

# The *MAST* Journal

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## Emotions in the Psalms

<b>Prayers of the Heart: What the Psalms Teach Us</b> <i>Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>“Centered in God ... Go Forward ...” in God’s <i>Hesed</i> and <i>Raḥamîm</i>: Catherine McAuley and the Seven Penitential Psalms</b> <i>Kate Rushton, R.S.M.</i>	<b>8</b>
<b>Do the Psalms within the Liturgy of the Hours Still Have Relevance?</b> <i>Judith Schubert, R.S.M.</i>	<b>17</b>
<b>Psalmody in the Prayer of the Ecumenical Community of Taizé</b> <i>Jean Evans, R.S.M.</i>	<b>22</b>
<b>Praise to God from Mercy Farm</b> <i>Mary Quinn, R.S.M.</i>	<b>27</b>
<b>What’s in a Name?</b> <i>Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M.</i>	<b>32</b>
<b>Homilies from the Institute Chapter 2017</b> <i>Linda Bechen, R.S.M., Joy Clough, R.S.M., Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Sue Sanders, R.S.M. and Aline Paris, R.S.M.</i>	<b>37</b>



Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,



During our lifetime of praying the Psalms, and in the 50 years since Vatican II, men published the bulk of academic commentaries on the Psalms. On my home-library shelves, as illustration, are six commentaries by men. Was some of this patriarchal legacy linked to the assumption that the Psalms of David, supposedly authored “in toto” by a king, were best interpreted by other men? In the last 10 years or so, a few women exegetes, both Catholic and Protestant have crept onto the publisher’s lists. Women religious may recognize

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A. and Irene Nowell, O.S.B., for example. The gender of the commentators is an odd misrepresentation of the statistics. Of those who have been praying the breviary or office, three times as many women religious as male priests and religious have been reciting the psalms.

This issue, “Emotions in the Psalms,” authored by women, may be received as a modest corrective to the history of commentary on these prayers. The Psalms, attributed to David as a “canonization” of their sentiments, most certainly reflect the experience, composition and voice of millennia of Jewish women --before they became the legacy of all women and men of faith. In Irene Nowell’s book, *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through the Psalms* (Liturgical Press, 2013), she offers a gender-inclusive invitation: “[T]he Psalms teach us to tell our story, cry out our pain, and to give praise to God. They also teach us to listen—to the voice of God, the voice of Christ, the voices of the people around us, and the voice of all creation.” The contributors in this volume of *The MAST Journal* certainly respond to Irene Nowell’s invitation.

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., leads off in “Prayers of the Heart” as an orientation to the Psalter, a collection of timeless prayers. She integrates the voices of both men and women commentators: St. Athanasius, Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., Walter Brueggemann, Carroll Stuhlmueller, S.P., John Craghan, and Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M. She highlights the emotional range in these prayers—delight, fear, lament, empathy with suffering people, repentance and desire for conversion.

Kate Rushton, R.S.M. does a scholarly study, drawing on our archives, that focuses on Catherine McAuley’s special attachment to a spiritual reading book, a “well-worn and thumbbed copy” of *The Seven Penitential Psalms with the Paraphrase* by Francis Blyth, O.C.D. Those Psalms—6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143—had a devotional history in being recommended for prayer during Lent. Kate proposes that these psalms--with themes of lament, dependence on God, and the mercy and compassion of God-- influenced Catherine’s ministerial outlook and her focus on the poor. She then does a meditative reading of Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God.”

Judith Schubert, R.S.M. turns our attention to “Psalms in the Mercy Prayer Book.” The 1998 Institute volume, *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, provided members with a four-week cycle of 50 psalms. Judith selects five of these “emotional poems” that represent the entire cycle, as well as the theme for each week: Ps. 141 (lament), Ps. 47 (celebration), Ps. 42 (lament), Ps. 84 (joy) and Ps. 103 (blessing). For

each psalm, she provides a short historical and cultural note so the sentiments of the psalm can be better understood.

Jean Evans, R.S.M., in “Psalmody in the Prayer of the Ecumenical Community of Taizé,” reviews the founding of the Taizé community in France during WWII, and the evolution of its thrice-daily prayer with melodies written by Fr. Joseph Gelineau and Jacques Berthier. It may be less realized that Taizé was one of the first places where the Psalms were sung in vernacular French, when, in 1950, the Office was still commonly prayed in Latin. The chanted refrains, so moving for any who have participated in Taizé prayer, reflect the “mysticism of suffering” as well as trust, confidence and hope in God.

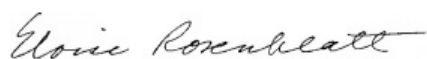
Mary Quinn, R.S.M. in “Praise to God from Mercy Farm,” writes a meditation on Psalm 148 as she leads readers on a walkabout around Mercy Farm in Vermont, located in the Lake Champlain Valley. Mercy Farm is an eco-spiritual center which welcomes guests for visits and retreats and puts out an internet newsletter. Mary asks, “How does one approach a reflection on the Psalm to the Universe when one view captures so much beauty?” We enjoy a tour of trees, mountains, birds, bees, vegetables, flowers, and dear sheep, mother and son Bailey and Dexter. “One stands alone with nature and with God. One is held, transfixed, mesmerized.”

Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M., whose project “Mercy Beyond Borders,” supports the education of poor women in war-torn Sudan, illustrates in “What’s in a Name?” that “women’s names are living psalms.” She features six women whose given names illustrate a particular moment in that student’s harrowing family history as refugees in a war zone. The names express suffering and hope-- “sacrifice” “journey,” “pilot-dropper of food from a plane,” “dry season-extreme heat,” “war,” and “peace-unity-harmony.” Marilyn links these names with psalm verses, indicating that the psalms are not ethereal spiritual sentiments, but arise from gritty emotions in the midst of actual life-death emergencies.

MAST Journal is grateful for the manuscripts and proud to print the scriptural reflections of Sister-homilists at the Sisters of Mercy Institute Chapter in Buffalo, New York, during June, 2017: Linda Bechen, Joy Clough, Marie Michele Donnelly, Aline Paris and Sue Sanders.

Let this issue be evidence that Mercy women hold the scriptures dear, that they are gifted commentators, and their many fruitful ministries arise from contemplation on “the one thing necessary.”

Yours,



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

# Prayers of the Heart-What the Psalms Teach Us

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*Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.*

One of the most touching passages in the Gospels is a simple request: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). That simple request resounds over and over again in the hearts of those who seek an encounter with God. Persons throughout time have sought to commune with God through ritual, sacrifice, chants, meditation and vocal prayers. All such resources provide an abundance of spiritual food but resting deep within our Judaeo-Christian heritage is a source crafted through the power of the Spirit itself...the Book of Psalms.

## **Psalms Express the Timeless Outreach to God**

The Psalms provide not only a variety of prayer forms, memories evoking thanks, and images of God, but patterns and paradigms of how to approach the Living God from a place of authenticity and trust. They are prayers that encapsulate human experience in all its forms: joy, longing, discouragement, fear and delight. The psalms provide for those who drink of their wisdom, a way to see God everywhere. They show us what it means to walk this human pilgrimage with our Saving God. St. Athanasius tells us:

The book of Psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest. It seems to me that for a person who recites them the psalms are like a mirror in which one may see oneself and the movements of one's heart and mind and then give voice to them.<sup>1</sup>

While modern people might find some of the imagery and language of the Psalms distant from their experience, Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., reminds us that reflective reading of the Psalms bring us in contact with the timeless religious dispositions of the psalmist.<sup>2</sup> As Bergant points out: “Standing in

solidarity with those people, we can make our prayer their prayer. In this way, our religious consciousness can be profoundly shaped by the psalms.”<sup>3</sup> From Jesus' youth these are the prayers he lifted up to God, the prayers which also shaped the “Yes” of Mary. They are prayers that play a vital part in the communal prayer of both Christian and Jewish faith communities.

So, what is it that we discover in the Psalms? Walter Brueggemann puts it succinctly:

The Psalms, with a few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time; a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for the same issues and possibilities persist in those deeply human dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

Brueggemann identifies for us what makes the Psalms so enduring and so powerful. They voice for us the depth of feelings of human experience which transcend time. The anguish of the Israelite, overwhelmed and frightened in the face of the enemy, is one with the human anguish felt today by the people of Southern Sudan or the families of Aleppo. Where is God? When will the cry of my suffering be heard? With the Psalmist, the oppressed cry out: “Save me, God, for the waters have reached my neck. I have sunk into the mire of the deep, where there is no foothold. I have gone down to the watery depths; the flood overwhelms me (Psalm 69:2-3).”<sup>5</sup>

The Psalms provide us with a pattern of prayer that welcomes human emotion. There is no attempt to conceal what is in the heart. Contemporary worshipers might recoil from such phrases as, “Slay them; with your hand, Lord, slay them; snatch them

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from the world in their prime” (Ps. 17:14) or “Blessed the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock” (Ps 137:9). It is hard to deny that out of dire suffering, such feelings can arise. What the Psalms constantly show us is that when dark and paralyzing suffering is lifted to God, it can be transformed. We remember that we are not alone, not without a God who hears our cry and is with us in the darkness. Though separated by centuries, the one who prays these prayers enters into solidarity with all who share the human experience of suffering, joy, expectation and awe. Brueggemann puts it this way:

...when we turn to the Psalms, it means we enter into that voice of humanity and decide to take our stand with that voice. We are prepared to speak among all people and with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous, human pilgrimage. We add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that beset us all.<sup>6</sup>

### Division of the Psalms by Emotional Theme

Scripture scholars over time have found various ways of classifying the 150 psalms. Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., speaks of songs of praise, prayers of confidence, prayers of thanksgiving, wisdom and prophetic psalms and those of supplication and lament.<sup>7</sup> This type of classification highlights a pattern of diversity, movements of the heart and literary style. Dianne Bergant echoes that division in her work on the psalms.<sup>8</sup> Using another way of categorizing, Brueggemann identifies three significant patterns found in the Book of Psalms, patterns of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.<sup>9</sup> In his work *Psalms for all Seasons*, John F. Craghan brings these two patterns together. Craghan places psalms of praise, trust, confidence wisdom and royal psalms under the category of orientation. Personal and communal laments comprise the phase of disorientation while

thanksgiving and declarative praise psalms would be indicative of reorientation.<sup>10</sup>

Psalms of orientation are indicative of what Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M., calls “seasons of well-being.”<sup>11</sup> They would be prayers of longing, gratitude, confidence, goodness, delight in God’s creation. They are simple in their form, calling upon what they experience as the goodness of God, the wonder of creation. They are concrete in their expression, not stopping at the act of giving thanks or praise but including the motive for such movements of the heart: Psalm 33 exemplifies this when it declares: “Sing to him a new song; skillfully play with joyful chant. For the LORD’s word is upright; all his works are trustworthy” (Ps. 33: 3-4).

