longs for "a poor church for the poor." Does that not imply "a poor religious congregation for the poor"? Or are we exempt? Do we look and act like people whose material resources are devoted to the poor as much as possible, no matter where we minister or among whom?

Even with our best efforts in this regard, we may still be embarrassed someday to face the yoke-sharing, self-emptying Jesus Christ who "though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8.9).

The four proposals I have put before you may seem "far-out" or too simple, but they are, it seems to me, some of the tangible ways we could more ardently "embody the Mercy of God" and begin to participate more wholeheartedly in the Revolution of Tenderness and Love; they are ways that we could, individually and corporately, respond to the question the Institute Leadership has put before us:

How might we embody the mercy of God in more meaningful and impactful ways into the future?<sup>21</sup>

### **Catherine McAuley's Shoes—On the Road and Living with Less**

Let us look again at Catherine McAuley's shoes. Those shoes went "forth" to where there was great human suffering; they walked the streets and trudged through snow; they took her to the "poor girls" she saw "loitering about the roads" in Kingstown "in a most neglected state"<sup>22</sup>; they carried her to Charleville where, as a Cork newspaper said, the poor "are so numerous, so wretched, and so neglected"; and in the end her shoes were so worn out that Catherine put them "in the kitchen fire" the night before she died.<sup>23</sup>

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**How would  
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So, with our eyes on those dear shoes, let us ask ourselves: How would Catherine "go forth" to the peripheries and participate in the Revolution of Tenderness and Love to which Pope Francis says God "summons" us?

Let us briefly recall the morning of Tuesday, October 13, 1840. Catherine had just come home the night before, after a series of long exhausting journeys—rough canal and coach journeys from Dublin to Tullamore then on to Galway, a distance of more than 100 miles; then a further fifty or more miles from Galway to Limerick; and finally a long journey on rumbling stage coaches back to Dublin, in a hurry; then on to Kingstown to put two sisters bound for Bermondsey on the boat to England. On October 13, finishing a letter to Frances Warde she was too tired to complete the night before, she said:

"Thank God, I am at rest again, and now I think the name of another foundation would make me sick—but they say I would get up again."<sup>24</sup>

Ah yes, the persistent Gospel call to "get up again." The persistent ministerial/missionary call to Sisters of Mercy to "get up again." Above and beneath all our conversations about congregational organization, and other secondary things, we keep hearing Christ's and Catherine's persistent call to join him and her in "getting up again"—for the fundamental "business of our lives." The call to pour out anew the healing nard of God's compassion; and to "found" and refound anew in our present world the perennial actions of tender mercifulness to which the Gospel has been calling us from the very beginning.

So what will "getting up again" look like for the Sisters of Mercy in the Americas in 2016 and beyond? I pray it will mean not slacking off, not clinging to our comfort zones, or our own supposed "needs," not putting unnecessary limits on our personal and communal mercifulness, not always making our own convenience a priority, not shying away from the hard work or the inevitable "crosses" that will come, not skimping on our generosity, not holding back before the crying needs of our brothers and sisters in this world.

Yes, we will grow "weary" from time to time, as Catherine did, and we will sometimes feel that the "name of another foundation" or another needed work of mercy would make us "sick." Then a break or a rest may be what's needed, for, as Catherine realized, we are human beings in mortal bodies, not angels. But the reason for and the measure of our "getting up again" will always be the Gospel call to go to those at the peripheries, and, following the example of the Good Shepherd, to lay down our lives for the sake of the human flock entrusted to us.

That is how Jesus Christ described his task, his mission of self-bestowing tenderness, and what it asked of him:

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . the hired hand . . . leaves the sheep and runs away [because he] does not care for the sheep, but I lay down my life for the sheep. . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (John 10:11-12, 15, 18).

To be a Sister of Mercy is not to be a "hired hand." It is to be wholeheartedly donated to Jesus' mission of enfleshing God's tender mercifulness in this world and willingly laying down our lives for the sake of God's people. Catherine described this laying-down of our lives as "bestowing ourselves most freely and relying with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God."<sup>25</sup> For her there was to be no hesitation—no undue concern about possessions, or convenience, or fatigue; no fidgeting about age, or numbers, or money. No fuss or fretting about our own "raiment" or "furniture" or "food" or beds or "decorations."<sup>26</sup> Think for a moment about the earliest Sisters of Mercy. At Baggot Street in 1832, they begged from door to door for clothes and blankets for the women in the House of Mercy; the postulant dresses of the first novices were "patched up into habits," and they wore the "old white veils" and "old guimpes" of the three who were professed at George's Hill.<sup>27</sup>

--In Tullamore, in the beginning, they slept on the floor in one room, giving the three small bedrooms to the postulants who immediately entered.

--In Carlow, the furniture was so "scanty," they had to carry their chairs with them from room to room. Three years later, their mattresses were "no longer . . . on the floor," but their food was still "plain . . . and sparing in quantity." As they wrote, "more meat would have been quite acceptable at dinner, and more [bread and] butter at breakfast and supper."<sup>28</sup>

--In Galway, the soup kitchen they ran during the Famine daily fed 500-600 women and children. When the famine diseases struck, two of the first sisters died of cholera.

In Bermondsey in 1854, five sisters, each carrying a small satchel of clothes and prayer books, went to the Crimea, on three days' notice, to nurse wounded and diseased British soldiers. Later, when the community took responsibility for a badly mismanaged industrial school for delinquent girls, they found only bare walls and twenty-five neglected girls with "hardly a change of clothing." They bought clothes, "chairs, tables, bedsteads," but casually remarked, "we can share our beds & blankets."<sup>29</sup>

### Summons to Keep Getting Up

In Jesus' prophetic description of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25), we are assured that in the end our having been true servants of the flock entrusted to us will be revealed in our having done the startlingly simple acts of feeding, clothing, sheltering, welcoming, visiting, encouraging, and consoling our afflicted brothers and sisters in this world, not just literally, but also in ways that address all the contemporary causes and systemic forms of such poverty and need.

