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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

Modern life is noisy and intense—with the deluge of news 24/7, the constant distraction of social media, the pressure to communicate instantly by phone and e-mail, and the shift from reservations made via personal phone calls to anonymous web-site navigation. Even if we use the phone, we typically don't deal with real persons. Instead, artificially intelligent voices guide us through scripts we do not control; invisible programming locks us into questions we are supposed to have and information we will receive whether we asked for it or not.

We may remember a time when there was room to breathe, to wait, even to procrastinate, to anticipate an event whose invitation arrived in the mail. So, this issue of *The MAST Journal*, "Mystics and Mysticism," is timely as a theme. The underlying questions can be variously proposed: Is the ancient practice of meditation accessible? Is a life of contemplation relevant? Do prayer-professionals from a distant or recent past—sometimes called mystics—have anything to say to us? Do any of those prayer-professionals offer us help and guidance today?

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M. discusses some of the life-forms of the desert tradition—hermits, cenobites and monastics. Men, as well as women, felt yearnings for a closer relationship with God. This led them to leave the noisiness and crowds of urban life, and take up provisional residence at the edge of cities and further into the desert. Intense reading of scripture, meditation, living simply and apart, earning a living by crafting and selling household goods, leading younger followers by example rather than lengthy discourses—this was what the desert mothers and fathers left as a spiritual legacy to a succession of founders of "religious life."

The early and late middle ages were a fruitful, inventive, and creative period. Women seeking a spiritual life occupied various kinds of residences within urban environments. Their impulse was the same—a yearning for direct experience of the living God, passion for communion with the Holy One, a life whose main work was prayer, contemplation and searching the scriptures, even as they engaged in various forms of service, mentoring and teaching.

Barbara Moran, R.S.M. retrieves scholarship about the Ancrene Rule in England—a medieval rule of life, or outline of counsels to guide anchoresses, women who devoted themselves to a life of prayer within a residence adjoining a church. They were the stable, professional pray-ers for the community. Besides counsels on participation in liturgy, the writer of the Rule includes a "pet-policy" of sorts—recommendations about the keeping of a cat to manage mice that might, unbidden, want to share space with the anchoress.

Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M. summarizes the life of Gertrude of Helfta, called "the Great" who lived in community life in the Benedictine monastic tradition. Her writings were not the works of a solitary genius, nor the inspiration of a uniquely gifted contemplative. Rather, her legacy is inextricably bound up with other gifted contemplatives and writers in her community. Sorting out what was uniquely Gertrude's work takes scholarly precision. What did characterize Gertrude's own writing is her encouragement to enjoy conversation with God. The mystical life is not the anxious reaching for an elusive vision, but a continual jubilation in feeling God's delightful presence and friendship.

Julie Upton, R.S.M., explores the Beguines, a 300-year old women's movement in the late medieval period in Europe. Beguines were women who sought an alternative to both marriage and enclosed religious life. They lived in large residences in town—some buildings still survive—and went out to engage in commercial activities. They also did works of charity and attended the

sick and poor. Their public presence distinguished them from enclosed nuns; their social and economic autonomy distinguished them from married women under the control of husbands.

Janet Ruffing, R.S.M., echoes some of the same then-now questions as Mary-Paula Cancienne: How is what we call “mysticism” from the past relevant for today? After highlighting post-Vatican II theology and its call to universal holiness, she identifies “mysticism” not as a withdrawal from the world, but an entry into the needs of the world more fully in a spirit of service. A woman who personifies this form of mysticism is Catherine of Siena, who was an energetic contemplative, preacher, writer, healer, reformer, and peace-maker.

Jayne Hennessey, Ph.D., shifts the focus of mysticism from a life-style, or an individual’s writings, to the contemplative experience of a work of art. Of many representations of the *Pietà*-- Mary holding the body of Jesus her son after he’s taken down from the cross-- she chooses one on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the “Rhineland *Pietà*.” She provides a meditation on the emotional resonance the viewer feels today, saddened by war and social upheaval, in identifying with Mary the mother left with her dead child, and Jesus the victim of death-dealing violence.

The articles in this issue leap forward several centuries to an essay on Thomas Merton by Marilyn King, R.S.M. In a personable style, she surveys his spirituality centered on ordinary actions of each day done with attention to the moment, and engagement with what is happening in the world right now. Mysticism is not the launching of oneself into a stratosphere of rare and grand insights about God. Rather, reassuringly, Merton teaches that the genuine mystical life involves mindfulness, focus on what is right in front of a person. She captures the humor of Merton, who laughed off exalted notions of prayer and monastic life, insisting instead that “what I wear is pants; how I pray is breathe.”

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M, also treats Thomas Merton. She analyzes a particular theme—simplicity—and Merton’s continuity with his own Cistercian tradition going back to St. Bernard of Clairvaux. She notes Merton’s attraction to the Shaker tradition and his attraction to the economy of form and line in Shaker furniture. Merton’s simplicity of life, she finds, resonates with the concerns of cosmologist Thomas Berry. That connection inspires a commitment to sustainability—care for the environment, mindful of the common good and service to those in need.

There are denomination-free movements today, growing in popularity, urging the practice of mindfulness to help restore calm after a jangly day, achieve concentration at school, and promote creativity and efficiency in one’s work. Breathing exercises can reduce stress and lower blood pressure, aiding one’s overall health-maintenance. The long tradition of mindfulness in the history of Christian spirituality has a specifically religious desire—the hope for a closer union with God revealed in scripture, and with Jesus of the gospels. That union is the aim of each of these articles, offered here for your meditation and encouragement.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

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

Spirituality of the Desert Men and Women: Is it Relevant?

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M.

“Tradition” continually invites us to revisit our past and to re-examine forgotten practices and insights, as they may illuminate our journey today. These items from our history, relics of the ancestors, can sometimes act as sunlit lenses through which we perceive and interpret our present reality more clearly and deeply. The spirituality of the semi-anchoretic desert mothers and fathers of Egypt, approximately 1700 years ago, with their short stories and sayings, offer us an opportunity to question and contemplate the positive power, or destructive power, of our words. This particular niche of ancient Christian spirituality invites us to examine how we value words, what we do with words, how they act on us, how we practice with words, and how we respond to words, particularly regarding what we name as “sacred words.”

Getting along in today’s world requires that we be proficient with many types of practical skills, including media’s use of words and images, and getting ahead of the game demands even greater proficiency. People work hard, even desperately hard, to improve their employment/income opportunities, housing arrangements, and general living situations. Safety, health, education, financial opportunities, a clean environment, along with family and community relationships are concrete realities that people must attend to methodically and consistently in order to be successful. In a world based on economic competition this means focusing on things that can be made, patented, bought, and sold, and on services that can be monetized and advertised. The less concrete, more elusive dimensions of life can be denied, ignored, or subjugated to interesting, but not terribly important domains. An openness to a possible pervasive, creative, and dynamic Loving Wisdom finds less

time and space within our driven methods of thinking and doing, all part of what it takes to keep the bills paid and the to-do lists in check. Our subtle senses can seem numb to another dimension of reality, leading more than just a few to ask, “Is this all there is?”

Yet, “spirituality” and “mysticism” entice us, even if common public understandings of the terms are wide and wild. Akin to St. Augustine who longed for something more, many of us, all ages and stripes, ache for and seek something more as well. Yes, our hearts and minds get bored or restless and we ask, “Is this all there is?”

The fourth century was a period when men of this nature, and some women as well, made their way to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Arabia.¹ Granted, where these semi-anchoretic desert mothers

and fathers tended to settle was not where we might imagine; that is, in totally isolated areas. Rather, many created their simple living cells near the far fringes of towns. Living within walking distance of some small market allowed them to trade and sell their wares in order to support themselves, even though their needs were minimal. Still, some certainly lived in greater isolation than others, and it was always a discernment question in terms of how

much comfort was good for the soul, as well as how much interaction with other people, even fellow monks.

Why they chose definitively to go to these areas of hardship is disputed, but contributing to their desire was a longing to feel the weight of their love and commitment for God. There was a sense that the living God/Christ/Spirit was losing bold presence in their lives, especially since the danger of “red martyrdom,” death for being a Christian, became far less likely when the Roman Emperor Constantine

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converted to Christianity early in the fourth century. Graham Gould writes of the ascetic movement:

Church historians have often seen it as a movement of protest of the gradual creation of a state Church in the fourth century following the conversion of Constantine, or as a biblically motivated call for a return to the values of primitive Christianity and to the era of martyrs.²

More so, Gould notes that E. R. Dodd claims that the ascetic movement was more along the lines of an “ascetical reaction to an ‘age of anxiety’” which was true for “pagans” and Christians. Peter Brown explains it as a “sociological” response “to the deep-seated religious and social needs of late-antique Syria and Egypt.”³ Yet, Jean Gribomont writes that “Roman oppression of the Egyptian peasants had already created a movement known as ‘anchoritism,’ which referred to the flight into the desert of peasants who refused to assume the burden of agricultural labor” in order to support the Roman state.⁴ In this sense the movement to the desert might be interpreted as an ancient protest movement.

Further, David F. Noble believes that the ascetic movement “held a powerful attraction for women, promising them an unprecedented independence from patriarchal bonds and an equality in the image of God.” He writes that some women “used it to create for themselves a new social space beyond the confines of the family and marriage,” and that it “certainly enabled women as never before to join in community with men outside the family.”⁵ Thus, the movement into the desert was not limited only to Christians, nor did it concern only men. Desire and need spur creativity, in this case, fostering the rise of what is sometimes called the path of “white martyrdom,” an intense Christian path of prayer, Scripture, asceticism, and charity that followed the basic contours of three main forms according to

Cancienne: Spirituality of the Desert Men and Women Benedicta Ward.⁶

First, the way of the hermit, most famously known to us through *The Life of Anthony* (Anthony the Great, 252-356 C.E.) by his chronicler St. Athanasius, who does embellish Anthony’s life, as was the custom at the time for someone held in high esteem. Second, and in direct contrast, were large communities in the form of cenobitic monasticism begun by Pachomius (290-347 C.E.).

The values of poverty and chastity were key in all three of the desert ascetic forms. But it was Pachomius, who spent years in the military prior to his conversion, as well as years as a hermit, who introduced the element of obedience.⁷ He offered a structure that many found easy to appreciate at the time.

Thomas M. Gannon and George W. Traub write:

For the simple people who had remained closely attached to nature, a life of strict discipline completely devoted to the well-being of one’s neighbor and to hard work for the community was the best possible path to becoming a monk.⁸

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The third path is the semi-eremitical or semi-anchoritic model, described as an anchorite or monk who lives inter-relatedly with other ascetics, usually in very small groupings, or in the vicinity, inclusive of an elder. It is believed that the bulk of the collection of stories known as the *Sayings* originated with people from this model who lived in the area of lower Egypt.⁹ Although a

collection of stories comes to us in written form, it is important to remember that they represent a period that was steeped in oral tradition, but shifting to a written form with the use of parchment codices.¹⁰

According to Douglas Burton-Christie there is evidence supporting the fact that codices would have been translated into Coptic, the native language of the

majority of the monks by this time. Although most of the monks in Lower Egypt probably could not read, there were still a significant number that could, as well as those monks who joined or visited them from other areas, even Rome.¹¹

This time of transition from an oral culture to a portable written text, specifically the Bible, is important to the general context of desert spirituality. Burton-Christie writes:

The desert fathers believed that only those with experiences could adequately interpret the sacred texts. They considered discernment and self-knowledge essential for enabling the discourse of the texts (scripture) to continue in a new discourse.¹²

Sacred texts were shared, and became the words and focus of their actions expressed in and through their lives. This was the work, the practice in the desert. Indeed, there was a great reverence felt for the Word and the carrier of the Word, as well as a deeply felt responsibility to share it with integrity. The stories and sayings from this tradition of Christian followers that eventually were written and passed down to us indicate that the monks struggled intensely to live externally what they felt strongly in their hearts and minds.

While the written word was still a novel experience, which some thought very highly of and others mistrusted, words were not to be stored up or collected, but were seen as “living things”:

It was axiomatic for the desert fathers that the Word was one of the fundamental ordering realities under whose authority they placed themselves. Theirs was a primarily oral culture, and words were living things. Both the Word of God and the word of the elder carried this authority and burst forth in “events” of revelatory power. The concrete power of these “word events” can be seen in their effect on those who felt their full force: such words invariably

moved them and pierced them to the depths of their heart, often relieving them of the terrible burdens that weighed them down, though sometimes revealing to them with shattering clarity the shallowness of their convictions or the duplicity of their motives. Word events transformed their lives.¹³

Burton-Christie reminds us of the thoughts of Paul Ricoeur who said it was the “dialectic of event and meaning” that made for such a powerful experience and for the possibility that it could endure and transform.¹⁴ These “word events” manifested a world into which they projected themselves, not in an unreal sense, but in a way, that was close to the bone and heart of their desire to love God and neighbor

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with few distractions. This was the mysticism of the desert, the movement from simple-ness, emptiness, and openness to a sense of fullness and presence that occupies your whole being and world, but without fanfare and show.

For those in the desert, “There was a clear sense that the words from Scripture and from the elders transcended the limited scope of the ‘event’ in which they were initially encountered and endured in meaning. And there is no doubt that

both the words of Scripture and the words of the elders project a ‘world of meaning’ which the desert fathers sought to enter.”¹⁵

Experimental Effort to Respond to God’s Call

The world in the desert was one of intense awareness of both inner and outer realities such that there was little separation, even if aspects of their spirituality were dualistic, a fight between good and evil, God and demons, ancient ways of interpreting our struggles.

In this tradition we find, as evidenced in the written stories from this time, footprints showing daily life textured with relationships that indicate a desire to grow in hospitality, charitableness, and love

of God and neighbor. Even though this spiritual manifestation had a relatively short life, desert spirituality continues to inform Christianity, perhaps because it was lived with an effort for constant attention to what is most desired, which for them had to do with God and the call of the Word of God.

It was a radical experiment and not a model lifestyle. It has been criticized for its extremes and narrow focus. Yet, in spite of this or perhaps because of this, it remains as treasure in our tradition. The men and women of the desert wanted to respond to God as earnestly as they felt God had acted toward humanity and creation, without compromise. Wrapped in an ethos of silence, the preciousness of words created new worlds of perspective, meaning, and call, not unto themselves, but in terms of how to live in God, with God and neighbor.

Benedicta Ward, writes regarding life in the desert and the ancient collection of stories called *The Sayings* (Apopthegmata Patrum) that there “is no way of talking about the way of prayer, or the spiritual teaching” of these men and women. They did not have a delineated way, but “they had the hard work and experience of a lifetime of striving to re-direct every aspect of body, mind, and soul to God, and that is what they talked about. That, also, is what they meant by prayer.”¹⁶

According to Ward, their approach was one of “radical simplicity and common sense,” certainly a juxtaposition that could lead some to undertake difficult experiments, such as how much food, sleep, or conversation one really needs. Yet, after pushing the edges, compassion seemed to win the day. More so, “ascetic practices were only a means,” not the end goal.¹⁷ One did not speak in order to be isolative, but because it provided the silence and space to listen to the Spirit. If one could not find God in one’s cell, alone, how could you think that you would find God someplace else? Ward writes:

The aim was hesychia, quiet, the calm through the whole man that is like a still pool of water, capable of reflecting the sun. To be in true relationship with God, standing before him in

every situation—that was the angelic life, the spiritual life, the monastic life, the aim and the way of the monk. It was life orientated towards God.¹⁸

Four Themes for Today

In conclusion we ask, what does a re-examination of the material from the desert mothers and fathers have to offer us today? I believe there are at least four areas where this body of treasure can make positive contributions:

1) There is an egalitarian nature to the scene, organically recognizing mentorship and leadership in those wisdom figures who grew by way of contemplation on experiences as these experiences were perceived through the “Word of God.”