There is an exuberance to psalms of praise.

Delight is not only rooted in the beauty of the night skies or the abundance of harvest, it is rooted in the memory of what God has done for the covenant people corporately and personally. When the people of Israel prayed Psalm 105, they retold the history of their covenant relationship with God. It is God’s wondrous deeds that prompt the outpouring of their soul. Because God has always been faithful, the psalmist can

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trust that that faithfulness will endure. This is particularly true of Psalms of confidence and trust. The Psalmist calls the community to worship the God of salvation and then relates the story which prompts confidence...God led them through the sea, God helped them triumph over their enemies, God brought them back from exile. It is about God’s response to their pleas for help. Out of the experience arises the act of giving praise.

### Desire for Intimacy with God

Ann Marie Caron, R.S.M., points out that “these corporate prayers are of theological import. For in their recollections are some of the most important statements in the Psalter about God’s way with Israel and the world.”<sup>12</sup> For all of us our image of God

shapes our relationship with God. When we approach the Psalms, we are invited to put into conversation the images of God and God's relationship to Israel with our own God images. An abundance of images can be discovered. What they all have in common is a sense of deep intimacy, a promise of faithfulness, a conviction that exploitation of the poor and oppressed is a violation of covenant love, a belief that God is a God who is always with us, never abandoning us.

Belief in possibility of intimacy with God is captured in psalms of longing and desire: "As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?" (Ps. 42-43:1-2) "I shall walk before the LORD in the land of the living" (Ps. 116:9). "LORD, my heart is not proud; nor are my eyes haughty. I do not busy myself with great matters, with things too sublime for me. Rather, I have stilled my soul, like a weaned child to its mother, weaned is my soul..." (Ps. 131:1-2). Such language captures the hunger for communion and union that moves us to seek God, to rest in the presence of One whom we believe not only knows us but loves us unconditionally.

### **Lament, Fear, Despair, Sorrow, Disorientation**

If longing for God were the only types of psalms found in the Psalter, we would find it incomplete, for the psalms of disorientation are vital for our faith journey. Caron reflects:

In this season of disorientation, human life consists of anguished intervals of hurt, alienation, suffering, and dying. Such lived experiences evoke rage, resentment, anger, self-pity and sometimes even hatred. Brueggemann speaks to the image of place in the psalms, suggesting that, in difference places, one prays different prayers.

The lament psalms, both individual and communal, are "poems and speech-forms that

match this season in its ragged, painful disarray."<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary Christians live and pray in the midst of a world reeling from violence, oppression, hunger, war, and overwhelming pain. Bringing their experience to God in prayer includes that reality. While there is much to move us to praise and thanksgiving, there is also ample suffering to move us to lament. Almost one third of the Psalter includes prayers rising from feelings of fear, despair, rage and powerlessness. There are three insights imbedded in the laments: (a) What exists is not what the merciful God desires; (b) The saving power of God can intervene and change that reality; (c) God will be faithful and save us.

The structure of the lament is more extended than those of praise psalms. It begins with a cry for help similar to that found in Psalm 142:1-8: "With my own voice I cry to the LORD; with my own voice I beseech the LORD. Before him I pour out my complaint, tell of my distress in front of him. When my spirit is faint within me, you know my path." It then gives voice to what is wrong in passionate and sometimes exaggerated language: "As I go along this path, they have hidden a trap for me. I look to my right hand to see that there is no one willing to acknowledge me. My escape has perished; no one cares for me." The third component follows, confession of trust: "I cry out to you, LORD, I say, you are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living. Listen to my cry for help for I am brought very low." Finally, the petition and vow of praise concludes the prayer. "Rescue me from my pursuers, for they are too strong for me. Lead my soul from prison that I may give thanks to your name. Then the righteous shall gather around me because you have been good to me."

In the laments, we discover that authenticity is key to prayer. There is no attempt to "clean up" one's feelings, to cover over the rage or anguish that is felt. The Psalmist trusts that God accepts one just

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as she/he is, and will hear them in their brokenness. Prayers arising from praise or thanksgiving might have a flowing rhythm or elegance of language but prayers of lament have the power of raw emotion, an urgent cry for God to act. When we enter into the sentiments and energy of the laments, we are challenged to remember that we say these prayers in and through Christ Jesus. In Christ, we are one with our brothers and sisters throughout the world and share in their pain as well as their joy. We, in truth, give voice to those who cannot cry out.

### **Re-Orientation of Life**

Embracing the reality of our brokenness, our alienation and suffering leads us to entrust ourselves into the providence of a loving and merciful God. Coming face to face with the truth that we cannot save ourselves is the first movement to a reorientation of life, the third pattern of the psalms. "Corresponding to this new beginning 'psalms of new orientation'; speak boldly about a new gift from God, a fresh intrusion that makes all things new."<sup>14</sup> Present in the psalms is a pattern of pouring out one's heart to a God who can change things. This conviction is the beginning of reorienting oneself to the truth that one is not in control of life. Reliance on God is the way of freedom and liberation. This reorientation of vision and imagination brings us back to the way of hope.

No one psalm contains all the rich diversity or styles of human prayer. Taken collectively, they form a tapestry reflecting the many faces of prayer. There are psalms for ordinary days, psalms of thanksgiving, of praise, of anguish and of longing, all echoes of the Spirit's prayer within. They challenge us to probe the depth of our own feelings both in times of joy and in times of anger or discouragement. We might not use the same words, but we share the feelings and the Psalmist's hope in a saving God.

### **Instruction on How to Pray**

Acknowledging that the psalms are prayers inspired by the Spirit, expressed in limited human words and arising from a specific cultural context, we

find that they still provide for contemporary believers' important insights concerning the way of prayer. So, what do the psalms teach us of prayer?

1. Prayer is leavened by memory. Conscious reflection upon the action of God in our lives moves us to prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Prayer practices like the examen of consciousness help us to identify the movements of God in daily experience. Such recognition moves us to embrace the sacred memories for which we wish to raise praise and thanks.
2. Prayer is rooted in lived experience. It arises from the human mind and heart as persons engage with concrete realities. To fully enter into the psalms today, we must explore their metaphorical connections to our experience. Who are today's oppressors; who are the oppressed? What is the action of God for which we render praise?
3. All life is reflective of the God of life and is a source of inspiration. The psalms are rich in images drawn from nature. They express the interdependence of created being. Among the spiritual movements of contemporary time is a hunger for reconnecting with the earth, with the wonder of planetary being. The psalms feed that hunger and remind us that when we are in harmony with creation, we discover a world charged with God's presence. Within that context we are prompted to want to know more and more about the wonder of multiple galaxies, dark holes, vastness of the cosmos and the miracle of quarks. The psalms tell us that earth is food for our prayer.
4. The psalms call us to authenticity in our prayer. We are not always proud or even accepting of our negative feelings, wishes for revenge or captivity to discouragement or depression. We sometimes not only want to deny those feelings to ourselves but to withhold them from the light of God's healing grace. The psalms



challenge us to come to God just as we are, in the fullness of our brokenness. It is only then that we open ourselves to the

healing and transformation that is offered to us. Brueggemann points out: "The Psalms are an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage."<sup>15</sup> God invites us through the psalms to come with what is truly in our hearts not what we think should be in our hearts.

5. The psalms vividly portray to us the story of God's abundant mercy. John Sachs tells us: "Psalms recount the mighty deeds of love and mercy which are the substance of God's hesed and proclaim it as the sure foundation for Israel's life and future."<sup>16</sup> What was true for the people of Israel, is true for us. The psalms mediate to us the powerful image of a merciful and faithful God who is always there for us.
6. The psalms provide patterns of prayer for individual and communal prayer. The psalms provide for us simple patterns or structures for bringing our own concerns and longings to God. Whether modeled on the invitation, motivation and act of praise formula characteristic of psalms of praise or the more extended formula of the lament described earlier, the psalms help us to formulate what is moving in us and express it in our own words.

"In praying the Psalms, we encounter our God through the words of the poet. In communicating that experience, the poet chooses images and symbols. It is these images and symbols that speak to our prayer needs."<sup>17</sup> The images fire our imagination and capture our hearts. If the Psalms were simply that, great, evocative poetry, they would enliven our prayer but they are more. The richness of the psalms in themselves is expanded by the function they play in the liturgical worship of the church. The psalms bring us into a deeper communion with the Body of

Christ. Within the context of the Liturgy of the Hours, we come together in Christ to lift up the prayer of the whole church. We believe that we pray in and through the Spirit of God and in solidarity with each other in Christ. In a sense, we go beyond our own experience and give voice to both the praise and suffering of all. When one prays: "Out of the depths, I call to you, Lord..." (Ps. 130:1) we are bringing to God not only our own pain but the pain of the abandoned, the trafficked one, the hungry throughout our world. It is the voice of Christ interceding for us before the Father.