So this morning let us together hear the call to "get up again" and lay down our lives for the sake of God's people. We are not talking about our final medical exit from human life at the end of our days, but about the daily laying down of our lives to which Jesus Christ is calling us—in the Gospel, in our own mission statements, and in all the exemplary moments of our Mercy history. We are talking about the Revolution of Tenderness and Love and the merciful self-expenditure to which Jesus Christ, Catherine McAuley, the first Sisters of Mercy, and

**For her there was to be no hesitation—no undue concern about possessions, or convenience, or fatigue; no fidgeting about age, or numbers, or money.**

our own founding women have been calling us since day one. ♦

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. This address was given at the Mid-Atlantic Assembly held in Parsippany, New Jersey, April 13, 2016.
- <sup>2</sup>. *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, pp. 117, 181.
- <sup>3</sup>. Institute Leadership Team Letter, November 5, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup>. Apostolic Letter, p. 7.
- <sup>5</sup>. *CMcATM*, 295.
- <sup>6</sup>. *Ibid.*, 297.
- <sup>7</sup>. *Ibid.*, 298.
- <sup>8</sup>. *Ibid.*, 305.
- <sup>9</sup>. *Ibid.*, 309.
- <sup>10</sup>. *Ibid.*, 312.
- <sup>11</sup>. *Ibid.*, 321.

- <sup>12</sup>. *Ibid.*, 325.
- <sup>13</sup>. *Ibid.*, 327.
- <sup>14</sup>. Sullivan, Unpublished manuscript, 78.
- <sup>15</sup>. Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 462.
- <sup>16</sup>. *Ibid.*, 341.
- <sup>17</sup>. *Ibid.*, 347.
- <sup>18</sup>. *Ibid.*, 343.
- <sup>19</sup>. *Ibid.*, 363.
- <sup>20</sup>. *Catholic News Service*, November 21, 2014.
- <sup>21</sup>. Letter, November 5, 2015.
- <sup>22</sup>. *CCMcA*, 86.
- <sup>23</sup>. *CMcATM*, 255.
- <sup>24</sup>. *CCMcA*, 300.
- <sup>25</sup>. Letter 283, July 24, 1841, in *CCMcA*, 418.
- <sup>26</sup>. Rule 17, in *CMcATM*, 312-13.
- <sup>27</sup>. *CMcATM*, 95.
- <sup>28</sup>. *CMcATM*, 225, 229.
- <sup>29</sup>. Sullivan, ed., *Friendship*, 49-50, 174.



“Jesus Christ is calling us—in the Gospel, in our own mission statements, and in all the exemplary moments of our Mercy history.”

# Pope Francis and Changes in the Tribunal Process: A Canonist's Experience

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*Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.*

In this sacred moment of Ordinary Time, we are blessed with a Mercy Jesuit Franciscan leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis is definitely Mercy. That is so obvious in his statements as well as in his spontaneous behavior. The core of Catherine McAuley's radical compassion for those who are poor, lives deep within the heart of our Pope. He is Jesuit by his profession of vows. He is Franciscan in his choice of the Pontifical name honoring Francis of Assisi.

Pope Francis was elected on 13 March 2013. For me, the most powerful visual image from that historic day happened when our new Pope first appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to give the world his blessing. First, he asked all those he would bless to pray for him and, in utter simplicity, he stood there in a poignant moment of silence with his head bowed, accepting our blessing of him. Since that time, many of the actions of Pope Francis have been as spontaneous as well as that direct, changing perceptions of the papacy while extending its influence in many hearts. That gesture symbolized well this new Pope changing the position of the Papacy to a more collaborative mode.

## **Historical View: Elderly Popes and Radical Change**

More than fifty years ago, John XXIII opened the windows of the Church for a breath of fresh air calling for Vatican II. Now it seems that Pope Saint John, following God's Spirit, unknowingly paved the way for Pope Francis to bring more rapid change into many aspects of the organization of the Roman Catholic Church, re-shaping her ministry to the People of God. On 26 October 1958 the Cardinals of the Church elected Pope John XXIII who was seventy-six years old which, at that time, was considered quite elderly. Some suggested that the

Cardinals chose an elderly interim leader for the Church after the nineteen years of leadership by Pope Pius XII because they were not ready yet to choose a future direction for the Church.

Four years later that "elderly" Pontiff opened the Second Vatican Council causing major changes in the Roman Catholic Church. Francis was also seventy-six when he was elected Pope in 2013, but that age held very different expectations of life and energy forty-five years after the choice of John XXIII.

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**Francis is wasting no time in beginning his own radical revision of the Church and her laws while Pope Francis calls all Catholics to be God's mercy in the world today, to reach out to those who are suffering.**

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Early in his papacy, addressing his concern for families, Pope Francis spoke of his deep compassion for those who find themselves struggling with their status in the Church during a time of great personal pain, coping with marriages which have ended. He named these people as part of those who are poor, those who claim his

heart and attention. Pope Francis pushed Church leaders to provide, in an incredibly short period of time, new laws and procedures to stream-line tribunal processes.

## **Francesco Coccopalmerio and Recommendations to the Vatican**

On 27 August 2014, 17 months after his election, Francis established a Special Commission to work on the revision of tribunal procedures in canon law. Such rapid action on the part of a new Pope regarding matrimonial laws was a real shock to canonical systems. The only Cardinal named to the Commission was Francesco Coccopalmerio.

I met then Archbishop Coccopalmerio in 2009 when I was privileged to be one of six American canonists invited to be part of a symposium on penal law (law which deals with Church crimes and

penalties) hosted by the Archbishop in Rome.<sup>1</sup> Those invited to hear our presentations were the heads of Vatican dicasteries (departments) and professors of canon law. During my presentation I looked out and realized I was speaking to a room full of men, almost all of them ordained.

Change had already begun in the curia of the Roman Catholic Church a few years before Pope Francis would be elected. I knew few of those listening to my presentation but, because of being in the process of editing a book of translations of rotal decisions from Latin into English<sup>2</sup>, I knew several of the Judges from the Apostolic Court of the Roman Rota who attended the symposium. During the discussion sessions, those of us on the panel realized how little the heads of the various departments of the curia interact with each other. When I was responding to one question I advised the inquirer that he needed to speak with the head of the Congregation for Clergy—who was seated next to him.

That experience reminded me of the time when I first became Director of the Tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati in 1991. A priest would call asking me how to handle a parish situation. Often I would call a neighboring priest who was more experienced in parish work to ask what to suggest without saying which priest had called me. Then I would call back the first priest telling him I spoke with the second priest and what he advised. It often took at least two such encounters before the first priest would call the second priest directly for advice. In my experience such networking is a gift women working in the Church bring to canonical settings. We naturally seek the advice of peers, aware we are honoring them in asking for advice and knowing it is a compliment when another asks our advice. For many men, including those in the Church, it is perceived to be a sign of weakness to ask for advice but they feel more comfortable asking a woman rather than another man.

During that symposium, a priest on the panel referred to the Cincinnati Handbook for penal trials.