2) There is a willingness to experiment radically with living simply while still attentive to the limits and frailties of the human being involved.

3) The act of speaking is held acutely within the broader context of silence, where the primary focus is on listening for the “voice of God” that speaks in us and all around us, however softly or loudly, with a clear avoidance to an unlimited proliferation of words to fill the silence.

4) And, there is a challenge to prune our lives of so many to-do’s and distractions, and to make room for deep encounters, those “events,” “word-events,” whose energy can occupy our whole being and within which we can discern their meaning, invitation, and practice growing in peace, mercy, and just sustainable creativity with the Earth and each other.

To the question: Is this all there is? – Perhaps there is more here than we know. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Benedicta Ward, translation, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xvii.

² Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.2.

³ Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, p.3.

⁴ Jean Gribomont, “Monasticism and Asceticism,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*,

editors, Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p.90.

⁵ David F. Noble, *A World Without Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.13.

⁶ Ward, *Sayings*, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁷ Thomas M. Gannon and George W. Traub, *The Desert and the City: An Interpretation of the History of Christian Spirituality* (Chicago: University Press, 1969), p.32.

⁸ Jean Gribomont, op. cit., p.96.

⁹ Ward, *Sayings*, p. xviii.

¹⁰ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.44 and 77.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 44, 111.

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁶ Ward, *Sayings*, p. xxiii.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. xxv.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. xxi.

MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

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

MAST has been meeting annually since then, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST'S Executive Director. MAST will hold its next **Annual Meeting at 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@csm.edu or by mail at College of St. Mary, 7000 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE, 68016.

Dues can be paid by check, payable to MAST and sent to association Treasurer, Marilyn King, R.S.M., 220 Laura Lane, Lebanon, KY, 40033-8155. E-mail mheleneking@windstream.net.

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

Life Among the Beguines: 1200-1500

Julia Upton, R.S.M.

A lengthy obituary in the April 2013 issue of *The Economist* reported on the death in Belgium of ninety-two-year-old Marcella Pattyn, described as the last of the Beguines.¹ Apart from the Cole Porter 1935 classic song “Begin the Beguine”² have you ever even heard of the Beguines? Well, even if you know that the Beguines were part of a medieval religious movement, it still seems puzzling why a leading business publication would feature such an obituary. We might expect to find such a notice in the *National Catholic Reporter* or *America* or *Commonweal*, but to see it in *The Economist* is a bit jarring, particularly when the article notes that Marcella was “taking 800 years of history with her.” Just who were these Beguines and why would readers of *The Economist* care? Knowing more about the Beguines and their spirituality as well as where, when and how they lived will help to explain this unusual connection as well as give some insight into their relevance for us today.

Although Beguines could be found in many European countries beginning in the early 12th century, they flourished primarily in the so-called Low Countries of Northern Europe as illustrated in the map on page 10. That was the era when major universities were being established in cities such as Bologna, Paris, Salamanca, etc. Although women were not permitted to be enrolled, those who were interested in more education often entered convents “which fostered an atmosphere and provided an environment conducive to learning.”³ Beguines were not nuns and did not live in convents, although they led lives of prayer, chastity and service. Knowing more about where they lived, and the culture of that area, as well as the spirituality of the times, helps us

to understand how the Beguines came to be and why they flourished for almost three centuries, roughly from 1200 to 1500.

Cosmopolitan Social Context

In that era, the Northern European countries reflected a high degree of urbanization and were inhabited by people who were multi-lingual and manifested a high level of literacy⁴ when compared with their southern neighbors. Family life in Northern Europe was also much different from that in the more familiar Mediterranean culture. Households were headed by both husband and wife who entered marriage rather late by comparison. Whereas we usually think of women marrying soon after they became able to bear children, it was more common in

the Low Countries for men and women to marry around age 25 and for husband and wife to be close in age. This meant that a newly-married couple was financially independent from their parents and able to set up a separate household. Family size was also smaller than we might expect, with families having only 2 or 3 children and a “remarkably large proportion of the population never married.”⁵

There was also a different outlook on the role of women in those households. For example,

women were able to inherit land and property from their parents just as their brothers could and therefore did not need a dowry when marrying. Rather, they were active as businesswomen in their own right. Archival sources record women active in the market squares, “running their own businesses, managing stalls and vending their wares. Law codes, court and guild records, contracts, and many other sources . . . reveal that they were innkeepers, cloth merchants,

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painters, fishwives, teachers, and even construction workers and smiths.”⁶ As you can see, such women were hardly timid souls in need of protection in a convent. This dynamic makes make them particularly interesting to us today.⁷

Vita Apostolica Movement and the Beguines

In her recent book *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement*, Laura Swan observed that “around 1980 scholars began to take a real interest in the Beguines as an independent women's movement.”⁸ Around that time Paulist Press began issuing the multi-volume *Classics of Western Spirituality*, conceived and edited by Ewert Cousins⁹ and Richard Payne. Cousins was one of my professors at Fordham and his enthusiasm for the series and for spirituality in general was truly contagious within the Theology department, with symposia and lectures focused on Spirituality a regular occurrence. It was Jesuit Father Richard Smith's two-semester course in the History of Religious Life, however, that first introduced me to the broad sweep of religious communities across the ages and piqued my interest in the Beguines.

A religious movement that flourished in the era of the Beguines and likely helped to give impetus to them was the *vita apostolica*. This compelling way of life became popular during the age of Gregorian reform (1050-1080) and the 13th century witnessed a religious revival of that desire to live as close to the apostolic ideal as possible.

According to Ernest McDonnell, the *Vita Apostolica* “embraced three basic principles: imitation of the primitive church, poor, simple, and penitential, with interests and activities restricted to the spiritual domain; a passionate love for souls at home and far afield; and evangelical poverty in

common, either predicated on mendicancy or mitigated by the work of one's own hands.”¹⁰ Responding to the leaven of that spiritual impulse, there followed the founding of the Dominican, Franciscan and Premonstratentian communities which also flourished. They were communities of men, however, while enclosed communities remained the only official option for women drawn to religious life.

Life-Style of the Beguines

Among the laity living in the Low Countries at that time were the holy women (*mulieres sanctae*) who became what we know as “Beguines.” Including both women living alone and in community they never formed a united group with a single leader or organizational structure. They promised to remain chaste while living as Beguines, but were also free to marry or to enter an established religious community, which some did.¹¹ The convents where small groups of Beguines chose to live together each “developed their own house rules, often intricate and exhaustive in their detail, which stipulated the activities to be followed at each moment of the day; the time allotted to prayer, to work, to silence and entertainment, and regulating the movement of visitors and movements outside the convent.”¹²

They attended mass daily and prayed the divine office, but since they did not take a vow of poverty they were able to retain personal property. Their fundamental orientation toward the poor and sick led some Beguines to work in hospitals, visit the sick in their homes and establish infirmaries. Others formed small schools for the education of girls.

Remarking on this balance between the secular and religious life a later observer, John Malderus, Bishop of Antwerp (1563-1633) noted:

Rather than sharing a common ideal, apart from living the Gospel or living under a religious superior, what united the Beguines was a desire to lead a committed Christian life together with other women without the constraints imposed by marriage or enclosure.

... it was a common capacity of many pious women in Belgium to rejoice in excellence rather than promise it. They preferred to remain chaste perpetually than to vow perpetual chastity. Likewise, they were more eager to obey than to vow obedience, to cultivate poverty by frugal use of their fortunes than to abandon everything at once; they might be the kinder to the poor if something were left. They preferred to submit daily, as it were, to obedience within the enclosure than to be confined once and for all. In constant spontaneity, they found compensation for perpetual claustration.¹³

Writings by and About Beguines

Swan notes that because the Beguines were never a formal movement, no medieval or early modern archivist or historian was ever tasked with documenting their lives and teachings. Therefore, their writings survived primarily because monastic women were interested in them, and preserved their texts in monastery libraries. Those narratives that do exist were generally recorded by their confessors with the Beguines' editorial collaboration.¹⁴

Writing in the monastic tradition they tended to emphasize affective experience over reason. Like active religious, they were living in the world rather than being cloistered from it, so they were "confronted by the paradox of suffering in a world created by a loving God. At the same time, they were acutely conscious of the God of Mystery and reflected a sense of awe at the enormity of God's love toward creation."¹⁵ If this sounds to you a bit like Meister Eckhart it is probably because he drew on his contact with the Beguines and other communities of women in his province.¹⁶ Their texts were also more pastoral than theoretical. Rather than lengthy systematic discussions of theology, their "emphasis was on the practical living of the life of Christ."¹⁷

Beguine Residences

In the Low Countries Beguines were frequently granted land on which to build their own communities. The majority of these settlements, which varied in size from a small hamlet to a "city within a city," and which existed in almost every town, were built between 1230 and 1300, and were sometimes granted the status of a separate parish. In time these settlements came to be known as beguinages, although they were a later development. According to Bowie and Davis "the numbers of women housed in the Beguine convents was often fewer than ten and almost never more than fifty, but the total number of Beguine convents multiplied rapidly during the 13th and 14th centuries as new houses were established in all major urban centers throughout the Low Countries, Germany and in France."¹⁸

Travel has been an important by-product and genuine blessing of my ministry in higher education, interleaving my studies of liturgy and spirituality with their lived expressions around the world. In that connection, I have been fortunate enough to visit beguinages in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and both Ghent and Brugge, Belgium. Although the Beguines are gone, many beguinages survive and 13 are listed among UNESCO's World Heritage sites.¹⁹ According to Swan's research, "most of the homes within the surviving beguinages in the Low Countries are affordable housing for the elderly, writers or artists."²⁰

While traveling to a conference in Eindhoven, Netherlands in 2003 I spent a weekend in Amsterdam and spent much of Sunday afternoon at the beguinage there. After attending Mass at the Cathedral, I found my way to the nearby beguinage. A somewhat hidden vaulted Gothic passage leads you from the main street into a large grassy courtyard surrounded



http://www.rcrusoe.com/filebin/images/Maps/WebMap_BelgiumNetherlands2017.jpg

by tall townhouses. It is a peaceful oasis and that afternoon attracted many visitors who were respectful of the atmosphere. Some of the homes are open to visitors and docents give you a good sense of how the women there lived—actually quite similar to how we live in community today.

Beguines as a Women's Movement

Some have written that the Beguines represented the world's oldest religious women's movement and that may be. Even if that is not literally true, however, there remains a fascination for how these remarkable women lived. Richard Woodward, writing in the Travel section of The New York Times, observed that "Traces of these remarkable women and their idiosyncratic spiritual ways can be found today in the urban islands of quietness they once called home." It called it a "distortion" to view them as an "avant-garde wing of 20th century feminism," concluding that their legacy as a religious movement is "deserving of respect and can still be felt in the unusual communities they devised, even as they themselves have ... vanished."²¹ ♦

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Endnotes

¹ See "Marcella Pattyn," *The Economist*, April 27, 2013 <http://www.economist.com/node/21576632/print>. Accessed 10/29/16.

² That "Beguine" refers to a gentle dance form similar to the foxtrot, popular in the West Indies.

³ Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, *Beguine Spirituality: Mystical Writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Hadewijch of Brabant* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 8.

⁴ Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁵ Simons, pp. 7-8.

⁶ Simons, p. 10.

⁷ Saskia Murk-Jansen, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998) p. 11.

⁸ Laura Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement* (Katonah, NY: BlueBridge, 2015): p. 2.

⁹ At the time of Cousins' death in 2009 there were 107 volumes in the series. Cousins later became general editor of the 25-volume series *World Spirituality*. Paulist Press continues to publish the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series and to date there 151 volumes listed.

¹⁰ McDonnell, Ernest W. "The 'Vita Apostolica': Diversity or Dissent." *Church History* 24/1 (March 1955), 15-31; here 15.

¹¹ Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies. *Beguine Spirituality: Mystical Writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Hadewijch of Brabant* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 11.

¹² Bowie and Davis, p. 22

¹³ Quoted in McDonnell, Ernest W. *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1954): p. 122.

¹⁴ Swan, p. 4.

¹⁵ Murk-Jansen, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁸ Bowie and Davis, p. 18.

¹⁹ <http://www.worldheritagesite.org/sites/site.php?id=855>. November 1, 2016.

²⁰ Swan, p. 2.

²¹ Richard B. Woodward, "A Lost World Made by Women," *The New York Times* (July 13, 2008), TR3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/travel/13journeys.html>. (Accessed November 8, 2016).

Mysticism and Art: The *Pietà* and the Embrace of Compassion

Jayme Hennessey, Ph.D.

On a Sunday afternoon in the medieval art gallery at the Cloisters museum and gardens in New York, a young woman wound her way through the tapestries, sculptures, and paintings, not looking for any particular image until she is “found” by a late fourteenth-century *Pietà* from the Rhine Valley (Figure 1.). In the presence of this *Pietà* she found herself standing -- mother to mother, heart to heart, grief to grief, recognizing in Mary’s embrace, a reflection of her own experience of the afternoon she held the broken body of her young son as he died in her arms. Here she experiences the collapse of boundaries as her grief and anguish pour into the *Pietà*, into Mary’s grief and into the grief of so many mothers who have suffered the deaths of their children and turned to this image in their heartbreak.

Here in the *Pietà*, in the chaos of maternal heartbreak, she experiences the embrace of compassion breaking the isolating grip of guilt and grief, and she begins to understand that she is not alone.¹ In that moment, she experienced the presence of divine compassion mediated through a six-hundred-year-old wooden devotional object related to the mystical life of a community whose contemplative embrace of the the *Pietà* directed them to embrace the suffering of persons in the world.

Mysticism and Art: Contemplation and Action

Identified as *Pietà*, the Italian word for pity or compassion, these devotional images of the suffering of both Mary and Christ have their roots in Germany and the Low Countries, and belong to the class of images identified as *Versperbild*: devotional objects that were used in daily evening prayer. Generally consistent in both composition and form, the *Pietà* presents the scene of a Mary bearing the body of her

dead son, Jesus, in a pyramidal sculpture. The scene of the sculpture is not from the Gospels, but from an imaginative engagement with the Passion story that aimed to contemplate the significance of the humanity of Jesus and his relationship to his mother. These early *Pietà* sculptures tended towards a graphic depiction of a compelling scene in which Mary does what any mother would do when faced with the lifeless and brutalized body of her child: enfold him into her arms and weep.