For some the Psalms may be confusing, too raw, seemingly distant from the realities of our time to be a school of prayer but transformative power resides within them. When we listen deeply to their voice, when we allow them to shape our imagination and leaven our hope, we are brought into a living, ever-changing relationship with God. What more can be asked of these sacred songs than this? ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Maria Martini, *What Am I That You Care for Me, Praying with the Psalms*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990): Prologue.

<sup>2</sup> Dianne Bergant, *Psalms 1-72, New Collegeville Bible Commentary*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2013): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*. (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1993): 13.

<sup>5</sup> All scripture quotations are taken from New American Bible. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, op. cit., 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms I*. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983.): 31-55.

<sup>8</sup> Bergant, op. cit., 6-8.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, op. cit., 14.

<sup>10</sup> John F. Craghan. *Psalms for All Seasons*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993.):5.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Marie Caron, "Journeys and Season—What about the Psalms?", *The MAST Journal*, Vol. 8:3 ( Summer, 1998):28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, op. cit., 20.

<sup>16</sup> John R. Sachs., *The Christian Vision of Humanity*. (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1991):68.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.

# Centered in God...Go Forward..." in God's Hese and Rahamim: Catherine McAuley and the Seven Penitential Psalms

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Kate Rushton, R.S.M.

Mary Clare Moore lists *The Seven Penitential Psalms with the Paraphrase* by Fr. [Francis] Blyth as one of Catherine McAuley's favorite prayers.<sup>1</sup> This biblically based devotional text begins by quoting Ezek. 18:21-23, Isa. 1:16-18 and Lk. 15:7 which all center on the sinner and repentance.<sup>2</sup> A preface follows. Each of the seven penitential Psalms is explained in a consistent format. On each page of this small book, both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> editions arrange one to three verses of the particular Psalm in the Douay translation and Blyth's paraphrase on those verses. A prayer follows each Psalm. The reader is referred often to an appendix which contains extensive more scholarly notes on each Psalm.

Elizabeth Davis concludes her excellent article on Catherine McAuley's interpretation of Scripture and how it permeates her letters and writing by saying that "this nineteenth-century Irish woman intentionally used the Bible to shape a community of women motivated by the life and teachings of Jesus and dedicated to the service of 'the poor, sick and

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ignorant."<sup>3</sup> While Catherine's interpretation was shaped by the theological understandings and the Catholic biblical interpretation of her time, it is notable that in *The Paraphrase* both devotional and scholarly approaches are found. The English Carmelite Francis Blyth was, arguably, an informed biblical scholar, for he wrote on many aspects of the Bible and, with Bishop Challoner, revised the

translation of the Douay Bible, the Catholic equivalent of the King James Bible.

## Catherine and the Penitential Psalms

Let us look at the first two verses of Ps. 51, fourth penitential Psalm, in the Douay translation which Catherine and generations of Sisters would have prayed, for the tradition of using the *Paraphrase* continued in some Mercy communities until the 1960s:<sup>4</sup>

Have Mercy on me, O GOD, according to thy great Mercy. And according to the Multitude of thy Compassion, blot-out my Iniquity.

The paraphrase of these two verses follow:

1. O Lord, whose Property is always to have Pity and to spare, Have mercy on me, miserable sinner. And as Thou camest not to call the just but sinners to Repentance; ah! Graciously condescend to save me, O GOD, and according to thy great Mercy accept my repentance. For Thou, Lord, who hast given it to me, knowest how true it is.
2. And therefore, since Thou wilt not the Death of a Sinner, but rather, that He be converted and live; accept, Dear Lord, the Conversion Thou hast wrought in me, according to the infinite Multitude of thy tender Compassions; and blot out my Iniquity, so that the least Stain of Sin, or Affection to it, may no longer remain in me.<sup>5</sup>

While the tenor of Blyth's writing reflects a bygone age, repeatedly in his paraphrase are enduring words which would have resonated with Catherine. "Mercy" is there frequently along with mercy related words such as "compassion," "tenderness" and "gracious." In the same paragraph as she lists the

*Paraphrase* as being one of Catherine's favorite prayers, Mary Clare Moore records:

"Mercy" was a word of predilection with her. She would point out the advantages of Mercy above Charity. The Charity of God would not avail us, if His Mercy did not come to our assistance. Mercy is more than Charity – for it not only bestows benefits, but receives and pardons again and again – even the ungrateful.<sup>6</sup>

One begins to understand why this devotion was among Catherine's favorite prayers as in her contemplation-action rhythm "she drew companions into a new way of living God's mercy in courageous response to the needs of the times."<sup>7</sup> I agree with Mary Sullivan's assessment that the tone of the "penitence" of the *Paraphrase* and Psalms are not the "guilt-trip" presumed by many today. Rather, those who prayed them were offered "truthful and peaceful acknowledgement of their radical need for God's forgiveness, for God's redemptive bridging of the gap between their spotty human virtue and God's clean holiness." Penitence of this kind gave Catherine "serenity and courage" to walk the streets of Dublin and compassion to feel the sorrows of those she visited and served.<sup>8</sup>

The reader is invited to imagine Catherine at prayer with her well-worn, thumbled copy of *The Seven Penitential Psalms with the Paraphrase* on her lap or her prie dieu. Maybe, it is an evening in 1840 after she wrote to M. Catherine Meagher of the two unemployed young women whose "dejected faces have been before me." She had turned them away because the House of Mercy was "crowded to excess"<sup>9</sup> Or during those seven months in 1832 when Sisters of Mercy worked in four-hour shifts at a makeshift Townsend Street cholera hospital set up in a slum area, Catherine had "such compassion on the [orphaned] infant that she brought it home under her [black woolen] shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed in her own room."<sup>10</sup> Of this time,

Mary Vincent Harnett recorded that Catherine's companions felt "[t]he spirit of mercy and compassion for them [the poor in the cholera hospital] which animated her sometimes made her adopt plans which to some would appear to exceed the limits of prudence."<sup>11</sup> Catherine had no illusion about the need of herself and her sisters "to do better" for as she wrote in 1839 to M. Elizabeth Moore: "we have been deficient enough – and far, very far, from cooperating generously with God in our regard, but we will try to do better."<sup>12</sup>

Catherine's devotion to the seven penitential Psalms (Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143) is grounded in an ancient tradition which can be traced to beginning with Augustine (354-430).<sup>13</sup> How these seven Psalms came to be chosen as the penitential Psalms cannot be ascertained. Cassiodorus (c.485-585) writes of such a grouping and interprets the

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number seven allegorically to suggest seven ways for obtaining forgiveness: baptism, martyrdom, giving alms, having a forgiving spirit, promoting the conversion of a sinner, abundance of love and by repentance. From the eleventh century, commentaries on these seven Psalms began to be written by both lay people and clerics. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) directed that these Psalms were to be prayed in Lent while early last century under Pius X they became part of the ferial office of

Lent. These Psalms have been, and still are used in the liturgy, especially Ps. 130, the *De Profundis* (Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord) and Ps. 51, the *Miserere* (Have mercy on me, O Lord). The tradition of praying Ps. 130 daily in communities of Sisters of Mercy and the frequent communal praying of Ps. 51 may be traced to Catherine's devotion to these seven Psalms.<sup>14</sup> Although regarded as the classic Christian prayers of repentance for sin, as we shall see, these Psalms are not always concerned directly with this (especially Pss. 6, 102, 143) yet all may be categorized as laments.

## Psalms of Lament

Broadly speaking, two traditions of interpreting the Psalms exist without “much knowledge of, attention to, or impact on the other.”<sup>15</sup> A long, faithful tradition of interpretation is mostly in liturgy and devotional prayer. There is tendency in popular piety to focus on a few well-known, positive, “nice” Psalms (e.g., Pss. 23 and 121) and omit difficult Psalms and verses. This practice obscures dimensions of the life and interaction of the people of Israel with God. To value a Psalm more fully, it needs to be considered in the context of how we receive the Psalms today which was fixed more than two centuries before Jesus. This leads to the second tradition of scholarly interpretation which tends to be critical, sometimes arid, and mostly its insights do not impact upon devotional and liturgical approaches to the Psalms. To suggest a way to pray the penitential Psalms in the new space of the tension between devotional approaches and critical approaches, the genre of the lament Psalms will be considered in the context of an overview of the Psalms and, then, attention will be given to Ps. 51.