When everyone looked at me, I explained it is not a handbook *per se* but a packet of about 75 pages detailing the procedures we follow in penal trials as well as sample decrees and documents. I explained that I offered the materials through the Canon Law Society of America only to Judicial Vicars—to keep the information from being exploited in the U.S. media. Archbishop Coccopalmerio humbly requested, “I am not a Judicial Vicar but may I have a copy?”

I returned to Cincinnati to warn Archbishop Pilarczyk that our forms and procedures were being sent to the Vatican, to the head of the Congregation for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts. As with everyone to whom I send copies, I asked to be advised of anything that should be changed or improved. The good news is that I did not receive any suggestions for revision.

From that encounter and thanks to simultaneous translation during the symposium, companions fluent in Italian, plus all of us being able to supplement our gestures with Latin words and phrases, I got to know our host. I was very happy to see Cardinal Coccopalmerio appointed to the Special Commission to reform tribunal procedures along with later appointed Rev. Francis G. Morrissey, O.M.I., (the only canonist from the Americas), one of my professors in canon law, now a friend and colleague. (Many Mercies know Frank as canonical advisor to the Mercy Futures Project and the preparation of the Constitutions for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas when we formed the new institute in 1991.) Both are brilliant men as well as very careful canonists with pastoral hearts.

After the annual canon law convention in October, 2014, when we learned who first was appointed to the Special Commission, and aware of the urgent need for response, I asked four priest canonists from different places to work with me to compose recommendations for the revisions of marriage law to send to Cardinal Coccopalmerio—because I knew him personally. Then, in December

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2014, I was asked to be part of a five-person Task Force to send official recommendations to the Special Commission from the Canon Law Society of America. It is amazing to see recommendations I helped formulate in the new norms for the universal Church.

### **Marriage Law Changes Going at a Rapid Pace**

It can be difficult for those who are not canonists or Church historians to appreciate the speed of change that is happening under the leadership of Pope Francis. Perhaps it will help readers to know that revisions of marriage law in the Roman Catholic Church usually take decades if not centuries. Such revisions were made in 1741 under the leadership of Pope Benedict XIV, and not again until 1908 under Pope Saint Pius X. After that came the “new” Code of Canon Law in 1983 incorporating the changes of Vatican II into the laws of the Church. On 11 October 1962, while I was in high school, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council. Despite that being such a momentous canonical event, it took twenty-one years for changes to be made in the laws of the Church responding to the decisions of the bishops during that ecumenical council.

On 8 September 2015, only a year after naming the Special Commission, Pope Francis announced major changes in tribunal procedures and new canons (laws) in the Code of Canon Law regarding marriage.

The new marriage laws took effect 8 December 2015, less than three years after Francis was elected Pope. According to Pope Francis, the new laws regarding Tribunal procedures, “are intended precisely to show the Church’s *closeness* to the wounded families, desiring that the many who experience the tragedy of matrimonial failure are reached by Christ’s healing work, through ecclesiastical structures ... for the good of the institution of the family.”<sup>3</sup>

Many of the changes are too technical to detail in this brief article, but I will attempt to explain a few.

### **Diocesan Tribunal Can Decide**

The new laws allow a marriage to be declared null by a diocesan tribunal without that decision automatically going to another diocese by law on appeal. Either of the spouses or the Defender of the Bond still could appeal a decision, but each decision is no longer appealed by law—which happened automatically before the changes. That shortens the processing of most marriage cases by many months.

### **Petitioner’s Residence Diocese is the Place**

Another change is that a case may now be processed in the diocese where the person presenting the case resides. There used to be a requirement for the consent of the Judicial Vicar of the other spouse, which could only be given if the other spouse had no reasonable objections. And there was a requirement that both spouses lived within the same Bishop’s Conference. Those restrictions made it very difficult

for a person to present a marriage case if the place where the other spouse lives did not have an active tribunal. That change in the law for marriage cases can save months at the beginning of a case.

### **Making Laity’s Access to a Tribunal Easier**

The new laws require that each diocesan Bishop appoint tribunal officials or join with neighboring bishops to provide tribunal access for the members of his diocese. In the United States, Catholics have access to local tribunals or at least inter-diocesan ones serving several dioceses which have few Catholics.

In some countries, that is not true. As he required each diocesan Bishop to appoint a tribunal, I am sure that Pope Francis was remembering his experience as Archbishop in Argentina—where fifteen dioceses were served by only one tribunal.

### **Shorter Processing Time**

The new laws also include a process labeled “shorter,” although it may not be shorter than the ordinary tribunal process. No one that I know suggested this process to the Special Commission so

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it was a surprise to most canonists. If both spouses to the marriage agree that the union was invalid and agree about the reason for nullity, and provided there are very clear proofs of the facts with no contradiction, it is possible that the case could be decided by the diocesan Bishop himself rather than being considered by three Judges. However, having worked in a tribunal for over twenty-five years, I know it is rare that both spouses agree about the facts of the marriage and the reason why a particular marriage may be invalid.

### **Annulment or Invalidity?**

Talking about the tribunal process reminds me of something about which both Cardinal Coccopalmerio and I feel strongly and defend vigorously – canonical precision of terminology. The tribunal conducts a canonical process which may lead to the declaration of nullity of a marriage. It is incorrect to call that an “annulment.” As a former English teacher, I point out that “to annul” is an active verb which means to make null something which was valid before the action.

The tribunal investigates whether a specific marriage was invalid from the moment of consent. There must be clear proof that something essential was missing at the time of the wedding. Church law (canon 1060) presumes that every marriage is a valid one. If there is proof to overturn that presumption, then the Judges declare that this particular marriage never was valid from the very beginning. Cardinal Coccopalmerio would say that nullity is very different from annulment: to declare the nullity of marriage is absolutely not an annulment. Unfortunately, the term “annulment” is commonly used incorrectly in English even by priests and bishops.

Pope Francis spoke of the new marriage laws saying, “The entry into force – which happily coincides with the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy” of the Apostolic Letter entitled *Mitis Iudex* (Gentle Judge) is “given to bring justice and mercy on the truth of the bond to those who have experienced the failure of their marriage....”<sup>4</sup>

### **Other Changes to Canon Law**

It seems appropriate to include a note that those in Rome say there is currently a movement in process to revise the penal law of the Church. Cardinal Coccopalmerio is leading that effort due to his position in the curia of the Vatican. Unofficially, individuals have been asked for input but there has not yet been an official request for suggestions from, for example, the various canon law societies of the world. This is another example of Pope Francis rapidly moving toward change in the Church.