It is difficult to describe, adequately, the complex phenomenon of mysticism in the Christian tradition, recognizing that historical contexts gave rise to varied experiences, expressions, practices and outcomes of mystical prayer. The preceeding narrative of a mystical experience prompted by viewing the *Pietà* sculpture brings some focus to an examination of the relationship of art to mysticism within the Christian tradition.

Originating in the thirteenth-century, the *Pieta* images were created to express and encourage a mystical experience of the presence of Mary and Christ, and integrate this experience into the daily life of a community of Christians. Viewed in the context of late medieval

mysticism, the sculpture inspired compassion as it fostered a mysticism that engaged the needs of the world. Today, the *Pietà* remains a powerful image, with a scene that has universal significance, and the capacity to prompt profound experiences of affectivity.

The tradition of using images to prompt devotion in the Christian tradition has been marked by ambiguity as theologians struggled to reconcile the representation of the infinite God in finite material



Figure 1. Painted wood *Pietà*.
Rhineland, 1375-1400.
Metropolitan Museum of Art.
www.metmuseum.org

images. While theologians have debated the legitimacy, veneration, and function of religious images, the power of these images has never been contested. In their appeal to the senses, the imagination and the heart, images can exercise a revelatory, formative and affective power. Images have the potential to shape Christian faith and move a person to compassionate action.

Mysticism for Everyone in Daily Life

The Rhineland *Pietà* pictured in this essay, is representative of the rich visual imagery of late medieval Christianity and its integral relationship to the mysticism of its day. It represents a form of mysticism that Bernard McGinn has characterized as democratized and secularized.²

Democratized because mysticism was no longer reserved for a spiritual elite. Laity could embrace the apostolic life and seek a personal experience of Christ through contemplative practices. Mysticism was democratized through the use of devotional images that emphasized the vulnerable humanity of Christ, and mediated a visual encounter with those who desired his presence, but lacked the gift of spiritual ecstasies.

Mysticism was secularized by its turn to the world, as laity who desired to follow Christ practiced the works of mercy in imitation of the love Christ showed for those who suffered poverty and illness. It is a mysticism that introduced a new narrative into western Christian theology, one that invited the ordinary Christian into an intimate relationship with Christ's love for humanity. Christ's own humanity becomes a point of spiritual communion and transformation for ordinary Christians.

Describing this mysticism and its focus on realizing the *Imago Dei* in Christian life, Caroline Walker Bynum notes, "The dominant note of piety is optimism and a sense of momentum toward a loving

God. Concentration on Christ's suffering in the Passion, which increases in thirteenth and fourteenth-century devotions, is not primarily a stress on the sacrifice needed to bridge the enormous gap between us in our sin and God in his glory; it is rather an identification with the fact that Christ is what we are."³

This new narrative of intimate love is embodied in the *Pietà* sculptures, with their expression of a mysticism that longed to be in the presence of both Mary and Christ, that desired to be deeply moved by the intimate human-divine love revealed in their relationship, and shaped a will to embrace the suffering found in the world.

When viewed as a part of a process of mystical reflection on the vulnerable humanity of Jesus, these images reveal a community probing the significance and shape of compassion for the Christian life. To paraphrase Rachel Fulton, the images and devotions of the late medieval period were tools forged by medieval Christians, to help them know how to *feel*, and prompt them to develop the emotions and the dispositions deemed essential to the Christian life. "...schooled religiously sensitive men and women in the potentialities of

emotion, specifically love, for transcending the physical, experiential distance between individual bodies--- above all, bodies in pain."⁴

Mysticism and Art: Community and the Embrace of Compassion

Joanna E. Ziegler has proposed that the *Pietà* may have originated with the Beguines, as a devotional image intended to integrate a mystical experience of the presence of Christ and Mary with the responsibilities of their daily life. The Beguines were a late medieval community of lay women in Northern Europe and the Lowlands who lived singly or in community, without solemn vows, bound

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together by their commitment to the apostolic life, working together making cloth and lace to support their ministries, and caring for the poor, sick and dying.

The noted mystics Hadewich of Antwerp (ca. 13th c.), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207- c.1282-1294), and Marguerite Porete (1250-1310) who was burned at the stake for heresy when she refused to renounce her mystical writings in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*-- were all members of a Beguine community. Zeigler has studied the *Pietà* sculptures found in many of the Beguine chapels, where these devotional objects may have functioned as Eucharistic images for the mystical practice of visual communion,⁵ a particularly poignant thought noting the excommunication of these women at the Council of Vienne in 1311.⁶

Through visual communion with the *Pietà*, some Beguines may have received from Mary what some clerics denied them: the Body of Christ. Mary silently extends the Body of Christ, her son, to the viewer who visually touches the body, all in a space that is potentially charged with compassion. Ziegler proposes that the *Pietà* has unique properties-- the tactile sense of the sculpture through which a person visually "touches," as well as sees the wounded and lifeless body of Christ embraced in the arms of his grieving Mother. This profound sense of physicality and touch serves as a structuring principle for viewers' personal and communal lives:

In its overt materiality – its own physical body – sculpture engages more than the eyes, for it demands the sensitivity of the hands and fingers as well, of the sense of touch – the tactile – the one sense above the others that can access the physical world and the properties that are unique to it.⁷

Can visual images
truly transform
a person's
consciousness, and
therefore influence
moral perception and
actions of persons in
the real world?

The Beguines' manual labor, their touch involved in healing the sick or consoling those who grieved, and their mystical experience of the presence of Christ and Mary were all drawn together in the tactile aspects of the *Pietà*. The image prompted them to embrace those who suffered from poverty and illness.

Reflecting on how the *Pietà* may have functioned in structuring the mysticism and life of the Beguines may provide us with some understanding of how art can support a form of mysticism that integrates contemplation with action. The mystical experience of the presence of the vulnerable humanity of Christ, in the *Pietà*, prompts contemplation on what it means *to love* the God who has entered into the vulnerability of humanity, whose body was not only nurtured and loved, but also endured the suffering of the cross and the reality of death. In prompting the viewer how *to love* Christ, the visible image of the invisible God, the *Pietà* is also prompting the viewer what it means

to love one's neighbor—showing the compassionate Christ who poured out his life for the salvation of humanity. The *Pietà* is a visual expression of affective and imaginative responses that characterized mystical experience in the here and now, rather than a visual expression of theology.

Mysticism and Art: The *Pietà* and Engagement with a Suffering World

The use of art to prompt and shape mystical experiences is tied to questions, in general, about the efficacy of images. Or, is the affective experience of looking at images solely internal and cathartic, providing no more than transitory release of certain emotions?

Part of the answer depends on the intention of the person gazing on the image and what she seeks in this moment. Another part of the answer depends on the experience of grace and its effect on the human

heart and mind. A Beguine who contemplated the *Pietà* in her chapel may have sought to enter, intentionally, into the presence of Christ and Mary, and hoped to grow in the grace and compassion that would bring a sense of Christ's love and mercy for the poor and sick entrusted to her care. The woman who encountered the *Pietà* in the Cloisters may not have been intending to find any solace there—but solace did find her.

Putting questions about the intentions of the viewer aside, we can consider how art communicates ideas or a semblance of an experience when words fall short, or when silence is the more appropriate response. There is some knowledge that can only be gained visually. Susan Feagin proposes that: "Once artworks are accessed—either as artworks or aesthetic objects—by special modes of perception or understanding, the question is how we can return to the world of real things with knowledge about it gained from our experience with the artworld."⁸

The *Pietà* offers knowledge about suffering in the real world. The knowledge that we gain from viewing it inspires tender love and gentleness in world that is reeling from the effects of original sin. The brutal violence of war, for example, continues to kill children, and mothers continue to mourn over their lifeless bodies.

Reflecting on how the violent death of her son initiated her into a community of grieving mothers—a group that no one really wants to join—the woman whose experience at the Cloisters introduced this chapter has commented: "There are more of us than you would think."⁹

The *Pietà* is embodied in the experience of mothers throughout the world, who have found the death of a child chiseled into their own lives. These grieving mothers give witness to atrocities against children, memorializing humanity's dark capacity for cruelty and depravity. Their grief also calls out for justice and peace. Reflecting on the experience of the cross that falls heavily onto the

lives of these women, Elizabeth Johnson observes:

Like them, Mary suffered the anguish of not being able to save her child from the hand of torturers and executioners. The fact that the Christian imagination can picture Mary standing with desolated people under all the crosses set up in the world is due to the history of her own very real grief. This memory finds its liberating effectiveness when it empowers the church's women and men to say, STOP IT. No more killing of other people's children, No more war, brutal greed, and tyranny.¹⁰

We find the patterns of the *Pietà* emerging all across our world in scenes of war, poverty, genocide, hate crimes, racism, and we are called to do more than feel empathy. We are called to re-structure a foundation of social justice to reform this suffering and violence. We are called to a mysticism that entails social transformation, a mysticism that engages the injustice of the world.

Describing the characteristics of this type of social justice mysticism, Janet Ruffing, R.S.M., draws from the theology of Johann Baptist Metz to propose a mysticism that "entails an active form of resistance to suffering in the world; it demands that human beings act courageously to create a more just social order and struggle for more universal realization of the Enlightenment ideal 'that all persons are able to be subjects' of their own histories."¹¹

It is useful to reinterpret the image of the *Pietà* as a support for mysticism that guides the work of social transformation. We can note that the forcefulness of the *Pietà* is not limited to late medieval Christianity. The image has been reinterpreted in modern times so it expresses the pain and determination of the artist, even while the form of the sculpture has remained relatively stable.¹² For example, the German artist Kathe Kollwitz created a small bronze *Pietà* (1938) to express her experience of devastation upon the death of son, Peter, in World

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War I. It is a *Pietà* that encourages resistance to war and violence that destroys the sons and daughters of parents in every land.

For centuries the *Pietà* was housed in churches and chapels, rather than museums. This created a space where women who were grieving the death of a child could recognize their own experience in the sculpture and found some solace. It was space created by a community who believed that God's compassion and love were revealed in the God become flesh and shared in all the vulnerability of humanity.

Across the centuries the *Pietà* silently but urgently calls the Christian community to embrace the body of Christ and to belong to the Body of Christ in all its vulnerability. The challenge today is to recover and re-interpret the image so it achieves its effect—to create a communion with Christ and Mary that moves us out into the world, rather than seeking seclusion from the world. In the *Pietà* we can recover a sense of compassion and rouse a commitment to justice that transforms us and our world. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Kathleen Coords, personal interview by Jayme Hennessey. Narragansett, Rhode Island, 2006.

² Bernard McGinn, "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism" in *Church History*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (June, 1996): 198.

³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): 130.

⁴ Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 147.

⁵ Devotion to the Body of Christ was institutionalized in the mid-thirteenth century by the prompting of the Beguine visionary, Juliana of Cornillon (1192-1258). The Feast of Corpus Christi was observed in Liege during the year 1246, with Pope Urban V adopting it for Church wide observance in 1264. Receiving the Real Presence of Christ was no small matter and required proper spiritual preparation; otherwise a person risked the possibility of unworthily consuming the Eucharist. Therefore, visual

and spiritual communion both were regarded as substitutions for consuming the consecrated host.

⁶ The Beguines endured a number of persecutions based on their independence from ecclesiastical supervision and the reputation for preaching.

⁷ Joanna E. Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in Southern Low Countries, c. 1300-c.1600* (Rome: Academia Belgica, 1992), 158.

⁸ Susan Feagin, "Paintings and Their Places," *Art and Its Messages: Meaning, Morality, and Society*. Edited by Stephen Davies, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 20.

⁹ Kathleen Coords, personal interview by Jayme Hennessey. Narragansett, RI. 2006.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 297.

¹¹ Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M., "Introduction," *Mysticism and Social Transformation*. Edited by Janet K. Ruffing, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001): 8.

¹² Michelangelo's famous *Pietà* sculpture of 1499 is a purposeful departure from the grotesque quality of the late medieval *Pietà* images. Michelangelo preferred to express an inward spiritual experience of peaceful acceptance of her son's sacrificial death, as Mary contemplates the love revealed in this Jesus' death on the Cross. The German artist Kathe Kollwitz created a small bronze *Pietà* (1938) to express her experience of devastation upon the death of her son, Peter, in World War I. The Kollwitz *Pietà* encourages resistance to war and violence that destroys the sons and daughters of parents in every land.

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Gertrude the Great of Helfta (1256-1302)–A Joyful Life in God

Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M

At the young age of five the woman we know as Gertrude of Helfta was presented as an oblate to Saint Mary's monastery in Eisleben, Saxony.¹ Eisleben is near present day Lutherstadt. The monastery is better known simply as Helfta. It was re-founded by Cistercians nuns after the reunification of West and East Germany in the 1990's. Gertrude is known as Gertrude of Helfta because there are no known details about her family. It is commonly thought that she came from an upper class family from the surrounding area. In the sixteenth century she was given the title "the Great" by Pope Benedict IV to distinguish her from Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (d.1291) and to recognize the depth of her spiritual and theological insight.

During her early years, she received her education in the liberal arts in the abbey school for girls. Then as a teen she entered the monastic community. Gertrude was a very bright child and in her early twenties proved herself a scholar. When she was about 25 years old, in 1281, she received her first vision of Christ's divine sweetness.

Communal Writings of the Helfta Nuns

As Sister Jeremy Finnegan recognized in her study on the women of Helfta, this was a community that raised up scholars and mystics.² Carolyn Walker Bynum in *Jesus as Mother* made another important contribution.³ More recent scholarship, for instance, the work of Laura Grimes and of Anna Harrison, has emphasized the spirit of this monastic community and the nature of the Helfta writings. These include two compiled books. *The Memorial Herald of the Abundance of Divine Love* (*Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis*, more familiarly known by the title "*The Herald*"). All but Book Two were

written and compiled by the nuns of the community in some collaboration with Gertrude. Book Two was written by Gertrude herself and is an autobiographical account of her conversion and the contemplative gifts and visionary prayer that came to characterize her life and legacy.

The Book of Special Grace (*Liber specialis gratiae*) is attributed to Mechtild of Hackeborn. This, too, is a book comprised of seven parts. Gertrude of Helfta was one of the writers. The third work in the Helfta corpus, an extant work of Gertrude of Helfta, with strong ties to Book Two of the Herald, came to be titled *Spiritual Exercises* (*Documenta spiritualium exercitationum*). This work contains seven meditations that are

"liturgically-based" and rich in biblical tropes, allusions and reminiscences.

These works represent the largest body of thirteenth century women's writings from Germany. Bynum comments "the fact that an entire community authored Gertrude's works undercuts the picture of her as a lone, childish needy mystic." If we accept the communal authorship of these works, then we must reinterpret the spiritual teaching of Helfta and conclude, in the case of Gertrude of Helfta, that "those around her saw her primarily as a teacher and adviser."⁴

The spirit of this monastery as a center of learning, liturgy and mysticism was encouraged and fostered by their Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (d.1291) who served as abbess for forty years. As an independent monastic community, the women lived the Rule of Saint Benedict and followed Cistercian customs. The monastery was under the jurisdiction of bishop of the diocese of Halberstadt part of the archdiocese of Magdeburg.