Essentially the Psalms are poems. Poetry by its very nature intensifies human experience for both the poet and the reader. First, after reflecting on an experience, the poet steps back and, as Schaefer describes “surveys an experience, abstracts universals, translates them into symbols (words and images) and transcribes them in poetic form.”<sup>16</sup> The Psalms as poems were adopted by a community of faith. The second phase of reflection concerns the reader who enters the Psalms which “do not simply speak their meaning, they paint it” in vivid imagery which means “interpreters must ... knead the textual dough with their imaginations so that images rise and give life.”<sup>17</sup> These prayers are expressed in the first person yet function “as a representative voice of many, past and present who relate to God.”<sup>18</sup>

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The Psalms present the human person essentially as a dialogue partner with God in an interactive covenant that functions in freedom and with accountability. In the living out of this covenant, the lament Psalms present the human person as “an assertive *complaining hoper*” who displays “courageous candor, [is] unwilling to practice restraint or deference, even in God’s presence.”<sup>19</sup> The duty of the faithful complainer is to describe in detail the reality, both actual and distorted, which God is called upon to address. Often this concerns multi-layered, complex situations such as injustice, sickness and social dislocation which confront the Psalmist. The complaint is an act of expectation and hope in God. The human person is conscious of being

a *forgiven sinner* who acknowledges this (Pss. 51:3b-6, 130:3-4) and expects to experience God’s transformative generosity.<sup>20</sup>

## Happiness According to the Psalms

Catherine’s exhortation that “[w]e have one solid comfort ... our hearts can always ... centered in God”<sup>21</sup> is a thoroughly Psalm-based position for the lament Psalms, described above, function in the context of the Book of Psalms’ thoroughly God-centered definition of human happiness which is described in Psalms 1-2 and unfolds in the rest of the Psalms.<sup>22</sup> This book’s first word is: “Happy” (NRSV *‘ašrê*) and this is repeated throughout the Psalter. The “happy” are those who follow God’s instruction (*tôrâ* Ps. 1:2) and take “refuge” (*hāsâ*) in God (Ps. 2:12). “Refuge” occurs frequently along with synonyms like “fortress,” “stronghold” and “trust.” The happy life is one of complete dependence on God for life and future is associated with another key term, “righteousness” or “the righteous” (see, Pss. 32:1-2, 11). This relational term of fundamental dependence on God applies to “the poor,” “the afflicted,” “the meek,” “the humble,” “the needy,” “the voiceless,” “the oppressed” and “the helpless” who live among

“the wicked” (also named as “scoffers,” “enemies,” “foes,” “adversaries”) who are not necessarily evil or bad but do not depend on God.

Dependence on God makes sense only because throughout the cosmos, the reign of God is a *present* reality. This conviction underpins prayer (that is, laments/complaints) and songs of praise which are inseparable theologically. The dominant voice in the Psalms is that of prayer addressed directly to God because as McCann points out “prayer is a way of life for those who entrust themselves fully to God’s care.”<sup>23</sup> This offering of the whole self to God involves “bitter complaint, brutally honest confession of sin or innocence, and poignant petition and intercession” while praise is the offering of the whole self to God through “joyful affirmation of God’s sovereignty, and enthusiastic celebration of God’s character and activity.”<sup>24</sup> Others are invited to join in because the cosmos and all peoples, creatures and creation belong to God. This has profound political, socioeconomic and ecological implications, for God wills an all-embracing “justice for all” whereby political and economic systems are to deprive no one from access to what is needed for life. Ecology and theology are inseparable for “to live under God’s rule is to live in partnership with all other species and of creatures and in partnership with the earth itself.”<sup>25</sup>

God’s invitational reign differs from the power and sovereignty used to impose the rule of the powerful. The result is that some people oppose God’s reign. Because of this, God can be said to become vulnerable, in order to relate to humankind by inviting, encouraging and enabling people to do the divine will. In this overall biblical landscape of God and the cosmos, arguably, the most important concept in the Book of Psalms is evoked by the Hebrew word, *hesed* (steadfast, enduring love or loving kindness) and related mercy words.

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All the penitential Psalms, except Psalm 38, have an explicit “mercy” word. *Hesed*, is found in Pss. 6:4; 32:10; 51:1, 130:2 and 143:8, 12, while *raḥamîm* is found in Pss. 51:1 and 102:13. Three of these Psalms, Pss. 32, 130 and 143, are prayed once in the four - week cycle of *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, while Ps. 51 is prayed in Morning Prayer every Friday of Weeks 1-4.<sup>26</sup> I turn, now, to consider three mercy-related words found in the frequently prayed Ps. 51 and consider some implications of praying this lament in the world of the Book of Psalms in order to suggest ways for praying it today in the spirit of Catherine.

### Terms Characterizing God

The first two verses of Ps. 51 which Sisters of Mercy praying

Friday Morning Prayer recite are:

Have mercy, tender God,  
Forget that I defied you.  
Wash away my sin  
Cleanse me from guilt.

As we shall see this International Committee on English in the Liturgy translation, along with other translations, in varying degrees, obscure the richness of the Hebrew mercy words.<sup>27</sup> The NRSV, for example, translates Ps. 51:1-2 as: “Have mercy on me (*hānnênî*), O God, according to your steadfast love (*hesed*); according to your abundant mercy (*raḥamîm*) blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” In these first two verses, three contrasting terms present the interface between God and the voice of Israel as expressed by the Psalmist in two sets of contrasting terms.<sup>28</sup> The three terms characterizing God echo their importance in the Torah where God reveals Godself to be “merciful (*raḥamîm*) and gracious (*ḥanûn*), slow to anger,

abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*)” (Ex. 34:6).<sup>29</sup>

In the Old Testament, the word used most often for “mercy” is *hesed* which means steadfast, enduring love or loving kindness and has connotations of loyalty, fidelity and constancy. It is translated usually as “steadfast love” (NRSV, RSV), “loving kindness” (NAB), “love is everlasting” (JB) and “mercy is eternal” (Douay). *Hesed* is “a one-word summary of Israel’s understanding of the character of God.”<sup>30</sup> According to the encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia* (*Rich in Mercy*), it “characterizes the life of the whole people of Israel and each of its sons and daughters: *mercy is the content of intimacy with their God, the content of their dialogue.*”<sup>31</sup> In the Psalms, the *hesed* of God is stressed over 100 times and is used mostly to characterize God’s relationship with the Earth community.<sup>32</sup> The reassuring “mercy” refrain of “God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) endures forever,” for example, occurs in every verse of Ps. 136 affirming that God’s *hesed* brought the whole cosmos into being.

As Veronica Lawson explains the explicitly female-inflected noun *raḥamîm*, the verb *raḥam*, to mercy or show womb-compassion, and the adjective *raḥum*, merciful or womb-compassionate, are related to *reḥem*, the Hebrew word for womb.<sup>33</sup> Denoting the love of a mother, womb-compassion evokes a movement of deep-down love, from depths of one’s being, from the womb. *Raḥamîm* expresses in its very root the deep, original bond and the unity that connects a mother to her child in a completely gratuitous love relationship.<sup>34</sup> So we can see that the NRSV, which translates this word as “mercy,” obscures this female image of God. “Womb-compassion” would be a better translation. Even that does not do it as “your abundant mercy” (*raḥamîm*) is plural – “your abundant mercies.” In naming God’s womb-compassion as a guarantee of forgiveness, the

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Psalmist invites associations with other images of God which destabilize the dominant, violent image of God as Warrior-Deliverer. The “disjunctive metaphor” of womb-compassion connects with God as Mother in Labor and Nurturing Mother (Isa. 42:13-14; 45:9-10; 49:13-15; 66:10-13).<sup>35</sup>

“Have mercy on me (*hānnênî*),” the opening cry of Ps. 51, would be better translated as “grace me.”<sup>36</sup> Lawson shows how mercy as steadfast and mercy as womb-compassion are paralleled with grace-related concepts which include the noun *hēn* (grace or favor).<sup>37</sup> As we have seen above in Ex. 34:6, and also in Ps. 51:1, various forms of its derivative *hānan* (to be gracious or merciful) are paralleled often with various form of *raḥamîm*. In Ps. 6, the first penitential Psalm, v.2, which the NSRV translates as “Be gracious to me,” also begins with this imperative and has *hesed* in v.4.

### Terms Characterizing the Psalmist’s Situation

We have examined three terms, translated as *grace*, *womb-compassion* and *enduring steadfast love*, which characterize God. From a situation of alienation, the Psalmist continues, “Blot out my *transgressions*. Wash me thoroughly from my *iniquity*, and cleanse me from my *sin*.” (Ps. 51:1b-2). Here are found three contrasting terms which are Israel’s preferred way of expressing separation from God: *sin*, *transgression* and *iniquity* which are preceded by imperatives from the vocabulary of forgiveness: “blot out,” “wash,” and “cleanse.”<sup>38</sup> These three imperatives are repeated later in reverse order suggesting that deep cleansing is required because sin is pervasive.

Two of these imperatives form a chiasm in vv. 2 and 7. First, in vv. 2a and 7b, we read “wash me” which is the imperative of a Hebrew verb meaning to clean physically as in washing clothes. Then in vv. 2b and 7a, we find “cleanse” and “purge” (NRSV) which both come from a Hebrew verb meaning to

cleanse through ritual purification. This poetic use of these two words suggests the depth of God's forgiving mercy "reaching both inside and out."<sup>39</sup> Another chiasm in vv. 1 and 9 forms an envelope for the first section of the Psalm. The imperative translated as "blot out" means literally "annihilation." Throughout Ps. 51:1-9, the Psalmist pleads for cleansing. Sin is very present because fourteen times vocabulary for wrongdoing occurs (transgressions, iniquity, evil, sin, guilt). God is spoken of only once in the first part (v.1). Later in vv.10-19, sin disappears and is replaced by God who is named six times.

### Focus on Re-creation

By now, the reader is aware of the many imperatives which the Psalmist uses: "teach," "let me hear," "let [the bones] rejoice" and "hide your face." From v.10, there is a change of tone from confession to petition where the God of *hesed* and *raḥamîm* is addressed in a series of imperatives which are an act of hope for right relationship: "create," "put a new," "do not cast me away," "restore," "sustain," "deliver," "open my lips," "do good," and "rebuild." Throughout this Psalm are twenty-one imperatives which Schaefer sees as expressing "intentional concern for multiples of seven [which] shows that the poet desires a total re-ordering of life."<sup>40</sup>

The focus on God in the rest of this Psalm is highlighted by the word "create" (*bārā* v.10) which is used only of God's creative activity and links Ps. 51 to Gen. 1:1, 21, 27, 2:3-4 and to Isaiah 40-55 where God is involved in creating a "new thing" (e.g., Isa. 43: 15-19; 48:6-7). Following the verb "create" are three verses which have a triple invocation of the spirit which has been likened to an epiclesis.<sup>41</sup> The spirit is suggestive of God's creative activity. As the spirit hovered over waters when the cosmos was being shaped, so too, the spirit (*ruah*) recreates the Psalmist as expressed three times in Ps. 51:10-12:

"put a new and right spirit within me"; "do not take your holy spirit from me"; and sustain in me a willing spirit."