Also in process are plans to revise the rules under which the Apostolic Court of the Roman Rota operates as well as plans to re-organize the dicasteries of the Vatican and how they interact with each other.

During this Year of Mercy, I was asked by the Cincinnati Archdiocesan newspaper<sup>5</sup> to write an article about how my ministry involves mercy. I have their permission to share these words which have since been published in a newsletter for the South Central Community and included in the Institute blog about *mercy*. These words reflect how the concerns of Pope Francis call each of us and the whole Church to mercy as well as justice. ♦ (See p. 44 for the article.)

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *Towards Future Developments in Penal Law: U.S. Theory and Practice: a symposium held under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, March 5-6, 2009. Edited by Patricia M. Dugan, Wilson & Lafleur, 2010. Gratianus Series.*

<sup>2</sup> *Rotal Jurisprudence, Selected Translations*, Canon Law Society of America, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See *L'Osservatore Romano*, Saturday 12 December 2015, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *The Catholic Telegraph*, February 2016, p. 43.



## ***Justice and Mercy Meet in Tribunal Ministry***

*I am a Sister of Mercy whose primary ministry is working to do Justice for those who come to the Tribunal seeking decisions about their marriage situations. Sometimes friends ask me if that feels like a contradiction. For me it is not.*

*Twenty years ago Bishop Moeddel and I offered evenings with the Bishop for those separated from the Church over marriage issues. One man told me about his situation which turned out to be a simple case (Catholic married without required canonical form) handled in a few weeks. That man later called sounding very anxious and asking if I thought God were angry with him for the 17 years he went to Mass every Sunday but did not receive Communion because he thought he could not straighten out his remarriage with the Church. I told him that the God I knew was very pleased with his fidelity and with him for doing the best he could with what he knew at the time. He thanked me and said after hearing me he could believe what his Pastor tried to tell him about that. He breathed a huge sigh of relief, and he said, "You really are a Sister of Mercy."*

*For some, Justice and Mercy seem incompatible. If Justice only involved dispensing deserved punishment for wrongdoing, and if Mercy only meant pardoning earned punishment, those virtues would be in conflict. However, Mercy and Justice are different aspects of God's love.*

*It was while I was still a teenager beginning college studies during Vatican II that I came across a statement that God's Justice and Mercy intersect at the cross. I love that integrated image of the virtues of Justice and Mercy.*

*Christianity teaches that God's Mercy is shown through God's Justice. The follower of Jesus does not make a choice to be compassionate and forgiving or to be fair and righteous. There is no putting aside Justice to make room for Mercy. In God, there is perfect balance. For God, virtue stands in the middle, not over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing one virtue or the other. The prophet Micah is often quoted about the way to live a good life: love Mercy, do Justice and walk humbly with your God.*

*If we relieve the suffering of the poor with a sandwich from a soup kitchen (Mercy) without also working to correct the social systems which caused the hunger (Justice), we merely pour a bucket of the living water of change into an ocean of deadening problems. Perhaps that is why the Bible puts so much emphasis on both Mercy and Justice. Mercy without Justice can lead to dependency and entitlement, increasing the power of the giver over the one in need. Justice without Mercy can lead to hardened hearts and cold, impersonal treatment of others. May all of us who follow Jesus continue to better harmonize Justice and Mercy in our ministries and in our lives.*

*Sister Victoria Vondenberger, RSM, JCL  
Tribunal Director  
Archdiocese of Cincinnati*

# Devotion of Pope Francis: Our Lady Undoer of Knots

*Mary Scullion, R.S.M. and Will O'Brien*

Just before presiding over the closing Papal Mass in Philadelphia on September 27, 2015, and hours before departing from the United States after an historic visit, Pope Francis made one of his much-heralded impromptu stops. The location was an unusual one. Next to the stately Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, the mother church of the Philadelphia Archdiocese, was a remarkable public art installation that was also a kind of temporary religious shrine: The Knotted Grotto.

Hundreds of thousands of persons were already spread across the Benjamin Franklin Parkway on that Sunday afternoon, some having arrived hours earlier, waiting for the Mass and their last chance to see the Pontiff in person. When, amid massive anticipation, the “Popemobile” and the entourage of security vehicles made its way into Center City, the crowd began to rustle in palpable excitement. But the convoy did not go directly to the massive stage at the end of the Parkway near the Museum of Art. Instead, it detoured down to the opposite end of the Parkway, toward the Basilica.

## **Pope Francis Stops at the Grotto of Knots**

The vehicle passed by the Grotto, stopped, and Pope Francis stepped down, accompanied by Archbishop Charles Chaput, Vatican officials, and security. In his gleaming white robe shining in the clear autumn sun, he slowly approached. A small crowd was at the Grotto, including the artist Meg Saligman and several volunteers who had been part of the project. A few of us, who had gotten word only a short time earlier that he might in fact come, were able to greet him as he arrived at the Grotto, and briefly orient him to the site. He listened carefully, then turned quietly toward the installation, closed his eyes and, in a moment of powerful stillness, raised his hand in blessing. Before leaving, he simply implored us, “Pray for me.”

The Grotto had officially opened about a month earlier, occupying the small courtyard to the side of

the Basilica. An igloo-shaped structure constructed with a series of wooden “ribs,” it sheltered inside a reflecting pool surrounded by beautifully placed stonework. The frame itself was hardly visible – sheathed with literally thousands of cloth strips that were tied on. Not only were the knots covering the grotto, they were also tied on to the fences surrounding the courtyard, and ropes along the side of the Basilica, even strands ascending upwards to the spire. The site was visually stunning: In contrast to the massive brownstone Romanesque columns and towering bronze dome, thousands of white strips fluttered almost weightlessly and freely, some arcing heavenward, others creating a sort of fragile shelter surrounding the Grotto itself.

But this was far more than an art installation.

## **World Meeting on Families**

In late 2014, about a year before Pope Francis’ visit to Philadelphia, several of us were invited by the

World Meeting of Families to form a special committee on issues of hunger and homelessness. The WMOF recognized that, in addition to committees focused on such pragmatics and logistics as housing, security, transportation, media and outreach, and volunteers, it would be inadmissible not to include as part of its preparation attention to the social concerns that had so marked the

papacy of this remarkable global leader.