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Divine Sweetness

Gertrude of Helfta exercised a *ministerium verbi*, the ministry of the word. The careful reading of Scripture seemed to her “honeycomb in the mouth, harmonious music in the ear and spiritual joy in the heart.” She was a compiler and a writer. The author of Book One of *The Herald* remarks: “If she found anything useful in scripture which seemed hard for the less intelligent to understand, she would alter the Latin and re-write it –[so that it would be] more useful to those who read it. ... from early morning until night she summarized lengthy passages to promote God’s praise and her neighbor’s salvation.” (*Herald* 1.1.7)

Although there is no extant catalog of the Helfta library,⁵ textual evidence in *The Herald* shows that the women of Helfta both owned and interpreted theological writings, especially those of Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux. Gertrude composed various pieces, including prayers for the benefit of the community. She did not write many of the extant prayers attributed to her in *The Herald*. Those in the *Spiritual Exercises*, however, were written by her.

In her day and earlier, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, writers like William of Saint Thierry, Guigo the Carthusian, and Saint Bonaventure were developing the tradition of “exercises,” or outlines for personal contemplative prayer and liturgical activities which promoted prayer. These spiritual writers were building on exercises in the works of John Cassian and Gregory the Great. They composed exercises which incorporated the practice of *lectio divina*, including the stages of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplation*. Reflecting this tradition, there are many exercises scattered throughout *The Herald* and *The Book of Special Grace*.

Overview of The Spiritual Exercises

The seven exercises in *The Spiritual Exercises* of Gertrude were written toward the end of her life. This

devotional work, as Maureen McCabe observed, “reveals a woman who had made the Word her own and who has, so to speak, come into her own through the Word.”⁶ “Grant,” Gertrude prays, “that in this life I may so perfectly learn your scripture, full of love, that to fill up your charity in me, not one iota may be wanting.”

Gertrude composed the Exercises in medieval Latin prose as she did her other works. The book titled *The Spiritual Exercises* contains seven meditations. The title *Exercises* does not come from Gertrude.⁷ It comes from the Carthusian Lanspergus (Johannes Gerecht, from Landsberg, Bavaria) who compiled these works in the mid-fifteenth century. The term *exercitia* is taken from the second of the seven exercises (II, 4).

Like other examples of spiritual or devotional exercises recorded in the writings of the Helfta nuns, *The Spiritual Exercises*, are referred to as tools or instruments of spiritual perfection. The exercises were used (prayed, performed) by the nuns to teach, nurture, develop, and celebrate a monastic mystical spirituality deeply grounded and nurtured in liturgical celebration.⁸ The spirituality of these *Exercises* reflects and nurtures the nuns’ lived experience of their call and consecration to God through their monastic way of life and its communal liturgical practices. A bridal mysticism is characteristic of the Helfta women. This theme reflects the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, especially his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, and twelfth century affective spirituality. By grace and free will, a person grows in consciousness of mystical union with God Triune, in communion of wills, being made one spirit with God.⁹

Although the body might impede devotees from renewing the *Imago Dei* and conforming themselves to God, the body also allowed them to gain access to God. It was through the physical man Jesus Christ that God revealed himself and provided human

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beings a way to know, love and become one with him. Bernard finds the model for this union in the Incarnation.¹⁰ A theology of incarnation is the foundation of the theology of the monastic life (Christian life) as an espousal, an invitation to spiritual marriage and by God's mystical union. This is a grace and gift of God, the gift initially given to humankind in the Incarnation.

Caroline Walker Bynum captured this theme in her important writings on the women of Helfta.¹¹ Christ is what we are. Our humanity is in him and in him it is joined with divinity. He became what we are. We encounter this humanity-divinity of Christ in the Eucharist and in mystical union, each of which is an analogue for the other. It is symbolized most especially in the divine heart of Jesus, the deified heart of the God-man. The glorified humanity of Christ means that the work of salvation is already accomplished.

In the years after her initial conversion, Gertrude of Helfta experienced God triune, especially in the gift of the divine face, the wounds, and the divine heart who drew her to a state of prayer which caused her "soul to bow down in admiration and wonder at the greatness of God's love."¹² Deep humility and a lived response of praise and thanksgiving, doxology, are a double-sided characteristic of her spirituality.¹³

The First Four Exercises

The seven exercises are set out in a plan based on the life stages wherein the monastic journey is marked by the commemoration of ritual celebrations. The First Exercise is for the renewal of Baptism as Christian initiation, the foundation of Christian life and Christian spirituality. In Exercise Two, the women renew and deepen their "first conversion," that the first step and entry into the monastic life. Gertrude and the reader pray that she may be received by the Lord into the cloister of love. Here Gertrude echoes the Rule of Benedict, which refers to

the monastery as a school of the Lord's service. She also images the monastery as the cloister of love, as well as Christ's deified heart.

The third Exercise celebrates and renews monastic consecration. In this exercise Christ the Beloved invites: "I will teach her the song of virgins, which will sound so dulcet from my throat that she will be compelled to be united with me in the most pleasant bond of love. What I am by nature she will become by grace. I will wind my arms of love around

her, drawing her close to the very heart of my deity in order that, by virtue of my burning love, she will melt like wax before the fire. (Line 22). Christ continues, "My beloved dove, if you want to be mine, you need to cherish me dulcetly, wisely, and strongly, and to be capable of experiencing all this pleasantly in yourself" (Line 27).

In this exercise, drawing upon the rite of profession, we find a reference to the circular dance: "[O Love]...you will

lead with you in the most blessed circular dance in heaven ... thousands upon thousands of the very brightest virgins. They are adorned, at one with you, in snow-white robes, jubilantly singing the dulcet songs of everlasting marriage." (384-6)

A nun's profession is also the liturgical basis for chapter four. These four exercises were made annually. The nuns were encouraged to use the final three exercises as frequently as they desired.

Exercise Five is structured on the pattern of the monastic day through the liturgical hours and is richly engages the Song of Songs. This Exercise is titled "Mystical Union."

Exercise Six is alternatively translated and titled "Praise and Thanksgiving" and "Jubilus." The latter title Jubilus was used by Gertrud Jarron Lewis. This exercise, like Exercise Five, is intimate, referring to special graces of Christian contemplative prayer and the elevation of the spiritual senses.

In this meditation, the reader encounters a glimpse of the ascent to highest stages of

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contemplative prayer, “[giving] the soul a foretaste of the joys of heaven.” In a similar vein, Bernard McGinn comments:

Gertrude’s [of Helfta] sense of belonging to heaven while still on earth indicates that the “praise, joy and awareness of glory” so characteristic of her mysticism finds a summation in this exercise in which all things, the powers and virtues of her soul and body, as well as the divine attributes and all creation, are called upon to offer jubilation to God.¹⁴

It is in this Sixth Exercise that the biblical-monastic themes of deified heart-house-temple-throne-tabernacle, new song, dance, and chalice of vision are again found. Gertrude crafts a liturgy of praise and jubilation, a liturgy with a strong eschatological theme-- the experience of divine presence in every Eucharist of the *there* and *here* and *now*. The same timelessness characterizes the contemplative-mystical union of the soul with God.

The final Exercise is on death. The title given by Gertrud Jaron Lewis is telling--- “Life in Death.” This is a meditation to prepare for death. It also evokes the soul’s longing voiced in the six previous exercises. Only by the passage through death will one hear the eternal “Come, beloved of my Father” and know the fullness of joy in communion that has been, prior to this moment, but a foretaste.

Each exercise then is a spiritual instruction guiding one’s intention in prayer. It leads the reader, nun, or community to intensify a single desire—to focus on the interior spiritual journey. The exercises are practices of an embodied, participatory form of prayer, both personal and communal, that nurtures a longing for the graces of a contemplative-liturgical-mystical life.

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Closer Analysis of Gertrude’s Sixth Exercise

Jubilus

All of the Exercises build on the practice of *lectio divina*. *Lectio* (reading Scripture) is oriented toward *meditatio* (meditation) and *oratio* (prayer) and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Mary Carruthers¹⁵ refers to the monastic art as the monastic authors talked about it, as art for *mneme* (memory), rather than art for *mimesis* (imitation). Here *mneme* produces an art for “thinking about,” for “meditating upon” and for gathering in, as in *legere*, to read. As an art of tropes and figures, it is an art of patterns and

pattern making, and an art of cognition. Tropes and figures are the memory resident tools, the devices and machines of monastic reading craft. Amy Hollywood also explains:

Meditation on images and texts, then, is foundational for medieval Christian visionary and mystical unitive experience. The use and subversion of biblical images to describe and evoke the experience of

God’s presence and union with God must be understood in this context, for through meditation on such biblical images, and in particular the erotic language of desire in the Song of Songs, such experiences are brought about in the mystic.¹⁶

This underlines and explains further the literary nature of mystical texts. She further argues: If we accept the premise that experience is mediated through and structured by language, then we must recognize that we have no access to an unmediated experience. Acknowledging the mediated nature of mystical texts, furthermore, allows us to take into account their literary quality without denying their claims to speak out of and to particular realms of experience.

In Exercise Six Gertrude has created an intensely personal meditation. With the interpenetrating movements of ascent and interiority, she weaves into her text familiar biblical and liturgical images and

tropes. Central among these are the sequence house-throne-tabernacle-deified heart; New Song, dance, and chalice of vision.

Much like Bernard of Clairvaux, Gertrude invites the one making the meditation into a new intertextual situation in which the guided instruction provided in the exercise, the scriptural book, and the book of inner experience would illuminate each other, leading the soul--as the bride of the Song of Songs-- or any one who reads or makes this exercise, into an ever-deeper relational bond with her Divine Bridegroom.¹⁷ This exercise, like the others, is a guided meditation based on the pattern of *lectio divina* to inspire renewal and recommitment. The language is biblical, embodied, feminine and performative. It can be described as an embodied prayer practice.

The Plan and Divisions of Exercise Six¹⁸

In the opening lines of Exercise Six Gertrude instructs the reader to:

Now and then, set aside for yourself a day on which, without hindrance, you can be at leisure to praise the divine and to make amends for all the praise and thanksgiving you have neglected all the days of your life to render to God for all the good he has done. (lines 1-4)

The next lines give the theme that will inform the prayer.

And that will be a day of praising and thanksgiving and a day of jubilation, and you will celebrate the memory of that radiant praise with which you will be jubilant to the Lord for eternity, when you will be satisfied fully by the presence of the Lord; and your soul will be filled with the glory of the Lord. [n. 1 Kings 8.11] (line 5) ...

The introduction is followed by three parts. Each of these three parts is subdivided. Each of the three parts begins with an opening psalm (Ps 102 (103), Ps 144 (145), and the Canticle from Daniel (Dn 3). The text instructs in simple rubrics, to “read the psalm with your heart and your mouth.” Reading (*lectio*) leads to meditation or a “free commentary” on the

psalm just recited. The movement leads to prayer (*oratio*) prayers of praise. Following this is a litany of petitions. Every sentence in Gertrude’s original Latin begins with either *Benedicant* or *Benedicat*, a word pattern, as Columba Hart comments, which cannot be reproduced in English with the same effect.¹⁹

Third are prayers of jubilation, in which every sentence begins with either *Jubilent* or *Jubilet*. Fourth, are prayers of adoration, where Gertrude resumes a less formal composition. The great *jubilus* or fourth movement follows, and stretches as mentioned from lines 421-489. This is the turning movement – what I would call the “breakthrough.” The fifth movement begins in line 490. The directive almost repeats the opening lines of this exercise.

Then, as if you were somewhat refreshed by praising your God, your king, who is in his sanctuary, rise up now with heart wide open to delight in God, your lover, throwing into him all the love of your heart so that here he may nourish you with the blessing of his gentleness and there may lead you to ...And [say] with these words (line 495).

The prayers of adoration in this movement are inspired by the thoughts of Psalm 22 (23), the “Lord is my shepherd.” Gertrude introduces Saint Bernard’s comment, that the gift of contemplation is granted “all too seldom and for too short a time.”²⁰ A few lines further on, Gertrude alludes to the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah, and then she comes back to the shepherd psalm. Christ as the Shepherd and herself as His ewe lamb are images that Gertrude loved. They recur in the first and four exercises. It is also in this movement that Gertrude uses the biblical images. In this movement the reader encounters rich and beautiful biblical symbolism that we will discuss further on, for instance, “Circling the altar of her reconciliation” and the “Inebriating chalice of vision.”

In the fifth and closing part of Exercise Six, Gertrude recommends the hour of her death to the protection of Christ and His mother, and voices her

longing for heaven again in rich symbolism and images. If the *ars amoris* (art of love) is inspired by the Song of Songs, the Apocalypse is a guide to present one before the throne of the lamb, to penetrate the eternal tabernacle and to sing the unending *Jubilus*. ♦

Endnotes

¹ This information is gleaned from the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). See also Anna Harrison, “‘I Am Wholly Your Own’: Liturgical Piety and Community Among the Nuns of Helfta,” *Church History* 78.3 (2009): 549-83. Recent scholarship and my own research on the Helfta women corroborate the findings in these earlier sources.

² Sister Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

³ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*.

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Gertrud of Helfta: Brief Life of a Female Visionary 1256-c.1302,” *Harvard Magazine* (May-June 2012).

⁵ Finnegan, *Women of Helfta*, pp. 4-5

⁶ Maureen McCabe, OCSO “The Scriptures and Personal Identity: A Study in the *Exercises* of Saint Gertrud,” *Hidden Springs Cistercian Monastic Women Medieval Religious Women*, Volume Three, Book Two, ed. by John A. Nichols & Lillian Thomas Shank, O.C.S.O., Cistercian Studies Series: Number One Hundred-Thirteen (Cistercian Publications, 1995): 498.

⁷ The term exercises was first applied by the Carthusian Lanspergius (Johannes Gerecht from Landsberg, Bavaria) to “The Exercises of Saint Gertrude.” He published it in Cologne in 1536 as part of her entire work. In this essay, I will be using the English translation prepared by Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, *Gertrud the Great of Helfta Spiritual Exercises: Translation, Introduction, Notes and Indexes* by Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, Cistercian Fathers Series: Number Forty-Nine (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989): 1.

⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350*, (New York, Crossroad, 1998): 275.

⁹ Cf. Bernard McGinn, “Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal,” *Spiritus: Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8:1 (January, 2008): 44-63.

¹⁰ Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (New York & London: Routledge 2002): 45-46.

¹² See Gertrude the Great of Helfta: *The Herald of Divine Love, Book 2*, trans. Margaret Winkworth (New York: Paulist Press 1992).

¹³ Cf. Sister Mary Jeremy, *The Women of Helfta*, Anna Harrison, op. cit. ; Sister Florence Feeney, O.S.B., “Love Response: The Exercises of St Gertrude,” in *The Benedictine Review*, IX, No. 1 (January, 1954).

¹⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, p.275.

¹⁵ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images 400-1200*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, Book 34. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Paperback Edition, 2000).

¹⁶ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 21.

¹⁷ See Bernard McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, pp. 185-190. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Songs I*, Sermon 20.