The outcome the Psalmist hopes for is expressed in anticipating active partnership with God (Ps. 51:13-15), for when the hoped-for change occurs, the Psalmist will not retreat quietly and happily from the world. The Psalmist who anticipates transformed existence, pleads by saying every organ of speech (vv.14-15 "tongue," "lips" and "mouth") will be used to reach out to others to teach them about the possibilities of new life (v.13) and "will sing aloud" praise in the assembly. It is a deep-rooted request for God's re-creation and hope for right relationship for both the individual and the whole community (vv.18-19) as evoked by Jerusalem.

In summary, we have explored how the seven penitential Psalms, listed among Catherine

McAuley's favorite prayers, influenced her spirituality and her focus on the mercy of God. This focus enabled her, with serenity, courage and compassion, to respond to the needs of her time.

The reader has been encouraged to imagine Catherine praying these Psalms. The so-called penitential Psalms have been considered as poetic laments and interpreted as both God's words to humanity and humanity's words to

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God. Through examining aspects of Ps. 51, the most frequently prayed Psalm in communities of Sisters of Mercy, we have seen how the biblical mercy words of *hesed*, *raḥamîm* and *hānnênî*, some of which are found in six of the seven penitential Psalms, are central concepts characteristic of God's covenantal dialogue with humanity. Those who depend on God and know their need of repentance (Ps. 51:1-9), as considered above, are assured of God's merciful activity of ongoing re-creating, doing new things and transforming through the three-fold invoking of the spirit (vv.10-12) Those so re-created and renewed

anticipate transformed existence and pledge to tell of the possibilities of new life (vv.13-15). I turn now to suggest some pointers for today which inform our praying of Ps. 51 communally, in our time and place, in the spirit of Catherine to hear in the light of *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home* to both the cry of the earth and the cry of poor (§49) and in inter-faith dialogue.

### Praying Psalm 51 Today

*Laudato Si'* states that "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself." When these "three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us, this rupture is sin." (§66) Francis reiterates that everything is connected (§117) and "everything is closely interrelated, and today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis." (§137) In this situation, [e]ach of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God ... Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities..." (§81). There is "no room for the globalization of indifference" (§31). Francis declares bluntly: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (§66). Because of the part our personal lives, culture and nation plays in this shocking situation: "A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal" (§202). Francis warns: "Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so

as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (§49).

Francis outlines elements this renewal invites. Ecological conversion "calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness" (§220). Included is an *integral ecology*, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions (§137). He speaks of "ecological virtues" (§88) and "ecological citizenship" which instills and cultivates sound virtues to enable "people to be able to make a selfless ecological commitment" (§119). Francis continues: "If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships" (§119). Further, "We need to strengthen the

conviction that we are one single human family" (§31) and "to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care" (§210). It is a "duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using

public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices" (§211).

In addressing the question as to why religion must be involved, Francis states: "If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it" (§63). When in the first verse of Psalm 51, we pray weekly on Friday mornings "... according to

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your abundant mercy (*raḥamīm*)” womb-compassion that wonderful word derived from *reḥem*, the Hebrew word for womb — we might consider that we are linked through this mercy-related word, in both prayer and the naming of God, with Muslims who recite in each of the five daily prayers: “In the name of God, The Most Merciful, The Dispenser of Grace: All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds, The Most Merciful ...” The Arabic word *ar-Raham* translated here as “the merciful” and, as Ali Zain points out, it is “used in the Quran as an attribute, or name of God – that is, God the most merciful. Ar-Raham is also closely related to the word *Rahm* which in Arabic means ‘womb’.” He continues that the womb is a symbol of motherly love and the significance of this means “God has attributes with strong feminine connotations.”<sup>42</sup>

The focus in Psalm 51, on the dialogue of our merciful God and humanity desiring re-creation offers hope for us because: “As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning ... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life” (§207). Using all means of communication (Ps. 51:14-15): “Let us sing as we go. May our struggle and concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (§244). ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mary Clare Moore, “The Annals of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Bermondsey [1841]” in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 116 and repeats this in *A Little Book of the Practical Sayings, Advices and Prayers of Our Revered Foundress, Mother Catherine McAuley* (London: Burns, Oates & Co., 1868), 34; Elizabeth M. Davis, “Wisdom and Mercy Meet: Catherine McAuley’s Interpretation of Scripture” in *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*, eds. Christiana de Groot and Marion Taylor (Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Praying in the Spirit of Catherine McAuley* (1999), 51 refers to the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of 1835. See, Francis Blyth, *A Devout Paraphrase on the Seven Penitential Psalms; Or, A Practical Guide to Repentance*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Dublin: Lamb, 1749) is available at <https://play.google.com>; for an illustrated 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: J. Hoyles, MDCCXLII [1742]).

<https://archive.org/stream/devoutparaphrase00blyt#page/n85/mode/2up>

<sup>3</sup> Davis, “Wisdom,” 79.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, “Wisdom,” 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> Blyth, *Paraphrase*, 1749, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 117.

<sup>7</sup> Kaupapa Whakahaere o Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa *Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy New Zealand*, #2.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Sullivan, “The Prayers of Catherine McAuley,” *The Journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology* 8 (3/1998) 46. (<http://www.mastrsm.org/>)

<sup>9</sup> Mary C. Sullivan, ed. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy 1818-1841* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004): 322.

<sup>10</sup> Recalled by Mary Clare Moore in a letter to Mary Clare Augustine Moore, 26, August 1845 in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 97-98.

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 181; see also Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012): 147-149.

<sup>13</sup> R.E. Murphy, “Penitential Psalms,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington: Catholic University of America. Published by Detroit: Gale, 2003), 73-74; for overview, see Bruce K. Waltke et al., *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014): 14-17.

<sup>14</sup> Sullivan, “Prayers,” 45.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984): 16.

<sup>16</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms; Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001): xi.

<sup>17</sup> Rolf Jacobson, “Imagery and the Psalms” in Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, eds., *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005): 197.

<sup>18</sup> Schaefer, *Psalms*, xxxii.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “On “Being Human” in the Psalms” in William P. Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of The Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 515, 521.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, “Being Human,” 523-524.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to M. de Sale White, 20 December, 1840 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 332.

<sup>22</sup> This overview in this section is drawn from J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Book of Psalms" in *The Interpreter Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996): 666-672.

<sup>23</sup> McCann, "Psalms," 669.

<sup>24</sup> McCann, "Psalms," 669.

<sup>25</sup> McCann, "Psalms," 670.

<sup>26</sup> *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, trans. *The Liturgical Psalter: Text for Study and Comment* International Committee on English in the Liturgy, 1994, see Ps. 32 (Evening Prayer of Wednesday, Week One, 567-568; Ps. 130 (Evening Prayer, Tuesday, Week Three, 663) and Ps. 143 (Evening Prayer, Friday Week Three, 682-684) and Ps. 51 (Morning Prayer, Weeks One-Four, 577-578, 631-632, 679-680, and 733-734. Ps. 51 is prayed also on each Friday in Morning Prayer of Weeks One-Four of *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite* (1974) which uses the Grail Translation.

<sup>27</sup> On "[d]ynamic equivalence, the approach used in this translation ... preferring to honor the idiom of the receptor language, in this case English," see Mary Collins, O.S.B., "An Introduction to the Translation of the Book of Psalms," *The Journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology* (8.3 1998): 16-22.

(<http://www.mastrsm.org/>)

<sup>28</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms, New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 236.

<sup>29</sup> On the five ways of expressing the notion of mercy in biblical Hebrew, see Veronica M. Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy: Biblical Perspectives and Ecological Challenges* (Northcote Vic.: Morning Star Publishing, 2015), 19-42. See, 40, where the following verses have combinations of these Hebrew mercy expressions: Ps. 25:6; 77:9; 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4 145:8-10.

<sup>30</sup> McCann, "Psalms," 199, 671.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia. Rich in Mercy. 1980, # 4*. Italics his.

<sup>32</sup> Lawson, *Blessing of Mercy*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Lawson, *Blessing of Mercy*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> John Paul II. *Dives in Misericordia*, § 4.

<sup>35</sup> Denise Dombkowski Hopkins. *Psalms Books 2-3. Wisdom Commentary*, vol.21 (Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016): 74.

<sup>36</sup> Dombkowski Hopkins, *Psalms*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Lawson, *Blessing of Mercy*, 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> The superscript of Ps. 51 ascribes this Psalm to David who in 2 Sam. 12 confesses his rape of Bethsheba and murder of her husband Uriah.

<sup>39</sup> Dombkowski Hopkins, *Psalms*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Schaefer, *Psalms*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> Schaefer, *Psalms*, 132.

<sup>42</sup> Zain Ali. "What Has Mecca to Do with Ponsonby?" in Neil Darragh, ed. *Journeying into Prayer: People and Their Pathways* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2012): 261-262.

## 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. This work is meant to serve women, the Church, and the Institute.

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](mailto: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](mailto:mheleneking@windstream.net).