The WMOF Hunger and Homelessness Committee convened in late 2014, comprised of local civic, nonprofit, and religious leaders, as well as several persons who had experienced hunger, homelessness, and poverty. Our mandate came from the Holy Father himself. Very early in his papacy, speaking to a group of Jesuit students from Italy and Albania, he said, “The times talk to us of so much poverty in the world and this is a scandal. Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an

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“The times talk to us of  
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(Pope Francis)

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education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry.”<sup>1</sup>

It was clear to us that the visit of this remarkable global leader – who had already stirred the conscience of millions of persons around the world, both within and outside the church – could not be just an occasion for a grand, multi-million-dollar civic celebration. Even the non-Catholic (and non-Christian) members of the committee understood that Pope Francis was calling us to hear and act on the cry of our poor sisters and brothers. He had given us a gift, by urging us to refocus on the truth of poverty and struggle in our world, both in its global and local forms. We wanted our efforts to reflect his own invitation to all of us to tap the wellsprings of compassion and goodness within us. In coming to a city marked by a poverty rate of over 25 percent, with thousands of persons living in shelters and on the streets, it was urgent that we underscore his call that we re-envision our society along the lines of justice and human dignity.

### **Mercy and Justice Campaign**

The “Mercy and Justice Campaign,” which we formally launched in the spring of 2015, sought to provide concrete ways for people to see and respond to the plight of sisters and brothers struggling with poverty and social marginalization. We established a special short-term The Francis Fund, through which people could meet the concrete and urgent needs of some of the most vulnerable persons in the region. By the time Pope Francis left Philadelphia, we had raised over \$1.4 million that was distributed to over sixty organizations and ministries – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and nonreligious – who served a wide variety of persons: persons struggling to feed their families, persons working to break the cycle of homelessness, persons in recovery from addiction and mental illness, women trying to break free from abuse and trafficking, day laborers and low-income persons seeking real economic supports, youth, ex-offenders struggling for stability and opportunity.

Pope Francis was also insistent on the urgency of addressing structural causes of poverty. “It is the responsibility of the State,” he wrote in his inaugural

encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), “to safeguard and promote the common good of society.” He would reiterate these same concerns in his address to the U.S. Congress:

The fight against poverty and hunger must be fought constantly and on many fronts, especially in its causes.

The Hunger and Homelessness Committee, working with national organizations around the country, sent to every member of Congress and to the White House a statement entitled “A Time for Mercy and Justice: Pope Francis and the Common Good in the United States.” Anticipating the very message he would give Congress, we called on our national elected officials to enact bipartisan legislation that would meet the needs of poor Americans. Over twenty thousand persons from around the country joined us in contacting their legislators with that same message.

### **Mary, Undoer of Knots**

This third component of the Mercy and Justice Campaign was more unusual, but in the end proved to be perhaps the most significant and powerful. It was the public art project based on the painting beloved of the Pope entitled “Mary, Undoer of Knots.”

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It is widely known that Pope Francis has a special devotion to Our Lady Undoer of Knots. In 1986, then Padre Jorge Bergoglio was in Europe for a period of rest and sabbatical. It was a time of deep personal distress: He had left his native country amidst great controversy, both over the strains caused by his leadership style as head of the Argentinian Jesuits, and over his murky role in the “Dirty War” that was marked by oppression and violence, including against the church.

Biographer Paul Vellely in his deeply enlightening book *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots*, writes that when Bergoglio came across the 18<sup>th</sup> century painting in Augsburg, Germany, it struck a deep chord in him. He himself was wrapped up in knots of guilt and pain over the shortcomings of his ministry and leadership (later reflected in his frequent statements as Pope that “I am a sinner”). He commissioned a copy of the painting for his return to

Argentina as Archbishop, and promoting public devotions – while he himself, perhaps having experienced an untying of his own knots, demonstrated an astonishing transformation in his public ministry – including a new fervent concern for the poor.

Early on in our planning for this campaign, we were seized by the power of this image – undoing knots, yearning for freedom from that which binds us. We recognized that while the image was rooted in a very Catholic devotional tradition, it spoke to universal human truths and encompassed many different kinds of struggles, both personal and social. Under the leadership of the nonprofit Project HOME, a nationally recognized provider of housing and services for persons who were homeless, the Committee commissioned local artist Meg Saligman, who was world renowned for murals and other public art installations she had done. She had previously collaborated with Project HOME on art installation in several residences for formerly homeless persons.

Meg also grasped the power and potential of this image, and saw it as a perfect symbol with which to welcome the pontiff and to capture the struggles and the hopes of suffering people. For several months, Meg and her team went out, initially to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, prisons, food pantries, and community centers. She especially reached out to persons on the margins, persons experiencing social hardships. Using cloth strips, she invited people to write their “knot,” their struggle, whatever they felt bound by and sought liberation from. They also went out to churches, synagogues, and mosques. They also went to public squares and parks (as well as a virtual public square through an online way to write and send in knots), with the same invitation – and it was clear that even those who might not suffer from such social hardships as poverty and hunger had their own knots – pains and hopes, prayers and needs.

Over the summer months, we collected tens of thousands of knots. Eventually, they became part of the Knotted Grotto, which formally opened one month before the arrival of Pope Francis to

Philadelphia. During the several weeks that the Grotto was opened, visitors came – initially a few, but by the time of the World Meeting of Families, thousands almost every hour. People were invited to write the struggle on a knot and tie it to the structure – and then to untie and read another knot, and offer a prayer for that person or family.

### **Knots of Personal Struggles and Social Struggles**

It soon became clear that we had tapped into a

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powerful truth, and the grotto soon became a truly astonishing sacred space. Looking through the knots, one saw a multitude of languages. In some cases, the written knots were only a word or two, in others, long extended messages that covered the strip cloth. Some knots conveyed very personal internal struggles (“I’m tired of being my own worst enemy where my negative thought patterns keep me hostage”). Some expressed bereavement and loss (“Grieving the sudden loss of my dear husband of 37 years”). Many knots spoke to fears and prayers for family and

loved ones (“My youngest son is struggling with mental health problems and addiction. He is lost and homeless. It is tearing me apart”). Some responded to social crises and struggles (“For the Syrian refugees,” “Mary, please undo the knot of addiction and abuse that are destroying so many lives”).

A core truth that was revealed at the Knotted Grotto is that we all have struggles, no matter our station in life. And there is tremendous power in naming those struggles and taking the courageous risk of making those struggles public. Through this process, while the struggles cover a vast array of experiences, we tap into a beautiful if painful truth of our common humanity. All of us are wounded, weak, and vulnerable to the awful and inevitable reality of suffering – but this is also the mysterious bond through which we know our deepest selves by knowing each other.