¹⁸ This is well documented. In this section I am drawing from Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *Spiritual Exercises, Gertrude D'Helfta Oeuvres Spirituelles*, Tome 1, *Les Exercices Texte Latin*, Introduction, Traduction et Notes par Jacques Hourlier et Albert Schmitt, Moines de l'Abbaye S. Pierre de Solemnes (Sources Chrétiennes No. 127, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1967) ; and Hart, *The Exercises of Saint Gertrude*, Introduction, Commentary and Trans. by Columba Hart, O.S.B. (Maryland : Westminster, 1956).

¹⁹ Hart, *Exercises*, p. 108.

²⁰ Hart, *Exercises* p.108, n.2. The same also appears in the *Herald* “Rara hora et parva mora,” Saint Bernard, *Sermones in Cantica*, Sermo XXVIII.15, col. 892. See *Legatus*, Lib. III, cap. 74 , p.257; *Exercitia*, p.79.



St. Gertrude of Helfta

Mystics and the Ancren Riwe

Barbara Moran, R.S.M.

While many readers may not associate the 13th century anchoresses with mysticism, a careful reading of either one of the original middle English texts or a modern translation, will show that these women were most probably called to a solitary life of prayer and contemplation. The original texts called women, later on women and men, and also lay people—in one of the later versions—to this lifestyle, first in England and later on in other European countries. But anchoresses were known throughout Europe by the 13th century, and they were seen as reclusive women, usually connected to a church and known for lives of prayer, penance, and separation from the world and its concerns.

The *Ancrene Rule*, to use a modern spelling, exists in 17 versions, 15 of which are in 13th century Middle English, and two others in French and Latin versions. The text is basically a series of spiritual counsels, probably written by a male director. However, neither the original version, nor the name of the writer, are included in the extant copies. But the instructions are both directions for the daily lives of the enclosed anchoresses and suggestions for prayer and spiritual practices. Whether these recipients should be called mystics may be open to question, but they originally spent many hours each day in solitary prayer.

Outline of the Rule on Leading a Life of Prayer

The first and final chapters of the Rule deal with everyday routines, but the rest of the material calls these recipients to a life of spiritual growth and development. Chapter One is entitled “Of Divine Service,” and after calling readers to a life of vocal prayer from morning until nightfall reminds them that at Mass they are closely united with Jesus Christ in the giving of His Body and Blood. This statement does not describe mysticism as such, but certainly contains the essence of mystical union with the Divine Redeemer.

This chapter is then followed by sections on other religious matters: “On Keeping the Heart,” “Moral Lessons and Examples,” “Temptations,” “Of Confession,” and “Of Love.” Each of these chapters provides the way for mystical development. The growing number of followers suggests that these directives were embraced by those who followed this Rule, either as single anchoresses, or in a community of women. Later on, men who were dedicated to a solitary religious life also adopted this Rule.

Reading the Original Text for Counsels on the Life of Prayer

For some readers who may be familiar with 13th century middle English, the majority of the Ancren Riwe texts published by the Early English Text Society are available. Other readers will probably prefer Morton’s 19th century translation¹ or The Medieval Library’s 20th century edition of Morton’s work.²

The first chapter of the Rule advocates the recitation of Canonical Hours, frequent prayers to Our Lady and special devotions to Jesus on the Cross. But at this period neither the term “rosary” nor “Stations of the Cross” are used. Reciting vocal prayer from morning until evening is the main duty of these anchoresses, and minute details

are provided. There can be little doubt that theirs was a life devoted to union with God.

Part II of the Rule includes detailed instructions for “Keeping the Heart: Of Sight, Of Speech, Of Hearing, Of Smell, and Of Touch or Feeling.” While these directives may seem negative, in the mind of the original author such regulations were essential for those who aspired to a life of prayer and contemplation.

Part III continues in much the same vein, with moral lessons taken from Scripture and an explanation of why one would embrace the monastic life. Interior love and forgiveness are also advocated,

While mysticism is not described as such, surely anchoresses who took these instructions seriously would be classified as contemplatives. Mystical union with Christ must have been their experience.

and the life of retirement from the world is also praised as truly the most Christian way of life.

The section on temptations covered in Part IV deals with both external and internal matters. It explains how anchoresses may be assailed by what is outside and inside themselves as they try to follow Christ more closely in both prayer and daily life.

Part V deals with Confession, not as Reconciliation, but the content of what must be confessed. Directives are given about how often anchoresses must approach this sacrament. Part VI describes the penance of daily life and sufferings endured by these women and warns them about the difficulties they may endure.

Love of Christ as Motive for a Contemplative Life

Finally, in Part VII, the writer turns exclusively to love as the reason for the anchoritic way of life. He covers the pure heart, love of Christ, spousal connection to Christ, cleansing the soul for such love, scriptural accounts, and love as the supreme rule. For the author of the Rule, the aspects of love important for the anchoresses include a pure heart, love of Christ and his cross, spousal union, chaste purity, devotion to Christ, and consideration of love as the primary goal of the anchoritic life.

Practical Aspects of the Anchoritic Life

In the next and final section of the Rule, the

writer returns to domestic matters. What may be surprising to modern readers, he also lists times for Holy Communion. These are listed as only fifteen times a year, and certain days are recommended. The remainder of this section deals with household matters, including relationships with servants, keeping a cat for the purpose of dealing with mice, connections with visitors, and other suggestions for the best possible way of living out the commitment of the anchoritic way of life.

Is this the way a mystic should live? According to this 13th century writer these are the preliminary means to prayer and contemplation. We read only of his exhortations, not how his readers responded, but the number of extant copies of the Ancren Riwle and the changes in direct address from 3 to many women, to men as well as women, and finally to lay people, indicate that his writings were received by a goodly number of Christians of his age and time. Other writings by the 14th century, and later English mystics themselves, suggest that a life dedicated to love of God included what he recommended for times and kinds of prayer and practices of daily life. Although the term “mysticism” is not used or described in the Rule, surely mystical union with God is the goal intended by the original author for those who would follow this life of prayer. ♦

Endnotes

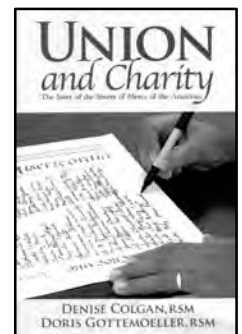
¹ *The Nun's Rule Being The Ancren Riwle*, Modernized by James Morton with Introduction by Abbot Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, Boston: John W. Luce and Company, Publishers, 1907).

² *The Nun's Rule Being The Ancren Riwle*, Modernized by James Morton with Introduction by Abbot Gasquet (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966).

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Pope Francis, Catherine of Siena, and Why Women Mystics Still Matter

Janet Ruffing, R.S.M.

As Catholic women of faith, we experience ourselves called to discipleship of Jesus and to mission within our church and within the world where we offer our service and solace, companionship and compassion, reconciliation and grace. Vatican II has shaped our particular moment in history. This work of the Holy Spirit unleashed such Pentecostal energy within our ecclesial community that the ship of Holy Mother Church was propelled from the safe harbor of some practices both familiar and outdated—and found itself blown into an expanse of the open sea of the modern world. Many of us were caught up in this enthusiasm of Spirit's promise. Others were affected and defined by the change, even if they did not entirely understand it. We adopted an ancient symbol of the church as a community—the people of God—sharing in the one universal call to holiness. We felt ourselves sent out on mission with a conviction that our following of Jesus would bring hope and joy to the whole world.

Lay women of faith were deeply involved in a variety of lay movements that preceded Vatican II. In fact, they led to the affirmation of the role of laity in the church's mission to the world. Pauline-Marie Jaricot in Lyons, France had founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in the 19th century. Dorothy Day had already established her Catholic Worker Houses in New York; so too, Catherine de Hueck Doherty her houses of hospitality in New York and in Canada; and Patty Crowley and her husband the Catholic Family Movement in Chicago. Simultaneously with the Council and in its wake,

various forms of lay ministry, lay missionary ventures, and social outreach efforts led by women exploded.

Pope Francis and *Evangelii Gaudium*

With Francis I's papacy, we have been witnessing a dramatic re-embrace not only of Vatican II, but a change in the style of the papacy from a renaissance monarchy to servant leadership—a more dialogical and pastoral mode of leadership exemplified in Francis. In his Apostolic Exhortation from the recent Synod on Evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, we have what John Allen called his “I have a dream speech” in which he lays out his hopes and dreams for the immediate future of the church.

We have been moved by his appealing and consistent parable in action of how he wants all pastors of the church to act, so much closer to the way Jesus spoke and acted in

the Gospels. And in this Apostolic Exhortation, he not only firmly emphasizes the message of God's love and mercy, expressed in Jesus, but also his deep conviction that the work of evangelization belongs to the entire People of God. We are participating in a departure from the small, purified remnant church of Benedict XVI to Francis I's desire for a church of the poor. Referring to God's preference for the poor, he wants a church that is poor, that extends itself to the poor, and is evangelized by the poor. He wants a church close to the poor, and does not want them pastorally abandoned.¹ We have seen a contrast in our American church, where school and parish closures signal shift away from a mission to the poor to a default service if those who can afford to pay for the pastoral services of the church.

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Francis integrates the social teaching of the church with the Gospel and calls us all to a new world of wider relationship of family. In his vocabulary “fraternity”—citing Benedict XVI’s stunning statement from *Caritas et Veritate*—that globalization makes us all neighbors but does not make us brothers and sisters of one another which the Gospel clearly requires.²

Women in the Evangelizing Church: Limits and Possibilities

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis describes the role of the Holy Spirit in this new evangelization, which in his view embraces the entire world. Yet this energizing summons to Christian evangelizing in an inclusive way within every culture and every class is ultimately the work of the Spirit.

And hence, my title: Do Women Mystics Still Matter? *Evangelii Gaudium* says the Holy Spirit works in the church understood as the People of God. I cite it, because it is one of the few places where women of faith are clearly addressed and included.

The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church. They are not an inheritance, safely secured and entrusted to a small group for safe-keeping; rather they are gifts of the Spirit integrated into the body of the Church, drawn to the center which is Christ and then channeled into an evangelizing impulse. A sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy people for the good of all. Something truly new brought about by the Spirit need not overshadow other gifts and spiritualities making themselves felt. To the extent that a charism is better directed to the heart of the gospel, its exercise will be more ecclesial. It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful. On the basis of her response

to this challenge the Church can be a model of peace in our world.³

Although Francis wants to create a place for women in leadership in the church, there is as yet no indication what this will look like. What we hear is a dictum that a path to ordained ministry remains closed, as does the possibility of women becoming cardinals!⁴ These intimations leave us for the near future exactly where we have always been. In the Church, we are limited in our authority to exercise leadership, to preach in liturgical contexts and to engage in pastoral ministry within education, health care, and parish roles. In society, by contrast, we are authorized to lead in secular and public institutions for which we are qualified by professional credentials.

Women suffer exclusion from the conversations, settings, and roles that influence ecclesial decision-making, and we feel continued limits on our authority in ministry within and beyond the church. However, we still feel the competence of our charisms, the gifts of the Spirit, that impel us into ministries of teaching, social justice, spiritual direction, catechetics,

and a host of social ministries. Without any legitimate route to the “office” of ordination, and without other structures for consultation, women (and lay men) retain only a charismatic or mystical path to leadership in the Church. Hence, the significance of why women mystics still matter.

Mystics at the Service of the Church

What do I mean by a mystic at the service of the church? By this I mean, women who ponder the word of God in their contemplative prayer and are open to being led by the Spirit or perhaps even “driven” by the Spirit as John the Baptist and Jesus were, or overshadowed by the Spirit as was Mary. A mystic is a person who experiences a sense of the presence of God in his or her life and organizes the whole of life and ministry around it.

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Francis eloquently describes preaching and pastoral care, directly addressing all the clergy, from just such a contemplative view of the Gospel, citing the example and teaching of Jesus. He wants this same God-soaked, Spirit-inspired basis for the ordained as well, since they are the ones who regularly preach.

This is a complicated time in our church for women religious. Our leadership in this country is in the final stages of the “doctrinal examination” of LCWR communities with several congregations invited to Rome for further “friendly” conversations related to their reports. Without consultation or dialogue with ecclesial authorities, some notable women theologians who affirm women’s experience of the mysteries of faith are called into question by bishops. In such a moment, I take comfort in the examples and experience of noted women mystics in our shared Christian history.

Women Named as Doctors of the Church

The example of Catherine of Siena, a laywoman, profoundly led by the Spirit through her mystical experience to work for the reform of the corrupt and dysfunctional church in the fourteenth century. It was encouraging to note that she was named a Doctor of the Church, along with Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux in 1970. These doctors of the church are honored not only because of their holiness of life but precisely for their “teaching.” Isn’t this particularly significant in a university setting like this one here at Xavier in Chicago?⁵

More recently, in 2012, Benedict XVI belatedly canonized and declared the most prominent theological, prophetic woman of the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Church a few months before he resigned from the papacy.⁶ This canonization only took eight centuries and a German, medievalist pope to rectify errors made earlier in two ineffective processes. It also required the tenacity of Hildegard’s community which secretly and quickly prepared all the documentation needed for this recognition by the Pope.

Hildegard was an herbalist and keen scientific observer of the natural world and a composer of liturgical music. She made a preaching tour of the Rhine toward the end of her life with the approval of the local bishops. She was long-honored as a saint in Germany but not in the universal church. The longevity and scholarship of Hildegard’s Benedictine community, still vital after 800 years, might also be seen to constitute a miracle.

In 1979, nearly a decade after the first women doctors of the church were named, the Pontifical Theological Commission finally judged that women, lay or vowed religious, might qualify as theologians.⁷ In the 1970’s, I was pleased when women were recognized as doctors of the church, but was quite innocent of the significance of that recognition—that the mystical teachings of these women were recognized as authentic and trustworthy theological instruction for the universal church. I had already been taught by a number of prominent women theologians in scripture, patristics, spirituality, and systematic theology.

When I received my own doctorate in Christian Spirituality in 1986, I was stunned when one of my Jesuit mentors toasted me as a “doctor” of the Church at my graduation party. This playful reference to an honorific recognition applies only to canonized saints whose teachings are recognized as free from error and applicable to the universal church. Of course, it took a theologian friend to impress upon me a recognition of the particular service to the church for which I was now qualified by education and called by vocation. As a woman with both theological and ecclesiastical credentials, my vocation took on a much deeper meaning.

Catherine of Siena as Mystic, Reformer, Peace-Maker, Apostle

To deepen our reflection on why mystics still matter, I focus on Catherine of Siena, a mystic, reformer, peace-maker, and apostle. I share with you some of the assessments of two women scholars who have specialized in the study of Catherine of Siena.

They have proposed reasons they felt Catherine deserved this recognition as a theologian even though the judgments of the men who actually made the decision did not give Catherine enough credit for her gifts of teaching and counsel expressed in her unique vernacular theological idiom. I then describe Catherine's own sense of being missioned or authorized by her mystical experience to roles of preaching, peace-making, and reform of the church. She identified with the role of apostola (apostle like Mary Magdalen who became an apostle to the apostles). She felt herself commanded by God to write her book, *The Dialogue*, which was inspired by a series of Catherine's mystical experiences and composed over a period of time.