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

# Do the Psalms within the Liturgy of the Hours Still Have Relevance?

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*Judith Schubert, R.S.M.*

For Sisters of Mercy, Associates and Partners throughout the world, recitation of an adapted form of the Divine Office, known as the Liturgy of the Hours, represents a common bond of daily prayer. Sharing the recitation of psalms, readings, hymns and petitions every morning, evening and night offers an opportunity to partake in communal prayer life despite geographical location. It offers us a deep unity through collective prayer.

The tradition of praying at stated times each day has its origin in ancient Judaism. Many Jews trace the practice back as far as the patriarchs, Abraham (morning prayer), Isaac (afternoon prayer) and Jacob (evening prayer). As Christianity evolved, it kept the Jewish practice of specified prayer throughout each day. Examples of the Jewish custom of praying throughout the day appears in Acts 10:9 and 16:25, where Peter prays at different time periods. In time, this practice became known as the Liturgy of the Hours. Among other practices, such religious customs would include recitation or singing of a psalm and a biblical reading.

As you well know, one of the important segments of Liturgy of the Hours consists of the recitation of a particular psalm. Throughout the four-week liturgical cycle of the *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, over fifty different psalms are recited.<sup>1</sup> Both individual and communal psalms appear during this period of time.

As I reflected on what topic would interest readers around the theme of this edition of MAST, I recall Sisters saying: “When are we going to update our communal prayer?” and “Some of the psalms

make no sense!” Subsequently, this article will concentrate on the emotions of selected psalms that appear within the four-week cycle of our daily prayer. Hopefully, a deeper understanding of these emotional poems will help to make more sense to the reader. Perhaps, too, a brief study of these psalms will help eliminate any pre-conceived notions of an angry God of the Hebrew Bible. More study of this testament will reveal that this Divine figure functions

primarily as a creator God of mercy, rather than as a God of justice and punishment.

To grasp the feelings of the ancient authors, it helps to know some historical, cultural and theological background of a psalm so that we can uncover the sentiments behind the prayer itself. Comments on each selected psalm will be limited to the texts as they appear in *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy* and

not necessarily of the entire psalm. Psalms have been selected to represent each week of the four-week cycle, while the first psalm exemplifies the entire cycle.

## **Weeks 1, II, III IV (Sunday Evening Prayer)**

### **Psalm 141 - A Prayer of Lament**

Psalm 141 represents the only psalm that occurs at the same time in evening prayer throughout the entire four-week cycle. In the first stanza, the mention of “evening sacrifice” suggests that this psalm represents an evening recitation from ancient times. The person prays with outstretched arms pointing to heaven as the smoke or incense rises to heaven in the evening sacrifice from the Jerusalem

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Temple. The petitioner seeks immediate attention from God with the words, “Hurry, Lord! I call and call!” The anxiousness of the caller can be sensed immediately.

When the restless rush for God’s attention has subsided, the psalmist asks divine help with personal behavior of speech and actions, such as “guard my lips . . . never speak evil or consider hateful deeds . . . (never) join the wicked.” In other words, the person requests divine guidance in curbing speech and keeping good company. This petition becomes stronger in the urging “I pray and pray against their hateful ways.” Once again, the reader senses the insecurity of self-trust and the need for divine assistance in order to be counted among the faithful.

While the next stanza seeks a divine verdict in the entreaty, “Let them be thrown against a rock of judgment,” the anger of the person becomes apparent. This poetic complaint becomes positive in the final stanza as the psalmist again turns to God for safety and protection in the assurance that “Lord my God, I turn to you, in you I find safety.” Yet, the reader senses a personal insecurity in the final pleas to God to “let the evildoers get tangled in their own nets but let me escape.”

This psalm remains very relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it did in the past. From earliest times until today speech continues to be used as a weapon to intimidate, to bully and to destroy others. In both ancient and contemporary times, such behavior brings wickedness from the attackers and vulnerability to the victim. In seeking help from God against such evil, the psalmist in Psalm 141 portrays sentiments that range from anxiousness, anger and insecurity to hope in the Divine.

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## **Week 1 (Wednesday, Morning Prayer)**

### **Psalm 47 - A Prayer of Celebration**

Historically, Psalm 47 presents a clear view of what an ancient liturgical procession to the Jerusalem Temple would have been like. Specifically, this occasion honors God as King.<sup>2</sup> While scholars cannot identify accurately when this jubilant ceremony occurred, it becomes clear that the psalmist presents a picture of a real triumphant festival. The participants in the procession or even those on the sidelines would have shared exciting anticipation, joyful celebration and other emotional experiences. Psalm 47 unmistakably orders in the opening verse, “all peoples, clap your hands” and “shout your joy to God.” Throughout the Temple area cries of praise, dancing and singing, would be heard, as the psalmist describes “cheers and trumpet blasts” from the people later in the third stanza of the prayer.

The writer proclaims God as king/ruler in the first four stanzas of the psalm, not only of Judah or Israel, but of the whole world. The proclamation, “God rules the earth” and “God rules over nations” make this remarkable point. In the last stanza, the psalmist announces that “foreign rulers join the people of Abraham’s God” in the acknowledgement of God as king. Whether this statement reflects a real or ideal situation, it gives great pride to the people who came to celebrate the feast. Their emotions run high as they enter into this wonderful occasion of God as king.

In the literary format of a hymn, Psalm 47 follows the pattern of an initial call to praise with reasons for the praise following the command. The imperatives, “clap. . .shout” reflect the direct order. Comments such as “God Most High is awesome, great king of all the earth” initiates the many reasons

to answer the Why of the directive. This powerful proclamation brings deep positive responses from the people. While the people did complain to God in other psalms, they surely knew how to celebrate in songs such as Psalm 47, the triumphant festival of God as king.

In our own lives, we have experienced both burdens and bliss. This psalm teaches us that, despite the challenges that we face from sorrow, sickness, separation, and aging, we need to acknowledge the happy moments in life with true celebration. Moreover, we need to share such exultant times with others. Joyful communal festivity provides awesome memories in our lives, ones to cherish for years to come.

## Week 2 (Monday, Morning Prayer)

### Psalm 42 - A Prayer of Lament

Three introductory points about the lament, Psalm 42, offer some historical background. First, Psalm 42 and 43 functioned originally as one hymn because they share mutual themes, vocabulary and a common refrain, “Why are you sad, my heart? Why do you grieve?” Secondly, Psalm 42 appears at the beginning of the second section of Psalms (called Book II), signifying its importance as the first of a series of psalms calling God, *Elohim*. Lastly, Psalm 42 serves as the first psalm of the Korahites, the keepers of the Tabernacle in the Jerusalem Temple.

This prayer of lament describes many sentiments of the psalmist such as emotional “thirst,” “tears,” “crying,” “sadness,” “grief,” “complaining,” and “abandonment.” Throughout the entire hymn, feelings of desertion permeate the texts. The psalmist aches for a connection with God like a “deer craves running water.” As the human body cannot exist without

water, so the psalmist knows that one cannot live without God.

The question raised twice by others and indirectly by the psalmist, “Where is your God?” identifies the deeply felt theological dilemma. The issue represents one of complete abandonment by God. Furthermore, the two questions asked by the person, “When will I see your face?” and “Why have you forgotten me?” expands this theological quandary.

Despite all the emotional pain, the author remembers “better days” by being brought back to the memories of the “house of God” in Jerusalem and “the joyful sound of pilgrims giving thanks.” These recollections of communal worship and jubilant celebrations cause additional grief of loneliness for the company of people as well as for God.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> stanzas, the psalmist speaks about a deeply “sad heart.” Yet, at the same time, reflects about God in the comment, “I remember you.” James Lindberg suggests that part of the longing for God and communal worship in the

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Jerusalem Temple comes from the psalmist’s geographical location which would have been a long distance away from the Temple in the north near Mount Hermon.<sup>3</sup> Whether this particular location happens to be the case or not, some type of exile prohibits the psalmist from experiencing the past joys of worship in Jerusalem. Due to physical location, the person feels out of God’s sight and forgotten. The remembrance of God “as rock,” fades “under the weight of

enemies” who impose insults night and day. Ultimately, however, the person attempts to be patient with all the negative feelings and agrees to wait for the presence of God and even acclaim the Divine.

In today’s world, feelings of loneliness and isolation permeate many in society. The same

sentiments of abandonment, expressed by the author of Psalm 42, become a reality for many including the elderly, the poor, those disenfranchised from Church, politics, and society. Many seek the presence of God but feel isolated from it. While this lament expresses similar negative feelings, in the end it offers hope to all in its final intention to “wait for the Lord” and “praise God” continually.

### **Week 3 (Monday, Morning Prayer)**

#### **Psalm 84-A Prayer of Joy**

Once again, the psalmist lived away from the Temple in Jerusalem and yearned for it. Unlike the feelings of loneliness in the previous Psalm 42, however, this prayer reflects sentiments of joyful longing. The term, “joy” appears in the very first verse and sets the tone for the entire hymn in the comments, “your Temple is my joy,” and more personally, “to live with you is joy.”

Since the psalm centers on the Temple and travel to Israel’s sacred city, it has been classified as one of the songs of Zion, one of the major hills of Jerusalem that has become a synonym for this Jerusalem. The songs of Zion represent a number of psalms e.g., Pss. 46, 48, 76, 87, 122, which would have been sung or recited originally by pilgrims as they journeyed to worship in their holy sanctuary. They experienced a zeal “for the courts of God,” and became “eager for your altars.” As sojourners on the way, they would “travel the towns to reach the God of gods in Zion.” Often, as they came over one of the hills and captured the beautiful site of the Jerusalem Temple within the city gates, they burst into one of these pilgrim songs out of sheer delight of reaching their destination and place of worship. The enthusiasm of these travelers grips the entire psalm.