The Grotto was also a nexus point through which we could connect our personal struggles with the social struggles of sisters and brothers in poverty and in situations of oppression. For those of us who live materially stable and even privileged lives, as we seek an unbinding of our personal knots, we are

invited to participate in the unbinding of poverty and injustice that affects others whose lives might seem distant from ours. (Many visitors to the Grotto, after tying on their knot, were moved to make a donation to the Francis Fund or sign an on-site letter to their legislator) This in fact is a core proclamation of the Gospel: as we share our sufferings, as we literally “suffer with” others, that is the very meaning of compassion.

This public sharing of pain and struggle also births an amazing community of power. Those who visited the Grotto experienced this power: The sheer visual impact of all the emblems of struggle, pain, and longing was an invitation to enter this community of broken humanity – which is also the community of truthful humanity. But as we accept that invitation, we take in this power, and we sense a new possibility to engage in healing and transformation.

### **Pope Francis Visits the Imprisoned**

On the last morning of his U.S. visit, Pope Francis visited detainees at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia (just a few miles from the Grotto). “Life means ‘getting our feet dirty’ from the dust-filled roads of life and history,” he told inmates. “All of us have something we need to be cleansed of, or purified from. May the knowledge of that fact inspire us to live in solidarity, to support one another and seek the best for others.”

What can this mean for our faith and for the church? In one of the most powerful passages in “The Joy of the Gospel,” Francis articulated his preference for “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Father has put flesh to these words in his own remarkable actions – from putting a shower in the Vatican for homeless persons in Rome to washing the feet of prisoners to visiting Syrian

refugees. He invites us out of the safe confines even of our charity to deeper engagement and solidarity with those on the margins, those who are suffering from society’s violence and injustice. But again, recall his own biography, recall his striking words that “I am a sinner” – and remember the only words he spoke at the Grotto, “Pray for me.” His compassion is clearly rooted in his own sense of suffering and struggle. He knows and gives voice to his own need for unbinding of knots – and that empowers him to act, through God’s grace, to unbind the knots of others.

We have known many people in our work with homelessness and poverty – amazing and compassionate persons who act out of an awareness of their own need for grace, who move from charity to solidarity, who act out of their own struggle to bind wounds and work for justice. Clearly, this is the way of the Gospel – and a way of being authentically human.

### **Refreshed Understanding of Marian Devotion**

The large bulk of visitors to the Grotto were clearly Catholic (especially during the week of the World Meeting of Families), and many of them were very traditional in their beliefs and practices. They naturally responded to this expression of classic Marian devotion (we had even prepared prayer cards with the Prayer to Our Lady of Undoing Knots, and distributed thousands of them).

The heart of the Undoing the Knots image is, of course, Mary the mother of Jesus. The painting (a reproduction of which was part of the installation) and the theology undergirding it belong uniquely to the Catholic tradition. In particular, the centuries-old tradition of Marian devotion with its notion of Our Lady as a special divine intercessor, while still strongly practiced in very orthodox and conservative parts of the broader Church, has ebbed in much of contemporary Catholic theology. For some, it feels like an awkward relic of an old-fashioned piety. It can certainly be a stumbling block in the Church’s efforts to strengthen ties with other Christian communions or in interfaith dialogue.

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**“All of us have something we need to be cleansed of, or purified from. May the knowledge of that fact inspire us to live in solidarity, to support one another and seek the best for others.”**

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But over the many months that the Grotto was present next to the Cathedral, it attracted a broad swath of visitors. Even among many non-Catholics, the image of the Mother of Jesus stirred a deep response. A Presbyterian woman, the lawyer-weaver Lori Lasher who was part of our committee, undertook a parallel project of working with people on the margins to weave a special stole, made up of “knots” that had been articulated and sown in by prisoners, refugees, women escaping trafficking, persons with addictions, persons who were homeless. (We presented this stole to the Holy Father at the Knotted Grotto.) A Jewish woman who was a friend of the artist Meg Saligman was so moved by the project that she composed a moving anthem, “Help Me, Mary” – which was publicly debuted at our opening press conference and blessing, sung by an African American woman who was a Baptist. Our imam colleagues prayed and spoke of the power of Mary as divine succor for all of us. Even many non-religious people, who were initially a little befuddled at the imagery, found solace and power in it, connecting and resonating in their own ways with the holy feminine/mother figure.

### **Patristic Origin and Modern Portrayal of Mary as Undoer of Knots**

This is very telling, and perhaps even challenges us to revisit this part of our Catholic heritage. We need to revisit the immediate theological framework of the original image, which originates in teachings of Irenaeus of Lyons in his 2nd century tract “Against Heresies.” He writes that “the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.” This teaching embodies much of the misogyny that marks much of Catholic teaching and tradition, tying the core of human sinfulness with female transgression.

Yet this modern iteration of the tradition offers, even in Pope Francis’ own embrace of the imagery and in the popular devotion he sparked in Argentina, an understanding of Mary a feminine and maternal

figure who embraces us in our struggle and pain – beyond just some existential state of sin. Mary does not have to be limited to a virginal, statuesque spiritual avatar, but a woman who knows the flesh-and-blood trials and tribulations of all women, all children, and all people. The biblical Mary felt the sword pierce her heart – the sword of empire that oppressed her people and the sword of violence and injustice that tortured and murdered her son. As the one who will give birth to the Savior, she first cries out in solidarity with all who are hungry, poor, oppressed, and marginalized, promising God’s liberation (Lk 2:34-35).

Mary is not just the mother of Jesus, she is the compassionate Lady who appeared to the peasant Juan Diego, and thus, as many liberation theologians have reflected, continues to stir the hopes of all those who are poor. She is also the mother of the disappeared in Argentina. As the evangelist Matthew suggests by way of the prophet Jeremiah, she weeps in pain and outrage at all the slaughtered innocents – in Soweto, in El Salvador, in Syria, at Wounded Knee, on the streets of Chicago.

All people who know suffering know this Mother – even if they don’t need to name her as the Nazarene mother of Jesus two thousand years ago. Addressing the French charity “Friends of Gabriel Rosset” in December 2014, Pope Francis spoke of “Notre Dame des Sans Abri (Our Lady of the Homeless)”: “What a beautiful name: the Mother of Jesus who gives a roof to her children! The Marian dimension of your dedication to others seems essential to me. Mary’s heart is full of compassion for all [people], especially the poorest and the most destitute, those who are in greatest need; and it is also her maternal tenderness – together with that of the Church – which is manifested through you.”<sup>3</sup>

And she offers a hope for unbinding knots – not just theological knots of cosmic justification, but very human knots of bondage in its many faces – addiction, shame, anger, guilt, grief, poverty, displacement, oppression, racism and all forms of dehumanization. In unbinding those knots, she holds forth the endless hope of liberation, the seeds of

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transformation, the taproot of our own capacity to struggle together for personal and social healing.