Catherine of Siena did not have access to the level of education we take for granted. Learning from sermons and conversations with theologically trained men in her circle, she demonstrated a powerful degree of retention. She was a creative and original thinker despite the fact she learned to read and write only late in life.⁸ She relied on the knowledge she gained from sermons and conversations, her practical wisdom, her ministry of service, and her mystical experience. She promoted the spiritual growth of her disciples through her own preaching and letter writing, her attempts at peace-making, and her dedication to church reform.

Modern Scholars' Perspective on Catherine

The Dominican theologian, Mary O'Driscoll summarizes Catherine's theological approach:

We note that it describes a spiraling movement which begins when the human person seeks self-knowledge. The movement reaches its apex in the intimate bond of love which that person experiences with the absolute other, God known as Love, and with all human persons. At whatever point we pause along the spiral we are aware of the dynamic relationship

between God and humanity; the divine-human dialectic at work. ...we discover that the key to her synthesis is Jesus Christ.

Catherine the theologian is a constant truth-seeker.... The Dialogue opens with her desire to "pursue truth and clothe herself in it," and it closes with the prayer: "Clothe, clothe me with yourself, eternal Truth." The theme running through all her theology can be described as a quest for truth. She wants to know the truth of who she is and she wants to know the truth about who God is. Within these two parameters she wants to know the truth about everything else: the Church, her neighbor, the world, sin,

salvation." She understands that the more she knows of the truth, the more she can love, for "love follows knowledge." Throughout her quest she appreciates that she can grow in knowledge of the truth only when she is enlightened by God, whom she delights in referring to as "First Truth," and by Jesus Christ who is "Gentle Truth."⁹

In Catherine's view, this truth is available to everyone, but is especially manifest in the apostles, martyrs, confessors, evangelists, and doctors of the church who are

"living witnesses to the truth in the mystic body of holy church. They are like lamps set on a lamp stand to point out the way of truth, perfectly lighted that leads to life." This way to life is based on their experience, "for they have experienced it in themselves. So every one...has enough light to know the truth if you but will...if you do not decide to put out the light of your reason by ...selfishness."¹⁰

Catherine further explains, "All receive according to their capacity and according to their readiness to know me, for I do not spurn their dispositions. ...the eye of understanding has received a light beyond any natural light, infused by grace, and in this light the doctors and the other saints came to know the truth in the midst of darkness."¹¹ It is instructive to notice that Catherine largely offers her own teaching on the basis of this same inner authority

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because she experiences herself as illumined from within. And in other parts of the Dialogue and in her letters she describes discernment of spirits as being developmental, increasing according to a pattern she describes as three lights.

According to Dominican Suzanne Noffke, in Catherine's theology, only God is "master of truth" ...as one who holds, embraces, relates as creative artist and lover. All others are servants and ministers of truth, called to embrace truth also as lovers and bring it to birth in the world in Jesus Christ, God and human, in whom is embodied both mastery and servanthood of truth."¹² This view leads her to see that all members of the church who carry out the mission of Christ, ordained or not, are servants or disciples of Christ who alone on earth is teacher or master of truth.¹³

Catherine as Reformer

This understanding leads her to speak the truth as she receives it to all who seek her counsel and some who don't. She persuades Gregory XI in Avignon to return to Rome in 1376, and deal with needed reforms in the Church in her day. In a letter to Urban VI, she defends a Dominican whom Urban VI had silenced because he raised questions about "certain abuses and papal appointments." In her letter, she acknowledges Urban's jurisdiction, but advises him that he should want helpers who really help and that he should welcome the "pure truth as it stands."¹⁴

How did Catherine as a woman assume such an audacious role for herself within Italy and the church in the 14th century? Once she affiliated herself with the Dominicans as an exceedingly young mantellate, she gained the protection of the Friars who gave her permission to travel and teach. She traveled with an entourage that included clergy who were kept very busy with the confessions of those whose hearts she converted. Raymond of Capua, who became Master General of the Dominicans, was assigned as her

spiritual director and theological advisor. He prepared documents for her canonization emphasizing her mystical experiences and the phenomena that accompanied them.¹⁵

Catherine as Peace-Maker

In a vision before she left for Avignon to try to end the war between Florence and the Avignon papacy, Christ gave her the cross, put it on her neck, and an olive branch in her hand, telling her to carry the cross and to announce to the people a great joy. The symbols of the cross and the olive branch indicate divine approval for her special mission to bring peace and salvation to all of humanity by traveling and speaking rather than by staying home

and praying. Here she identifies with the role of the itinerant preacher (the angel who announces good news, in her case to the shepherds of the church) and to be actively involved in the negotiations. Also in this vision, she saw the infidels and Christians both enter into the side of Christ and believed she was to reconcile Christians and infidels. Against further complaints by the local Siennese government for

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engaging in activities unacceptable for women in her times, she claims her work is authorized by God whom she would not dare disobey. Further, Catherine talks about "hiding in Christ's wounds," which expressed a willingness to suffer on behalf of her mission but also symbolized her closeness with Christ who will act on her behalf. And in another period of prayer, she hears Christ telling her, "So go back there and do not fear. For I will be the one to work for you."¹⁶

In her letters, she equates the suffering entailed through gossip and criticism with ascetical suffering, a way of participating in the suffering of Christ. When her mother complains about her travels, she compares herself to the apostles who are forced to leave Mary, the mother of Jesus, behind in the house

because the Spirit sends them on mission. Here Catherine is an apostle and her mother is placed in the role of a stay at home Mary.

Catherine as Apostle

Finally, Catherine identifies with saints from the apostolic church, particularly Mary Magdalen and the apostles. She writes of Mary Magdalen as an apostle of love and cites the legend of her preaching in Marseilles. She appeals to Mary's willingness to break with social conventions and her freedom of movement in a man's world. Catherine sees her as a fearless female apostola whose example teaches women to seek and to love God in unconventional ways without regard for gossip or criticism and to preach the Gospel of salvation to all who will listen.¹⁷

If Catherine of Siena so easily identified with both male and female apostles in her own day, how much more easily for women today to identify across stereotypical gender identifications. Today it is common for women to ignore fixed gender roles. Contemplation of the scriptures inspires mystical experience which can reveal that God calls women to their most fundamental identity as embodiments of Christ.

I find it particularly poignant that Catherine died of congestive heart-failure in Rome before her efforts to end the schism between Urban the VI and Clement the VII succeeded. She died uncertain about the success of her efforts to convert clerics to live up to their calling. As Mary Catherine Hilkert describes Catherine:

Catherine of Siena wrote, spoke, and acted out of the conviction that conformity to Christ is conformity to the will of Christ and conformity to the pattern of his life. The promise of baptism is that the Spirit will conform women, men, and children into communities of disciples who become a living remembrance of the one who created inclusive communities and open table-sharing, who welcomed children and attended to the needs of the poor and the outcast, who sought out those who were lost or abandoned. We recognize Christ in ministers of the gospel who bring hope to the hopeless, who preach unlimited forgiveness, who

bind up wounds and offer new possibilities to those who do not believe in themselves or God's power. To image Christ is to enflesh the life of the one who celebrated life in all its fullness and who exercised mercy even in the midst of his own dying.¹⁸

At the same time, we dedicate ourselves to the particular ministries we experience ourselves to exercise.

Reflection on Academic Ministry in a University

My last very brief reflection relates to those of us here whose primary calling is some form of ministry within a Catholic university. Yes, teaching is a ministry whether in the classroom or through publications. And campus ministry is not the only location for evangelization in a Catholic school. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis gives explicit attention to the mission in universities by naming academic circles as a "different culture" to which to proclaim the Gospel. This he understands as an encounter between faith, reason, and the sciences, a creative apologetics with the potential of "encouraging a greater openness to the Gospel."¹⁹ Francis "appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences" as "part of the Church's saving mission."²⁰

He encourages us: "Universities [are] to be outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way."²¹ In his view, "Catholic Schools, which...join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a...valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even...where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods."²²

I end on this note, leaning into the future before us, leaving it to you who share this ministerial context to ponder what this might mean for you. Personally, I was consoled by Francis' attention to my particular context in a non-denominational Divinity School in a secular university. As a spiritual director and

professor in spirituality, I have long been skilled in accompanying others in their spiritual growth. Within the divinity school where we serve some forty-two denominations and the occasional Jew or Muslim, I appreciated the way Francis described ecumenical dialogue as contributing to the unity of the human family as well as to the unity of the Christian faith.

I found helpful his attention to the intellectual life and the need to engage in it as a Christian as well as to engage disciplines beyond my own, as a less obvious form of evangelization. More than anything we say, we communicate the joy of the Gospel and the claims of the Gospel on us above all when others recognize our joy as Christians and our love and care of one another within our particular sphere of mission.

By virtue of our own baptism and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit which compel our love for the Church and our service to the Church, we, as non-ordained women and men, will continue to speak our truth from the authority and the love of God poured out in our hearts. The Spirit drives us to embrace our suffering world, as well as those who suffer within the Church itself, as it strives to become a more inclusive, dialogical, and inspirited institution, becoming a clearer embodiment of the Gospel. This is why I think women mystics still matter. ♦

Endnotes

¹ “I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties, they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.” Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis I, (November 24, 2013) Vatican Press, §198. “I regret that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privilege and

preferential religious care.” (§200)

² E.G., § 221, and more extensively in “Fraternity as the Foundation of Peace and as the Pathway to Peace,” the Pope’s Message for World Day of Peace. (8 December 2013) §5.

³ E.G. §130.

⁴ On August 2, 2016, Francis appointed a commission to study the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate focusing on the earliest history of such service in the church in response to a request from the May 12, 2016 meeting of USIG to open the diaconate to women. This work has just begun and does include a significant cohort of women theologians.

⁵ This piece was first given as a lecture at St. Xavier University in Chicago on March 19, 2014 in their Women and Faith lecture series.

⁶ Benedict XVI proclaimed her a saint of the universal church on May 28, 2012 and a doctor of the church October 7, 2012.

⁷ Lay and women religious in Europe were admitted to doctoral level studies in theology and Scripture in the 1930’s and in the U.S., only in the 1960’s. Exception was the Ph.D. program at St. Mary’s in South Bend, Indiana begun by Sister Madeleva Wolff in the mid 1940’s for lay men and women, but especially women religious who were to educate the young women in formation in their own communities.

⁸ Suzanne Noffke, OP, “Catherine of Siena, Justly Doctor of the Church? *Theology Today* 60 (2003): p.58

⁹ Mary O’Driscoll, OP, “Catherine the Theologian” *Spirituality Today*, 40 /1 (Spring 1988) 15-16, accessed at www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/88401odriscoll.html, Fordham University Library, December 21, 2013.

¹⁰ Dialogue, Ch 29.

¹¹ Dialogue, Ch 85.

¹² Noffke, p.59.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Noffke, p.61

¹⁵ Karen Scott, “St. Catherine of Siena, ‘Apostola,’” *Church History* 61/1(March 1992), 37. Accessed <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3168001>, Yale University Library, April 2, 2013.

¹⁶ Cited by Scott, p.41.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.42.

¹⁸ Mary Catherine Hilkert *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2008): p.47.

¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §132.

²⁰ Ibid., §133.

²¹ Ibid., §134.

²² Ibid., §134.

Mysticism and Overalls: Thomas Merton's Down-to-Earth Spirituality

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

Many years ago, when I was in the novitiate our assigned spiritual reading was the 1931 edition of *The Spiritual Life* by Aldolph Tanqueray. Its subtitle read “A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology.” With this assignment came a stipulation that we not read the last section of the book because it was on mysticism. Perhaps the novice mistress did not want any of us to begin levitating, bi-locating, having visions, or digging caves on the motherhouse grounds! Isn't this what mystics do?

As it happened, I didn't inquire about the mystical life for many years—until I began my research on Thomas Merton in preparation for my doctoral dissertation in the early 1970s. It was then that I began to realize that mysticism can be “normal”—as a pair of denim overalls.

This realization was concretized recently in an article in the Louisville archdiocesan newspaper, *The Record*¹. An article announced a display of Merton's letters, essays, books, and art to be featured in the Frazier History Museum in Louisville as part of the conclusion of the centenary celebration of Merton's birth. In the article Merton was lauded as “one of America's most widely read spiritual leaders,” whose mystical experience at the corner of 4th and Walnut Street in downtown Louisville catapulted him into that category of the spiritual life that I was forbidden to read about as a novice. This oft-quoted experience was recorded in his book,

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . .

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither

sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody . . . [T]he gate of heaven is everywhere.²

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In that experience Merton's vision broke through all the separations that the “worldly” mind sees into the unity that is the deepest reality of all that is. A mystical experience.

Interestingly enough, however, in that same newspaper article there was also a photo of Merton's workpants on display at the Frazier exhibit. This juxtaposition of spiritual heights and everyday clothes prompted me to explore Merton's spirituality as related to the

things of everyday, such as a chair, a tea party, . . . and pants.

The Balanced Life

Thomas Merton described the spiritual life as “the perfectly balanced life.”³ It is a life in which all the facets of the human person blend together into an integrated whole. The vivifying source of such a life, Merton believed, is a power within the depths of each person which binds together all conflicting forces, amalgamates all diverging elements, and builds the person into one piece, united with all that is in the One Who Is.

To live in a perfectly balanced way involves, according to Merton, an ability to respond to reality, “one of the most important—and most neglected—elements in the interior life.”⁴ In fact, Merton writes, the first step in the spiritual life is learning how to

respond, how to see and taste and hear and feel what he calls "the splendor that is all around us."⁵ In order to be at harmony within oneself and with all that is outside of oneself, a person must be able to respond to reality positively.

To determine the reasons why such a positive view of reality indicates that a person is living spiritually and to examine the ways in which a person comes to such a balance, Merton often would simply point to some everyday reality in which he saw a crystallization of what he felt to be the spiritual ideal, the mystical union between the divine and the created.

Shaker Furniture

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as the "Shakers," spread from northeastern United States to the Midwest, settling in Kentucky in 1806, quite near the earliest Trappist foundation in America. It may be that this long-standing connection between the Shaker community and the Trappist monks was partly responsible for Merton's interest in and respect for the religious beliefs and dedication of this Christian sect. Particularly impressed with their view of work, Merton regarded the Society as "the purest kind of monastic witness in the area of work in which integrity of eschatological faith bore fruit in perfect work."⁶

The "perfect work" of Shaker labor is perhaps best exemplified, according to Merton, in the furniture made by the Shaker craftsmen. The members of the Society believed that the artisan was an instrument whom God, the "great Artist," directed in the designing of a piece of furniture to bring out from the untouched wood a pattern revealed to the carpenter by angels. The final form of a work of furniture, the Shaker believed, was the expression of a spiritual force which "sprang directly from the mystery of God through Christ in the Believing artist"⁷ For this reason, the raw materials with which the artisan would work, called forth from him profound respect; he knew that from within the wood the divine design would be made manifest by the work of his hands. Because of this rather mystical

outlook on shaker craftsmanship, such heavenly inspired work was regarded as a kind of "religion in the wood."