Throughout Psalm 84 the writer praises God in many ways. The description of God as the “Lord of heaven’s might” appears three times. The

acclamation characterizes the universal power of God over creation. Phrases such as “my king, my God,” “God our shield ...our sun” demonstrates complete trust and acknowledgement in the Divine. Moreover, the Lord’s attention to the people continues in the description of God as “the giver of honor and grace” and “the Lord never fails to bless those who walk in integrity.” Ultimately, the psalmist exhibits great joy and exuberance in God’s universal strength in the world and care for the faithful. Nowhere in this prayer does the reader find any disappointment, despondency or the feelings of abandonment from the writer. In essence, the feelings of love, trust, gratitude and elations permeate this masterful hymn.

Today, we take encouragement from these heart-felt sentiments of Psalm 84. The positive feelings of this author inspire us to live lives of gratitude and love for all that God has done for us. Instead of the Temple in Jerusalem, we have the assurance that God is ever present in our midst. The Lord will always be there for us so that we, too, can sing “to live with you is joy!”

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### **Week 4 (Monday, Morning Prayer)**

#### **Psalm 103 - A Prayer of Blessing**

Personal attitudes of blessing and praise for the Divine appear throughout Psalm 103. The phrase, “bless (*barak*) the Lord” emerges six times. The writer frames the entire hymn with this sacred sanction by using it in the opening and concluding stanzas. In between the two sections, the author presents many reasons for the insistence of blessing.

God’s tender mercy (*hesed*) ranks first among the most important motives to “bless the Lord.” While in the Mercy prayer book, the Hebrew term, *hesed*, has been translated as “tender care/tender” or “love,” it indicates mercy. In the Bible, *hesed* (mercy) has often been interpreted as loving kindness within the context of a covenantal agreement with

God. In Psalm 103, *hesed* appears four times to emphasize the importance of God's mercy to the people. To highlight the great gift of divine mercy even further, the writer employs another Hebrew term for mercy, namely, *rehem*. The literal meaning, "womb," signifies a merciful love like that of a mother for her child. The Mercy prayer book translates *rehem* as "care/caring." In these instances, God acts as a loving mother for her children, one who is "slow to anger, rich in love."

Throughout the poem the psalmist provides numerous examples of God's mercy towards the community by reminders of how such kindness has touched all aspects of their lives. Descriptions such as the one who "forgives your sin," "heals every illness," "works justice," "defends the oppressed" represent a few of the many phrases associated with a truly merciful God. This loving and compassionate God meets people in their neediest moment. Furthermore, the author speaks of the Divine as the one who "gives you an eagle's strength" through continued support and fortitude. The psalmist's whole existence comes from a merciful God. To this majestic creator God, the author declares "bless the Lord!"

The emotions of exuberant affirmation, gratitude, and thanksgiving permeate this sacred song. In addition to blessing God individually, the writer invites others to do the same since they have been the object of God's mercy and love in all circumstances of life. Like the people in ancient times, we, too, have been invited to recall all that God has done for us. So, as we walk in the ways of mercy, let us also proclaim, "bless the Lord!"

## Conclusion

All the psalms of the Bible represent the joys, sorrows, petitions, thanksgivings, frustrations and praise of God's people. Each song offers glimpses into various times and situations of their lives. In

ancient times the Israelites sang these sacred songs for numerous occasions such as Temple worship, religious festivals, times of joy or sorrow, etc. Even within one psalm a range of emotions can unfold within the prayer.

Hopefully, a brief explanation of these five psalms from *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy* has deepened an understanding of them. More importantly, we can appreciate the rich heritage of prayer that has been handed down to us from ancient times. Prayer through the Psalms remains relevant today as it had been at the time of their writing. In the recitation of the morning, evening and night prayer we join with our foremothers and forefathers, who have prayed these words before us.

What we recognize as we pray attentively is how the psalms often explode with varied emotions-- from exuberant elation to deep frustration and longing. These ancient prayers express feelings that we experience at different moments of our own life. Emotions and responses have similarities from one generation to the next. Like the authors of these sacred songs, we, too need to pour out our hearts in prayer to the One we love. Then, we realize again that a merciful God has always been in our midst and listens to the feelings of our hearts. ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*. Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> While scholars in the past (e.g. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 171) theorize that God's enthronement ceremony took place at the New Year's festival, modern scholars do not always agree, e.g., J. Clinton McCann, "Psalms," in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol IV, 868.

<sup>3</sup> James Lindberg, *Psalms*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.





# Psalmody in the Prayer of the Ecumenical Community of Taizé

*Jean Evans, R.S.M.*

The Common Prayer of Taizé has evolved over nearly seventy years since the founding of the Ecumenical Community of Taizé, France in 1949. The Taizé Community was founded by Brother Roger Schutz (1915-2005), a Swiss Reformed pastor. Initially composed primarily of Protestants, Catholics were allowed to join later. Brother Roger was steeped in the Bible from his childhood—his father was a pastor. Brother Roger valued the writings of the Fathers of the Church from his theological studies and believed in the strength of monastic life. He expressed this belief about monasticism in the Rule of Life: “Whereas several men could not do much separately, these same men joined together in common life are able to hold on firmly to a faith which can move mountains”<sup>1</sup>

## A New Type of Monastic Life

The common prayer of Taizé and the lifestyle of the brothers reflect the dynamic nature of the community’s engagement with the world: struggle and contemplation.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1940’s Brother Roger sought out a place where he could begin to live his call and offer some assistance to people in need of safety—something his grandmother had done during World War I. Brother Roger cycled to France from Switzerland and was led to the village of Taizé, a poor village, close to the demarcation line dividing France under occupation, not far from the monastery of Cluny.

When friends in Lyon started giving Brother Roger’s address to those in need of a place of safety, he asked his sister to come and help with the hospitality. From 1940-1942 they welcomed political refugees and Jewish people fleeing persecution until it became clear in 1944 that Roger and his sister were in imminent danger from the Gestapo. In the interim,

Brother Roger and his confreres prepared themselves to return to Taizé and live together their monastic life as a sign of reconciliation. “In 1944, the community came back to Taizé. They wanted to pray together three times a day. Although they tried to have an Office in the night, that didn’t last long” as Brother Emile said in an interview in 2002.<sup>3</sup> They settled in the village and soon began offering a Sunday meal to German prisoners of war.

## After WWII

Another opportunity for solidarity with the suffering and persecuted presented itself to the Taizé Community during the Cold War. In 1962, the year after the Berlin Wall was built, Brother Christophe said to the Community: “It would be so important for brothers of our community to go two by two to the countries of Eastern Europe to have meetings with young and old, to listen and try to understand,” as Brother Roger recorded in 2006.<sup>4</sup> For many years brothers travelled inconspicuously to countries under Communist domination such as Poland, Romania, Croatia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia “to listen and understand.”

Subsequently, Brother Roger and a group of brothers would travel to countries in the world where there was suffering or distress of any kind in order to show solidarity: South Africa, Haiti, Bangladesh, Chile, Ukraine, India, to name a few. A Methodist pastor observed in 1965: “The Taizé brothers’ key to monasticism is not to isolate themselves but to live in a real community with one another while they serve the world.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Evolution of the Common Prayer at Taizé

The Taizé liturgy is not the official liturgy of a particular Church, but rather “a contribution of a Community... marked by a concern with clarity and

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universality.”<sup>6</sup> At Taizé, life revolves around the three times of daily prayer—morning, midday and evening prayer where the brothers gather in the Church of Reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on the sources of prayer, of faith, and the experience of the entire Church throughout the ages, the prayer of Taizé is ancient and new, contemporary and traditional.<sup>8</sup> In the early days at Taizé, the brothers were all interested in liturgy and “were quite open to exploring Christian traditions.” Their prayer has been enriched by the Orthodox and Catholic traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Since the beginnings of monastic life, the liturgy has offered the keys for “entering the world of the psalms,” writes Dom Jean Leclercq. While the liturgy provides a lens through which the beauty and truth of the psalms is appreciated and illuminated, so the psalms dispose readers to interiorize the Word of God.<sup>10</sup> The introduction to the Taizé community’s book of common prayer, *Praise God* reminds those who pray with the community that the psalms belong to the history of the People of God as an age-old source of prayer and faith.

From early days at Taizé, the brothers prayed the psalms. Brother Emile explains the structure of the Office: “For many years the Office had the same basic structure: opening psalm followed by a second psalm, Bible reading, and then responsorial psalm. In the morning, there was a second reading, then a time of silence, a litany, the Our Father, and then a blessing by Brother Roger.”<sup>11</sup>

When Fr. Joseph Gelineau,<sup>12</sup> a French Jesuit visited Taizé, “he was struck by the way the brothers used to sing because many of them were from the Reformed tradition, where people sing quite

energetically. Father Gelineau felt that this strong singing was right for the psalms, that in the monasteries the psalms were sung too gently.”<sup>13</sup> When the community’s prayer of the Office was published in the 1950’s, it attracted a lot of attention in both Protestant and Catholic Churches because it was in the vernacular (Catholic liturgy was still in Latin). Taizé was one of the first places where the psalms were sung in French, set to the melodies created by Fr. Gelineau.