As we watched people experience in manifold ways this image of a compassionate and merciful Mother, we ourselves re-discovered the Mother of Jesus. We witnessed how this ancient and seemingly arcane traditional piety can in fact be deepened, enriched, and broadened to speak to our wounded world today. Again, the words of the Holy Father underscores this understanding: "This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization."<sup>4</sup>

### Disassembling the Grotto

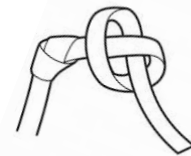
In the days and weeks after the Papal visit, after we held a final blessing and began the processing of disassembling the Grotto installation, people frequently asked what we were going to do with all 150,000 knots. (For some particularly pious Catholic, this was a question of some theological urgency, given that the knots had been blessed by the Holy Father.) We announced that all the knots would be used as part of the insulation for Project HOME's planned development of a new permanent residence for homeless and low-income persons.

We believed – and many concurred – that this was a fitting final chapter for the "Undoing the Knots" project. The physical knots would literally contribute to warmth and solidity for a new home for those once on the social margins; the residence in whose structure the knots would be embedded represented a social and personal knot unbound for many who had experienced homelessness and poverty. More powerful was the symbol behind this architectural gesture: those struggles and pains and hardships and longings that were publicly named could become the energy of transformation, of compassion, of justice. Our own suffering, when confronted with truthfulness and in community, bears the fruit of healing and new hope.

**Our own suffering,  
when confronted with  
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new hope.**

If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed," the prophet tells us, "then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. I, your God, will guide you continually, and satisfy your desires with good things and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters shall not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to dwell in."

Pope Francis echoes the prophet when he tells us: "God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones. Let us be renewed by God's mercy; let us be loved by Jesus; let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy—channels through which God can water the earth."<sup>5</sup> ♦



### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, "Address of Pope Francis to the Students of the Jesuit Schools of Italy and Albania" (Vatican City: June 7, 2013).

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130607\\_scuole-gesuiti.html#Dear Girls and Boys, Dear Young People](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html#Dear%20Girls%20and%20Boys,%20Dear%20Young%20People)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelization in Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation (Nov. 26, 2013), (49).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, "Pope's Address to French Charity: Friends of Gabriel Rosset," (December 13, 2014), published on [www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org), (December 16, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelization in Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation (Nov. 26, 2013), (288).

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, "Easter Urbi et Orbi" message, (Vatican City: March 31, 2013).



## *Discussion Questions*

**(Donnelly)** On the theme of community, Pope Francis asks, “How can we enable each member to speak freely, to be accepted with his/her particular gifts and to become fully co-responsible?” What have been positive experiences when other members of your community promoted these goals? On the other hand, what kinds of behaviors interfere with these goals?

**(Ducey and Malik)** The authors describe a mental-healthcare project which started with their dream of serving an under-served population in New Orleans twenty-five years ago. Today, Mercy Family Center receives funds from the Sisters of Mercy, from the federal government, from regional non-profit organizations, and from state agencies. Does your own ministry involve financial support or collaboration with entities other than the Sisters of Mercy? How has the financial undergirding of your ministry remained the same or changed over the past years?

**(Dwyer)** Margretta Dwyer focuses on sexual misconduct as an issue that implicates entire families of offenders, not just the victim who was abused by the offender. What’s been your experience and assessment of the Church’s response to sexual misconduct by priests? Are the families of the victim, and the families of the offender included in the circle of pastoral care?

**(Gottemoeller)** Of the ten themes Doris Gottemoeller outlines, what order of importance would you give these three as they affect your ministry: Love in the Family, Concern for the Vulnerable, and Living in a Global Church. What additional theme do you think has particular importance for your personal spirituality or your ministry?

**(Julian)** How do the “works of Mercy” cited in Isaiah 58:6-7, call attention to needs in this prophetic passage that are different from the traditional spiritual and corporal works of Mercy in the Christian tradition?

**(Kerrigan)** Sharon Kerrigan sums up several reforms initiated by Pope Francis. Which one or two of these has particular significance for the vitality of institutional church, as you see the church’s needs? Family life; interreligious dialogue; reform of clericalism among priests, bishops and cardinals; appointment of new advisors to the Curia; bishops living simply; putting emphasis in ministry on service with the poor.

**(King)** How do you reconcile Pope Francis’ terms, “joy of the gospel,” and “joyful messenger” with looking at the tragedies of what people are suffering every day as you watch the news? Is Francis talking about more than just an upbeat, positive, can-do attitude?

**(Scullion and O’Brien)** If you were to write on a strip of cloth your most tangled “knot”—what would it be? What struggle, what you feel binds you, what you seek liberation from? Pick a friend, a family member, a person you know in one of your ministries. What “knot” would you write for that person? Taking the “knot” someone else has written, what would you pray as your hope for the un-doing of the knot?

(Sullivan) “And yes, we should teach people ‘how to fish,’ and we have ministries that do just that; but sometimes a man or woman simply needs an immediate ‘fish,’ offered with tender words.” Explain the difference in your own ministry, or your own experience, of “learning to fish” as opposed to having someone simply give an “immediate fish.”

(Vondenberger) Given the streamlining of the annulment process in canon law following Pope Francis’ *Mitis Iudex* (Gentle Judge, 2015), do you think this would have helped ease the annulment process for people you know? What stories of success or difficulty with the Church’s annulment process can you narrate from your own pastoral experience?

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## Contributors

**Marie Michelle Donnelly, R.S.M.** (Mid-Atlantic) currently serves as Co-Director of Mercy Spiritual Ministries, through which she provides preached retreats for parishes, school faculties, ministry groups, ecumenical groups and religious communities. She has served in both sister formation and congregational leadership for the former Merion community. She is a frequent presenter for parent and parish groups throughout the Tri-State region (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware). She is a keynote speaker for large diocesan gatherings across the United States. She is adjunct professor of theology at Gwynedd Mercy University in Pennsylvania. She holds an M.A. in Theology from Villanova University.

**Sarah J. Ducey, R.S.M.** (South Central) holds a Ph.D. in Applied Developmental Psychology from the University of New Orleans. She has a B.S. from Maryville University, and an M.S. in Psychology from the University of Missouri- St. Louis. She was co-founder of Mercy Family Center in New Orleans. She ministered there as a psychologist and remains in this current position. Sarah is also the Director of Mercy Learning Center. She has also taught courses in statistics and psychology at Maryville University. She has co-authored *Teenage Pregnancy: The Interaction of Psyche and Culture* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1997), and the manuscript of *Having a Baby for Mama: Culture, Psyche and Teenage Pregnancy* (2010). She has given presentations and published her research on child development, sex differences in mathematics, and adolescent pregnancy in the black family, including the journal *Adolescence*.