For the Shaker, work was worship. Consequently, he labored in an attitude of patience, humility, love, detachment. All competitive or compulsive spirit, which would only foster violence and greed, was strictly forbidden. The artisan, as instrument of the Master Builder, hid himself in his work so that the heavenly pattern alone would show forth in the finished product. His part in the fashioning of a chair, for example, was to allow the chair-in-the-wood to come forth from the natural materials and be what it was meant to be. For this

reason, anything superfluous or ornamental was regarded as dishonest work, untrue to the reality contained within the uncut wood.

Merton greatly admired the almost grim simplicity and spiritual purity of the Shaker furniture and acclaimed it an eloquent witness to the unself-consciousness with which it was made.⁸ The integrity, honesty, and humility of the craftsman brought forth in the wood a stark beauty which, Merton remarked, must issue from communion with

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truth, especially with the truth of the worker's inner self. Work for the members of the Society engaged them in something higher, directed them "to something that transcended and included both: a kind of wholeness and order and worship that filled the whole day and the whole life of the working community."⁹

Although Merton admitted that the Shakers' attempt at utter honesty and purity in work was a bit strange he never ceased admiring the perfection of their furniture which he felt of itself was a verification of the reality of their vision. The wordless simplicity of the Shaker spirituality was, in a sense, mystically expressed in the quiet and plain honesty of a table or chair.¹⁰

The Japanese Tea Ceremony

In his college years Merton became attracted to the religious traditions of the East. This preoccupation remained with him until the end of his

life at which time, during a journey to the East, he experienced first-hand the mystical religions he had studied especially during the last decade of his life. With a mixture of satisfaction and displeasure, Merton became more and more convinced that the spiritual disciplines of the East had more in common with what he believed to be authentic Christian spirituality than what he found to be actual practice of the spiritual life among some of those who were of his own religious persuasion. For example, he wrote of Zen Buddhism: "Indeed, it is illuminating to the point of astonishment to talk to a Zen Buddhist from Japan and to find that you have much more in common with him than with those of your own compatriots who are little concerned with religion, or interested only in its external practice."¹¹

In Zen, Merton sensed a power which was able to bring together the different dimensions of life into an inseparable unity. Writing in a preface to John Wu's book on Zen, Merton observed: "The Zen experience is a direct grasp of the unity of the invisible and the visible, the noumenal and the phenomenal, or, if you prefer, an experiential realization that any such division is bound to be pure imagination."¹² Zen transforms the ordinary into something more than that which meets the eye by awakening a primal consciousness hidden within the eye. And, according to Merton, nowhere is the spiritual power of Zen more clearly and more beautifully shown than in the Japanese tea ceremony.¹³

The ancient "art of tea" is the antithesis of what in the Western experience is a "social hour." It is, rather, a spiritual discipline, "in reality a deeply spiritual, one might be tempted to say 'liturgical,' expression of art and faith."¹⁴ In the ritual guests and host by stylized gesture, traditional dress, and contemplative stillness put off all that is superficial in their bearing and attitude and come together in a simplicity, in a poverty where there is no longer any external distinction between them. In a freedom and spontaneity which is borne of a conscious consent to a religious ceremony, the participants lose themselves in simplicity, silence and contemplation. In such a spiritual atmosphere the guest and host reverence the

poverty and incompleteness of the individual and the harmony of the world.¹⁵

What is true of Japanese art will be true also of the "art of tea." Hence, when Merton describes the qualities of art influenced by Zen, he also describes the feature of the tea ceremony. A peculiarity of Zen art, he noted is "that it is able to suggest what cannot be said, and, by using a bare minimum of form, to awaken us to the formless."¹⁶ This kind of art beckons the observer to enter into it, not in order to understand any content or subject represented, for there is as little of that as possible, but to participate in the energy that is present beyond the form. The purpose of the art is to incite a kind of meditation which is not an exercise in explaining or analyzing, but in simply paying attention. It is an awareness "which simply sees what is right there and does not add any comment, any interpretation, any conclusion. It just sees."¹⁷

In some notes, which accompanied an exhibition of his own calligraphies, Merton attempts to clarify this rather unusual approach to art, so characteristic of Zen. He asks his viewers not to judge his drawings in terms of familiar categories, for they are not "drawings of anything." He continues:

These abstractions—one might almost call them graffiti rather than calligraphies—are simple signs and ciphers of energy, acts or movements intended to be propitious. Their "meaning" is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept. These are not conventional signs as are words, numbers, hieroglyphs, or symbols.... They came to life when they did, in the form of reconciliation, as expressions of unique and unconscious harmonies appropriate to their own moment though not confined to it. But they do not register a past and personal experience.... However, the seeing of them may open up a way to obscure reconciliations and agreements that are not arbitrary—or even to new, intimate histories.¹⁸

Analogously, the art of tea, by its very ordinariness, its contentlessness, points beyond itself to a truth about the harmony which exists between the individual person and all else. In the poverty of the ceremony all that is superfluous and superficial is

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stripped away by the sharing of a cup of tea. Empty of self-consciousness, the guest and host are at one. They recognize that they are in no way isolated from one another but are reconciled in an awareness of something behind their own separate forms and the separate forms of a tea cup and the room in which they sit. Detached from the conventions of society and the distractions of speech and conceptual thought, the actors become one with and through the action in a purely spiritual, immediate awareness of a unifying reality which is beyond subject-object distinction. They are at one with all that is—without the mediation of logical verbalizing.¹⁹ They have surrendered their persons to one another in a ceremony which has become “a celebration of oneness and convergence, a conquest of multiplicity and of atomization, . . .”²⁰

A Pair of Overalls

A short time after Merton moved into a hermitage on the property of his monastery, he was questioned in an interview about how he spent his day. In a somewhat mocking reply, first published in *The Hudson Review* and entitled “Day of a Stranger,” Merton wrote:

This is not a hermitage; it is a house. (“Who was that hermitage I seen you with last night?”) What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. Who said Zen? Wash out your mouth if you said Zen. If you see a meditation going by, shoot it. Who said “Love?” Love is in the movies. The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual.²¹

This description of his life, including the comment about his “pants,” upon some analysis, reiterates Merton’s view on the nature of the spiritual life, on the meaning of the mystical life which is a “waking from a dream of separateness.”²² The spiritual life—embodied in a chair, a tea ceremony and a pair of pants—is not a withdrawal from life, but an acceptance of “everyday life” as integral to and supportive of the inner life of the spirit.

Simplicity

A striking characteristic common to each of these “earthly” realities is that of simplicity. Each example illustrates a belief that the spiritual response to reality lies in allowing something simply to be what it is. In each case, there is a deliberate avoidance of whatever is ornamentation, falsification, veneer. Limitations or imperfections of things which are, as a matter of fact, limited or imperfect, are not covered over. Instead, it is in putting off all that is artificial, by whittling away the superficial, that the truth is discovered about reality. Once all that is extraneous is removed from whatever is being dealt with, the truth that is revealed is that the real is more than what first meets the eye. As details and frills and masks are taken away, consciousness is directed to a reality greater than that which is apprehended at the level of the immediately detectable. There is a growing realization that freedom from distraction

from truth will lead to an experience of the transcendent Truth. And isn’t that mysticism?

In each of the three examples explored above Merton shows that a person comes to a knowledge of the ultimate truth when s/he removes from her/his vision anything that is unnecessary or false. Such a person knows not only that which is made or ritualized or worn, but s/he knows and is at one with the Maker, the Host, the Designer

who is in and beyond all these things. Be it a Shaker chair or a Zen tea ceremony or a pair of overalls—or one’s very self, the spiritual person encounters each in such a way that false distinctions vanish and diverse elements are reconciled in an experience of truth and union. In a poverty which accepts the limitation of what a thing or the self truly is, everything comes together into one and in this convergence all that is, all beings, are united to that which causes them to be. This process of simplification and resulting unification is the spiritual life, the life in which everything is “perfectly balanced,”²³ everything is in its proper place, everything has a meaning because it is related to its source, the power that is within the depths of each thing that exists. This is the life which has discovered

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that in the ordinary and the everyday “the gate of heaven is everywhere.”²⁴

Conclusion

Returning now to the memories of my novitiate introduction to the spiritual life, I don’t think I missed anything by not reading the third section of Tanqueray’s version of mystical theology. From the teachings of Merton, rather than trying to levitate, bi-locate, or dig a cave, I found relief in the realization that the task of my spiritual life is sitting in a chair, drinking a “comfortable cup of tea,” and getting into my old jeans—and then breathe! ♦

Endnotes

¹ *The Record*, January 21, 2016, p. 3.

² *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1968): pp. 156, 158. Hereafter cited as CGB.

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⁴ *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955): p.33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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⁷ See Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews, *Religion in the Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* (Indiana University Press, 1966), p. x. See also Merton’s article on “Pleasant Hill, a Shaker village in Kentucky”, in his *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969): pp. 197-99. Hereafter cited as MZM.

⁸ MZM, p. 196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰ See *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964): p. 260.

¹¹ MZM, p. 209.

¹² Preface to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968): p. 37. Hereafter cited as ZBA.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁵ See MZM, pp. 9-10; ZBA, p. 91.

¹⁶ ZBA, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.38

¹⁸ *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966):180-81.

¹⁹ See MZM, pp. 9-10, 14, 20 and ZBA p.37 for descriptions of this experience in terms of enlightenment.

²⁰ MZM, p.10.

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²² See citation referenced in CGB, endnote 2.

²³ See NSC, p. 140.

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Thomas Merton on Simplicity of Life and its Lessons for 21st Century Sustainability

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.

In the 19th century, such notables as Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Bronson Alcott conducted experiments in simple living. In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi lived simply in order that others might simply live. During the same century, Thomas Merton sought to embrace and live out the Cistercian monastic charism of simplicity of life, which is rooted in the Rule of Saint Benedict.

In the 12th century, Saint Bernard sought to revive Benedictine simplicity of life in its purest form. He restored the monastic life at the Abbey in Cîteaux, France, and later established a monastery in Clairvaux, France, where he became the first abbot. It was from the foundation in Clairvaux that the Cistercian Trappist monastery in Kentucky, where Merton lived for twenty-seven years, was later founded.

Merton and Cistercian Simplicity

As a Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton studied, wrote about, and sought to live out Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's understanding of simplicity. According to Merton, Saint Bernard's teaching on simplicity of life is valid for all Christians, not simply for Cistercians.

Merton's in-depth study of Saint Bernard's writing enabled him to become an accurate commentator of the various aspects of the mystical theologian's teaching regarding simplicity of life. In his theology, Saint Bernard situates his discussion of simplicity within the context of each person being created in God's image and likeness. For Saint Bernard, the divine image in the soul of a person consists of his or her natural simplicity and inborn freedom of will.

Reflecting on Saint Bernard's teaching, Merton notes that when Adam fell, his pride was the birth of sin and the immediate ruin of human simplicity.

Duplicity (doubleness in self) then concealed each person's natural simplicity. In order to reinstate the original simplicity of being created in God's image, one must "turn to God, begging him for that grace and infused charity which will enable him to purify his soul of the ... duplicity."¹

Merton explains that according to Saint Bernard, in order to reach the desired return to one's original, natural simplicity, one must first develop simplicity in the sense of sincerity that includes the awareness of one's shortcomings. Next is simplicity in terms of

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humility, which involves self-acceptance as one dependent upon God for all things, especially one's very existence. Regarding this form of simplicity, Merton indicates that it entails developing a sense of mortification as one strives to rid self of "everything that is useless, unnecessary to one's end: the recovery of the divine image and union with God."² According to Merton, in this regard Saint Bernard

stresses the importance of simplicity of food, clothing, lodging, work, and manner of life as described in the Benedictine Rule.

Simplicity of the Interior Senses and Will

For Saint Bernard, a further form of simplicity is that of the interior senses and the intellect of a person that calls for simplicity in devotions, studies, prayer methods, liturgical matters, and church decorations. Accordingly, as Saint Bernard indicates, there is the matter of simplicity of will that manifests itself in the

denial of self-will and the embracing of the common will, that is, the good of all. For Cistercians, simplicity of will includes obedience of the monk to his abbot who, in monastic life, is considered Christ's representative. Regarding monastic obedience, Merton asserts that "the perfection of simplicity in obedience is to do things in the precise way the superior wants them to be done."³

According to St. Bernard, a person who embraces a life of simplicity is able to progress to the experience of a union of his or her will with God's will in a mystical marriage of love. In this union, the person immersed in God has no other interests or desires but those of God. In such a mystical marriage, the person participates in God's utter simplicity.

The Shaker lifestyle of material and spiritual simplicity and hard work aimed at bringing its celibate members closer to God. In his teachings, Saint Bernard stresses that cooperation with God's love in drawing one to Godself enables a person eventually to experience mystical marriage with God. According to Saint Bernard, only relative union in love with God is possible on earth, whereas a more complete experience of such a marriage can take place in heaven. In either case, Saint Bernard maintains that the experience of mystical union with God includes both satisfaction and desire not totally fulfilled.

During his life as a Trappist monk, Merton strove to live out the Cistercian charism of simplicity of life. As a member of his monastic community, Merton embraced an asceticism embodied in a daily regimen of personal and communal prayer, a meatless, modest diet, and the wearing of the Trappist garb. Merton also experienced the discipline of teaching, study, writing and, in humility, was obedient to his abbot.

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In his final years, as a hermit Merton took up residence in a cinder-block dwelling on the monastery property. There, life simplified for this monk who for so long yearned for deeper solitude. In the hermitage, Merton developed a daily routine of prayer, study, some writing, preparing of simple meals, washing dishes, and cutting wood. In the greater silence of his lodging in the woods, Merton sought mystical union with God. There, the deer, birds, frogs, trees, ponds, rocks, and other elements in his surroundings drew Merton closer to God. In and through his nature experiences, he experienced communion with the One who created and sustained all life.

Shaker Simplicity

It is significant that during the latter part of his life, Thomas Merton became very interested in the community called the Shakers. In order to better understand what Merton learned about simplicity of life from this group, it is important first to become acquainted with this celibate brother and sisterhood.

Ann Lee, the daughter of a blacksmith, joined the Shaking Quakers when she was 22 years old. Eventually, Ann led eight people to the United States where she began the Shaker community. This tiny band determined to live simply, sharing everything they owned. By the 1850s, the Shakers had grown to approximately 6,000 members in nineteen communities from Maine to Kentucky. The Shaker lifestyle of material and spiritual simplicity and hard work aimed at bringing its celibate members closer to God.

In Shaker villages, buildings were modest, unadorned, and plain. "Every building was designed to be simple, useful, and sound."⁴ Shaker room furnishings evidenced painstaking workmanship, functionalism, and simplicity in conception and execution. Shaker furniture was truly a work of art, an expression of simple design in wood, a celebration of the very grain of the wood.

Devoid of ornamentation, Shaker clothing was never designed for fashion. An individual Shaker's clothing occupied a drawer or two in a retiring room in the dwelling house.

Retiring rooms were typically furnished with a chair and a narrow bed for each occupant, a wood-burning stove, a strip of carpet, a washstand, looking glass and towels, a few brooms and brushes and little else.⁵

In Shaker dining rooms, place settings on tables were simple and there were no decorative table linens. Shared meals were considered gifts from God and were eaten with gratitude.

Simplicity was essential to Shaker worship. Shaker hymns sung during worship services were considered inspired gifts of the Spirit.

In simple rhymes Shakers were able to convey to each other complex ideas and understandings and the beautiful uncluttered melodies added an emotional current that gave the words additional force.⁶

The Shakers viewed music as religion in song. Shaker songs were very sing-able; thousands of songs were composed and sung by Shaker brothers and sisters. One song sung everywhere in the Shaker society written by Elder Joseph Brackett is *Simple Gifts*:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down
Where we ought to be –
And when we find ourselves
In the place just right
'Twill be in the valley
Of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend
We shan't be ashamed,

To turn, turn will be our delight,

Till by turning, turning

We come round right.⁷

A song that originated in the New Lebanon Shaker community is: "I will bow and be simple, I will bow and be free, I will bow and be humble, Yea, bow like a willow tree."⁸ Another song reflective of the Shaker commitment to leading a simple life is "I want to feel little, more simple, more mild ... and more like a child; more thankful, more humble, more lowly in mind, more watchful, more prayerful, more loving and kind."⁹

Dancing was a part of Sabbath worship in the Shaker community. In 1794, the Shakers abandoned "the whirling, shaking, and leaping of the first Shakers in favor of a simple, uniform dance that all believers could practice as one, stepping forward and back in perfect unison."¹⁰ Employing simple, shuffling steps, the Shakers labored, moving their hands and feet in organized movement. The Shakers viewed their dancing as sacred and productive of blessings. Dancing filled the Shakers with heavenly joy. It made love and union flow.

Merton and Shaker Simplicity

Thomas Merton's connection with the Shakers included his experiences at the Pleasant Hill Shaker community (also known as Shakertown) in Lexington, Kentucky; his friendship with Edward Deming Andrews and his wife Faith Andrews; and his own study of this communal religious group.

In a history of the Trappist community published in 1949, Merton described the Shakers as "quiet, sober, hard-working men and women who segregated themselves into communistic villages of their own where they lived in celibacy, practiced their religion, and supported themselves by farming and various crafts."¹¹

In the last decade of his life, Merton was able to visit the Pleasant Hill Shaker village which had become a kind of museum, since no Shakers were living there any longer. Referring to one of his

experiences at Pleasant Hill, Merton journaled: “[T]he old Shaker colony at Pleasant Hill is a place that always impresses me with awe and creates in me a sense of joy. I love those old buildings and I love the way the road swings up to them. They stand there in an inexpressible dignity, simplicity, and peace under the big trees.”¹² After another visit to Shakertown, Merton entered the following reflection in his journal: “How the bland side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot image. A completely miraculous achievement of forms.”¹³

Cistercians and Shakers Born of the Same Spirit

The Shakers’ simplicity of life was what most attracted Merton to this celibate community. According to Merton, the Shakers and the Cistercians were “born of the same Spirit.”¹⁴ In a letter to Edward D. Andrews, Merton wrote:

I am deeply interested in the thought that a hundred years ago our two communities were so close together, so similar, somehow in ideals and yet evidently had no contact with one another. ... I feel all the more akin to them because our own Order, the Cistercians, originally had the same kind of ideal of honesty, simplicity, good work, for a spiritual motive.”¹⁵

Merton’s interest in the Shakers included his desire to write a book about their “mysticism in practice, as evidenced by their life and their craftsmanship.”¹⁶ For Merton, the exquisite beauty of Shaker craftsmanship silently gave witness to this group’s simplicity of life. Sometime after Edward D. Andrews passed away, in a letter to his wife, Faith Andrews, Merton reflected: “I realize more and more the vital importance of the Shaker ‘gift of simplicity’ which is a true American charism: alas, not as fully appreciated as it should be.”¹⁷

Merton recognized in both the Shakers and Cistercians a lifestyle that revolved around the rhythmic interplay of prayer, work, and study. For

both communities, work was a sacred endeavor, entered into for the praise and glory of God. Both groups also shared a commitment to peaceful living and the sharing of goods in common. The motto: “Hands to work and hearts to God” that Shaker foundress Ann Lee coined is applicable to both the Cistercian and Shaker way of being. Referring to this motto, Merton noted, in regard to his monastic community that:

Well, of course, this is normal for us. You work and your heart is lifted up to God while you are working and you are working for God. Now, to work for God means ... your work is your union with God. Ideally speaking, whatever a person is doing, his work is his union with God.¹⁸

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According to Merton, simplicity characterized both Shaker and Cistercian architecture. Merton described Cistercian architecture as

... famous for its energy and simplicity and purity, for its originality and technical brilliance. ... The typical Cistercian church, with its low elevation, its plain, bare walls, lighted by few windows and without stained glass, achieved its effect by the balance of masses and austere, powerful, round or pointed arches and mighty vaulting. These buildings filled anyone who entered them with peace and restfulness and disposed the soul for contemplation in an atmosphere of simplicity and poverty.¹⁹

Likewise, Shaker buildings are spacious, devoid of ornamentation, and evidence an economy of form and lines.

Merton viewed the Shakers as an “authentic American form of the monastic life.”²⁰ According to Merton, this 19th century community of Believers sought to return to a life of pure simplicity just as the Cistercians did when they came into existence. The desire to live in utmost simplicity was the

undergirding, the foundation of each of these monastic, coenobitic communities.

According to Merton, Cistercians have deep respect for land. Describing the early Cistercians, Merton commented:

When the monks had found their homes ... they sank their roots into the ground and fell in love with their woods. Indeed, this love of one's monastery and its surroundings is something integral to the Cistercian way of life.²¹

The Shakers also have evidenced deep appreciation for the land where they have dwelt. They have tended their surroundings with care and been deeply grateful to God that their agricultural endeavors have yielded fruit for their daily sustenance. Technically excellent Shaker buildings still stand as a peaceful presence that blends with the surrounding landscape. It can be said of both the Shakers and the Cistercians that they have considered land sacred and have sought to relate to it in a deeply reverent way.

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Commenting on Shaker chairs, Merton noted that "the peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was "made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it."²² According to Merton, each time a Shaker craftsman began work on a new chair, he did it as "if it were the first chair ever to be made in the world."²³

Merton understood that for the Shakers, all their creative endeavors, including chair-making, were undertaken in a true spirit of humility with the goal of proper order and functionality. The Shakers'

superbly simple creations testify to their belief that they viewed themselves as intermediaries for God's bringing something new and beautiful into existence.

Shaker and Cistercian Simplicity of Life as Model for Others

In our contemporary world, there are many individuals who are attempting to live according to the spirit of simplicity Thomas Merton found embodied in the Shaker and Cistercian traditions. Like Merton, these persons are cognizant that adopting such a lifestyle entails rejecting the Western cultural values of undue consumption and excessive accumulation of goods, i.e., the acquisition of more and more things, a phenomenon called "thingification."

Like the Cistercians and Shakers, these people's desire to live more simply is religiously motivated. Their search for simplicity of life is grounded in God who is utter Simplicity. They recognize that in order to more perfectly reflect God who dwells within them, they need to align their lives with God's simplicity. They wish to uncomplicate their lives, which they realize is not easy to achieve in a society that lives and breathes an ideology that more, more, and even more is better!

For these people, voluntary simplicity entails focusing on what is essential in life. It entails de-cluttering their lives in order to stress that life is about being rather than having. In so doing, they create more space for God in their lives. Richard Foster describes this process as freeing oneself from "intoxication to material or outward things and becoming sensitive to things of the spirit."²⁴

Like the Shakers and Cistercians, non-monastics who embrace simplicity in contemporary society know that humility is essential to doing so. As humble persons, they live in the truth of their dependency on God for life itself and all that is needed to sustain it. They rejoice in the genius of God's creativity demonstrated in the diversity of human and natural life on Earth.

Those who internally embrace an ideology of simplicity express it outwardly in their ways of being

and acting as temporary Earth residents. These persons' practice of simplicity, nurtured by their ongoing listening in silence to the voice of God, enables them to become strongly committed to responsible stewardship of God's gift of creation.

Practitioners of Christian simplicity focus on wholeheartedly loving the Triune God. They live life from the Center who is God. They lovingly share what they have with neighbors in need of basic necessities. They understand that compassionate justice necessitates sensitive global awareness of and response to those in various parts of the world who go to bed hungry every night and who die daily of malnutrition and related diseases, especially women and children.

Those who embrace simplicity of life know that their personhood is not identified with possessions or position. For the Shakers, Cistercians, and those who follow in their spirit, gone is the need to strain to get ahead. For these followers, as for their monastic counterparts, work is cooperative, not competitive; it is a means of contributing to the common good.

Those who choose to live according to the spirit of simplicity modelled by the Shakers and the Cistercians often engage in activities such as daily meditation, gardening, recycling, consuming natural food, and wearing clothes until they are worn out. They purchase products that are durable, repairable, functional and non-polluting. As already indicated, their simplified way of life is reflected in their strong sense of social responsibility in relationship to others in the Earth community.

Conclusion: Simplicity of Life—Key to 21st Century Sustainability

The simplicity of life that Thomas wrote about and embraced as a Cistercian, Trappist monk, he also discovered embedded in Shakerism. This world-view provides a path for securing a sustainable earth in the 21st century and beyond. A principle of sustainability is that earth is sacred and has been entrusted to humankind by a loving Creator. All living creatures and non-living elements constitute an inter-related

and interdependent whole. Each being and component make a unique contribution to the common good of life on earth.

The Divine Being desires the flourishing of all of creation. Thus, humans have a profound obligation and responsibility to reverence and care for all of earth's life forms. Thomas Berry, one of the foremost contemporary commentators on the Earth story, stresses that humans must undergo a conversion from ego-centricity to eco-centricity. According to Berry, such a movement, pivotal to securing a sustainable Earth future, entails humans shifting from a consumer to a conservator way of being. In effect, it involves humans embracing the kind of simple lifestyle modelled by the Cistercian and Shaker communities as it was interpreted and lived out by Thomas Merton.

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According to Merton, both the Shaker and Cistercian humble, frugal lifestyle provides a paradigm of good stewardship of Earth resources. Practitioners of these traditions demonstrate what it means to graciously receive what one has as gift from God; to live mindfully with less; and to keep ever in mind the common good of one's local community and the broader community of those in need. For Merton, the Cistercian and Shaker commitment to simplicity of life offers a clarion call to humans to embrace sustainable ways of being including reverencing all life; eliminating non-essentials and waste of resources; enjoying parks, beaches and

libraries without owning them; and consciously caring for the common good. With respect to such sustainable practices, Merton would insist that, in harmony with his and the Shaker tradition, all be done in order to grow in greater union with God by

loving God's creation. Finally, Thomas Merton would agree that any sustainable actions be entered into in order to live simply so that others, including earth itself, might simply live and that simplicity of life is always a work in progress. ♦

Endnotes

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²² Thomas Merton, "Introduction" to Andrews and Andrews, *Religion in Wood in Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*, p. 85.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1981): p. 121.



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Discussion Questions

(Cancienne) What in the desert tradition still seems necessary for you in living religious life--economy of speech, silence, solitude, focus on scripture, reliance on a mentor, egalitarianism, hospitality, living simply, creating space so significant encounters and experiences can be recognized?

(Caron) *"If she found anything useful in scripture which seemed hard for the less intelligent to understand, she would alter the Latin and re-write it [so that it would be] more useful to those who read it...from early morning until night she summarized lengthy passages to promote God's praise and her neighbors' salvation."* It seems that the writings of the nuns at Helfta served as instruction for lay-people in the area. What pastoral concerns were driving Gertrude of Helfta's ministry of the word? What kinds of scripture passages do you imagine she might have left out or adapted so they would be more "useful" to readers?

(Hennessey) As for your own devotional history and style of prayer, does the Rhineland image of the Pieta—Mary holding Jesus after he's taken down from the cross—have any relevance for you? Are there other artistic representations of the Pieta that speak to you, or represent your social justice concerns?

(King) Merton's mysticism is grounded in his feeling connected to a world of everyday things, such as a chair or work pants. Just breathing is a form of prayer. What ordinary actions or things you see and use every day trigger a sense of God's power working in you? For those in active ministry, is it possible to develop a consciousness in which earthly life and divine life feel like one experience? Or do you think that consciousness requires a more contemplative setting or retirement from the active apostolate?

(Moran) Do you know any "unofficial" anchoresses? What are the spiritual values, practices of prayer, and pastoral guidelines that still seem viable in today's religious life? Or is this lifestyle oppressive of women? What are natural gifts of personality that would make this lifestyle agreeable?

(Ruffing) *Catherine of Siena identified with the role of 'apostola' (an apostle like Mary Magdalen who became apostle to the apostles).* In what ways do you see your present or past ministry as sharing in a role of preaching, peace-making or reform in the church? Or do you feel your own ministry isn't connected with a church-related role?

(Sunderman) *Practitioners of these traditions demonstrate what it means to graciously receive what one has as a gift from God; to live mindfully with less; and to keep ever in mind the common good of one's local community and the broader community of those in need.* Merton, a monastic, was attracted to Shaker practices. Do you see any signs that laypersons today are adopting values associated with Cistercian and Shaker traditions?

(Upton) *The Beguines were "hardly timid souls in need of protection in a convent. Rather, the fact that they already led world-centered lives may be a reason the Beguines developed a spirituality that was both in and of the world, not separate from it. This dynamic makes them particularly interesting to us today.* Are Sisters of Mercy a continuation of the Beguines? What makes Mercy spirituality and life-style different?

Contributors

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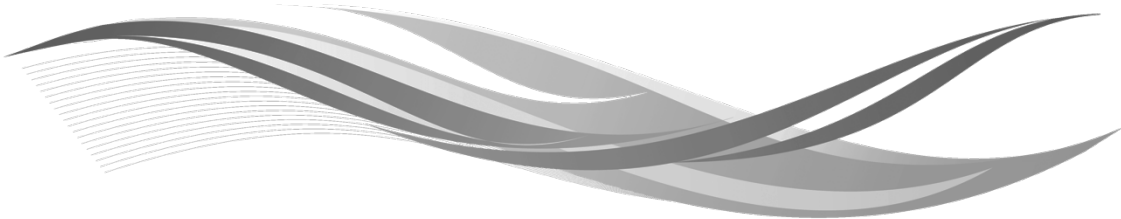


*This poem by **Maya Angelou** was read at the January 13, 2017
opening session of the CA Senate by Michelle Gorman, R.S.M.,
who is their Chaplain.*

Father, Mother, God,
Thank you for your presence during the hard and mean days;
for then we have you to lean upon.
Thank you for your presence during the bright and sunny days;
for then we can share that which we have with those who
have less.
And thank you for your presence during the Holy Days;
for then we are able to celebrate you, and our families,
and our friends.

For those who have no voice, we ask you to speak.
For those who feel unworthy, we ask you to pour out your love
in waterfalls of tenderness.
For those who live in pain, we ask you to bathe them in the river of
your healing.
For those who are lonely, we ask you to keep them company.
For those who are depressed, we ask you to shower upon them the
light of hope.

Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of substance:
We ask you to give to all the world that which we need most- peace.
Amen.



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