**Margretta Dwyer, R.S.M.** (West Midwest) has been a board-certified LMFC marriage and family therapist for over 40 years. She served on the faculty of the University of Minnesota's Medical School in the Program in Human Sexuality for 17 years, and administered the sexual offender treatment program there. She focused her research on sexual offenders, and has about 90 published papers as well as two co-edited books in which she has chapters: *Sex Offender Treatment: Psychological and Medical Approaches* (1992) and *Sex Offender Treatment: Biological Dysfunction, Intrapsychic Conflict, Interpersonal Violence* (1996). She is the author of *Understanding Offending: Unveiling Myths, Seeking Sexual Health* (2007). She has lectured internationally on treatment of sexual offenders in Norway, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, Venezuela, and Greece. She has developed a cybersex course for people addicted to computer sex. She is presently semi-retired, living in Omaha, Nebraska, where she provides short term therapy in person and by phone for clients having various mental health and sexual issues.

**Doris Gottmoeller, R.S.M.** (South Central) was elected as the first president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Subsequently, she acted as the senior vice president for Mission Integration at Catholic Healthcare Partners, a multi-state health system. She earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, with a focus on ecclesiology in the work of Yves Congar. She is widely published on themes of religious life and renewal. Among other projects, she is currently co-editor of a book celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, re-organizing and uniting the former 25 regional communities of Sisters of Mercy in the U.S. and their mission congregations. She has spear-headed the planning for recent annual meetings of MAST in Philadelphia.

**Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M.** (Aotearoa New Zealand) holds a D.Min. from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.). Her B.A. and B. Ed. are from Massey University, Palmerston North ANZ and her M.Ed. from Boston College in Massachusetts (U.S.A.). She presently works within The Catholic Institute of Aotearoa New Zealand as a lecturer and coordinator of Distance Education. Her previous ministry focused on preparing teachers for careers in Catholic schools and adult education. Her research has included the relationship among biblical texts, Mercy spirituality and the tribal rituals of indigenous peoples of New Zealand. She is a regular homilist at congregational events and has been a presenter at Bishops' conferences. She has published several articles in *The MAST Journal* on biblical, feminist, congregational charism, and Mariological topics.

**Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.** (West Midwest) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Foundation and a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary. She served as a Vice President of Mission for Provena Senior Services, System Director of Spirituality for Provena Health, and faculty member at Saint Xavier University. She has published articles in *Health Progress* and the *MAST Journal*. Currently, she is Assistant Administrator of Mercy Life Center and Academic Advisor at Saint Xavier University. She serves as a personal contact person for West-Midwest community members, and is also on the Editorial Board of *The MAST Journal*.

**Marilyn King, R.S.M.** (West Midwest) has served as Director of Lifelong Formation and Education at St. Joseph Proto-Cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky where her principal ministry is with Adult Faith Formation. She lives at The Laura, a place designed to balance ministry and prayer, community and solitude, and simple living among rural people. She received her doctorate from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in the field of philosophical theology and spirituality. Her dissertation was on purity of heart as the central focus of Thomas Merton's spiritual theology. She is a frequent contributor to *The MAST Journal* and serves on its Editorial Board.

**Mary Melinda Malik, Ph.D.**, holds a doctorate in Applied Developmental Psychology from the University of New Orleans, a B.A. in Psychology from Duke University and an M.A. in Theology from the University of Notre Dame. In 1992 she was co-founder with Sarah Ducey, R.S.M. of Mercy Family Center in New Orleans, where she also served as Program Director. She currently resides in Arizona where she is the vice-president of Training and Program Development at Arizona Centers for Comprehensive Education and Life Skills (ACCEL), a non-profit serving children and adults with developmental disabilities. Past honors have included the City of New Orleans Mayor's Certificate of Merit for Community Service in 2000. Her parish ministries include serving on the RCIA team and a prayer and retreat ministry. Her publications include contributions to *Teenage Pregnancy: The Interaction of Psyche and Culture*. (Hillsdale: Analytic Press, 1997) by A. L. Dean, in collaboration with Sarah Ducey, and contributions to professional journals including *Cognition and Instruction* and *Developmental Psychology*.

**Will O'Brien** lives in Philadelphia, works at Project HOME with Sister Mary Scullion, and teaches scripture. He served on the Hunger and Homelessness Committee for the visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in September, 2015.

**Mary Scullion, R.S.M.** (Mid-Atlantic) has an M.S.W from Temple University in the School of Social Administration. She is co-founder and Executive Director of Project HOME in Philadelphia, a nationally recognized non-profit developing solutions to homelessness and poverty. Project HOME has grown from an emergency winter shelter to over 600 units of housing, with an additional 200 units in development, and three businesses that provide employment to formerly homeless persons. She served on the Hunger and Homelessness Committee for the visit of Pope Francis to Philadelphia in September, 2015. Sister Mary has received numerous awards and honorary doctorates for her leadership in the City of Philadelphia.

**Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M.** (NyPPaW) holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in English from the University of Notre Dame, and an M.Th. in systematic theology from the University of London. She is presently Emerita professor of Language and Literature at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as dean emerita of its College of Liberal Arts. She is the author of numerous articles and seminal works on the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, including *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), and *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

**Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M** (South Central) is a canon lawyer with a J.C.L. from St. Paul University in Ottawa. She is the director of the tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as well as promoter of justice and defender of the bond, a position held since 1990. She served for twenty years in secondary education – English, theology, journalism, and administration. Her publications appear in canon law journals, *Studia Canonica* and *The Jurist*. She is an editor of *Jurisprudence* and has contributed to the Canon Law Society of America's *Advisory Opinions* and *Roman Replies*, as well as *Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. She is the author of *Catholics, Marriage and Divorce: Real People, Real Questions* (2004). She served as secretary of the Canon Law Society of America from 2004-2006.



## MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

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

**MAST** has been meeting annually since then, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST'S Executive Director. There will be no Annual Meeting in June 2017. The next Annual Meeting will be at the Institute's **Mercy Heritage Center, Belmont, NC, June 15-17, 2018**. 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@csn.edu](mailto:aparis@csn.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., 220 Laura Lane, Lebanon, KY, 40033-8155.  
E-mail [mheleneking@windstream.net](mailto: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.





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