Jacques Berthier was another French musician whose musical gifts influenced the liturgy at Taizé. In 1955, the brothers asked Jacques Berthier to compose music for their worship. Berthier worked

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with the community when they recorded the Christmas liturgy. Later, after the Taizé first Council of Youth brought 40,000 young people to Taizé in 1974, the brothers approached Berthier to create simple, repetitive refrains from the texts given him by Brother Robert.<sup>14</sup> These chants, often with Latin refrains, would make it possible for everyone to take part. Brother Emile comments:

At the beginning of this new period in the ‘70’s, there were just canons and *ostinatos*, texts with few words. We felt there were other ways of doing

things. We could have more text if we had solo parts while the assembly continued to sing the *ostinato*. And we discovered that young people were happy to move from one language to another. That helped. We continue to search.<sup>15</sup>

The two French musicians, Fr. Joseph Gelineau, S.J. and Jacques Berthier in collaboration with Brother Robert and other brothers, were influential in the formation of Taizé’s style of prayer and song. In recent years, since the deaths of both Gelineau and Berthier, some of the brothers from the community, including the prior, Brother Alois, compose music for the common prayer.

## Psalms Used in the Prayer of Taizé

Community prayer at Taizé follows the Church's liturgical cycle. For those who wish to celebrate prayer with the Community, the website [www.taize.fr](http://www.taize.fr) indicates<sup>16</sup> what psalms, readings, and intercessions are appropriate for the seasons,<sup>17</sup> as well as prayers from Brother Alois<sup>18</sup> or Brother Roger. The psalms used in each liturgical season reflect the mood of the liturgy. The list of psalms below, made from the website, is a good indicator of the community's prayer:

- Psalms of Advent: Psalms 85, 25, 130, 43, 31, 27 express personal lament, longing, confidence, and praise in Psalm 19.
- Christmas time, Psalms 67 and 98 celebrate the enthronement of God over the nations and thanksgiving, as in Psalm 138.
- Lenten psalms are generally penitential: Psalms 32, 51, 143; laments in Psalms 25, 86, 130, and a sapiential psalm, Psalm 90.
- During Holy Week, Psalms 22, 116 and 142 are prayed.<sup>19</sup>
- Easter celebrates the victory and praise of God, in confidence and joy: Psalms 18, 149, 16, 23, 99.
- In Psalms 113, (Hallel) and 33, songs of praise explode at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Reading a list of psalms used in the community's book of prayer, however, does not suffice to explain what animates the prayer of the community and attracts young people to the hill of Taizé. We listen to Brother Roger:

In the period before I was twenty, I was plagued by the fear of lacking in intellectual honesty. I refused to affirm a faith that I could only dimly sense. But I was searching. And one day I came upon this verse of a Psalm: "My heart says of you: seek his face. I am seeking your face, O God." All of a sudden, I realized that I could kneel down by my bed and say that very prayer: everything

within me says, seek his face; I am seeking your face.<sup>21</sup>

Could it be that Brother Roger's experience as a young adult created an extraordinary sensitivity within him, an openness to listen to the struggles of young people who came to Taizé? The God-search became the trajectory of Brother Roger's life and to do this in the presence of other brothers was his life's joy. "Anyone who perseveres in giving his whole life to God gradually discovers, at every turn, another life welling up: the Risen Christ."<sup>22</sup> The Exhortation at Profession reads: "Stay simple and full of joy, the joy of the merciful, the joy of brotherly love."<sup>23</sup> The music of the community has mirrored this joy: "Jubilate Deo" (Rejoice in God) by Praetorius, "Jubilate Servite" (Rejoice in God, all the earth, serve the Lord with gladness), by Berthier.

At the same time, Brother Roger and the community were deeply aware of the world's distress and prayed for those innocent who suffer. The texts and chants reflect a kind of mysticism of suffering.<sup>24</sup> "Dans nos obscurités, allume le feu qui ne s'éteint jamais, qui ne s'éteint jamais / Within our darkest night, you kindle a fire that never dies away, never dies away."<sup>25</sup> Another chant based on Psalm 139 breathes assurance and hope in paradox: "Our darkness is never darkness in your sight—the deepest night is clear as the daylight" La ténèbre n'est point ténèbre devant toi: la nuit comme le jour est lumière.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1970's the community of Taizé inaugurated a Pilgrimage of Trust upon the Earth. The theme of trust and confidence in God was a favorite of Brother Roger's. There are many chants that express confidence and hope in God. This chant is in Latin: "*Bonus est confidere in Domino. Bonum sperare in Domino.*" "It is good to trust and hope in the Lord" from Lamentations 3:25. Psalm 27 is another psalm of confidence in which the chant becomes, "Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart" (Ps. 27:14). Likewise, the chant based on Psalm 62:1, 5-6, expresses a hope for trust and peace: "In God alone

my soul can find rest and peace, in God my peace and joy. Only in God my soul can find its rest, find its rest and peace.”<sup>27</sup>

Brother Roger was raised in the Reformed tradition. His journal entry of August 14, 1975 reveals inner turmoil: “Murder of my soul, / swallowed in dark desert nights. / My being, silence; / come back, Jesus.” Then he comments: “Letting the pen run on produces these strange accents. Latent puritanism constantly desires to kill life; it is ashamed of spontaneity; it wants to murder the soul, disguising as positive injunctions what is only destructive violence”<sup>28</sup>

One wonders if this expression of distress in his past could have been an impetus toward a deep and abiding relationship with the Spirit of God. The psalms inspired Brother Roger with the theme of praise of God-- “Laude Dominum” from Psalm

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“It is enough,”  
writes Brother  
Roger, “to have a  
simple desire to  
welcome God’s  
love for a flame to  
be kindled...”

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117-- and mercy from “Bless the Lord,” in Psalm 103. They also gave him “Veni Lumen,” “Come, Creator Spirit! O come, light of our hearts!...send your breath and renew the face of the earth!” from Psalm 104:30.

### The Theme of the Holy Spirit

The breath of the Spirit was a source of spontaneity, of joy and inner freedom for the founder of the Taizé Community. The Spirit continues to be the light and peace of those who experience the prayer of the Taizé Community. “It is enough,” writes Brother Roger, “to have a simple desire to welcome God’s love for a flame to be kindled. Animated by the Holy Spirit, this flame of love is

perhaps very frail. And yet it burns. And the Holy Spirit stirs us up and is at work within us, reorienting the depths of our being.”<sup>29</sup>

In the community of Taizé the psalms are a support, a consolation and a teacher of prayer. They utter the laments of the suffering, and shout the victories of the just. They comfort mourners and reassure the frightened. At Taizé “a lone child chants, ‘The Lord is my light, my light and salvation. In God, I trust....’”<sup>30</sup> ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Brother Roger, *Parable of Community: The Rule and Other Basic Texts of Taizé* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981): 83.

<sup>2</sup> Brother Roger, *Struggle and Contemplation, Journal 1970-72* (Michigan, Seabury Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Paul Boers, “Drawn to the Mystery: A Conversation with Brother Emile of Communauté de Taizé,” *Reformed Worship* 63 (March 2002): 40. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2002/drawn-mystery-conversation-brother-emile-communaute-de-taize>. Accessed May 29, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Brother Christophe was German, Brother Roger continues, and as a young man at the end of the Second World War, he was taken to the Soviet Union as a prisoner of war and spent three years there (*Brother Roger, A Path of Hope: Last Writings of Brother Roger of Taizé* (London: Continuum, 2006): 47).

<sup>5</sup> Together, 1965, p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Taizé. *Praise God: Common Prayer at Taizé*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 14.

<sup>7</sup> [http://taize.fr/en\\_article14240.html](http://taize.fr/en_article14240.html). August 9, 2012

This week we are celebrating a special anniversary. Fifty years ago, on August 6, 1962, the church in which we are gathered was inaugurated. You may know that it is called the “Church of Reconciliation.” Our brother Denis, who is an architect, designed it and young Germans from “Aktion Sühnezeichen,” an organization created for reconciliation after the World War, assumed the work of building it. Over the years, this church has been altered and extended because Brother Roger was constantly preoccupied by this desire: that all who enter this church could understand that it is God who welcomes them.

<sup>8</sup> *Praise God. Common Prayer at Taizé*, 1977, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Boers, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Leclercq, “Ways of Contemplation and Prayer, II Western,” in *Christian Spirituality. Origins to the Twelfth*

*Century*, eds. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, (London: SCM Press, 1996): 431-432.

<sup>11</sup> Boers, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Fr. Joseph Gelineau, S.J. was active in liturgical development from the time of his ordination in 1951. He taught at the Institut Catholique de Paris and was active in several movements leading toward Vatican II. Fr. Gelineau's translation and musical setting of the Psalms have achieved nearly universal usage in the Christian church of the Western world. These psalms faithfully recapture the Hebrew poetic structure and images. To accommodate this structure his psalm tones were designed to express the asymmetrical three-line/four-line design of the psalm texts.

[http://www.giamusic.com/bios/gelineau\\_joseph.cfm](http://www.giamusic.com/bios/gelineau_joseph.cfm).

Accessed May 30, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Brother Emile cited in Boers, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.giamusic.com/bios/berthier\\_jacques.cfm](http://www.giamusic.com/bios/berthier_jacques.cfm).

Accessed May 30, 2017. Jacques Berthier In 1955, Berthier was to compose his first works for the Taizé Community, which at that time consisted of only twenty brothers who sang beautifully in four equal voices. In 1961 he was appointed organist at St-Ignace, the Jesuit church in Paris--a position he held until his death. He continued to compose and publish, receiving requests from various parishes. The brothers of Taizé once again approached him in 1975, asking him to compose simple repetitive chants for use by the increasing numbers of young people who came from all parts of the world each year to gather at Taizé.

<sup>15</sup> Boers, op.cit. p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> [http://taize.fr/en\\_article5806.html](http://taize.fr/en_article5806.html).

<sup>17</sup> The cycle consists of seven Advent prayers, three Christmas prayers, seven Lenten prayers, three Holy week prayers, seven Easter prayers, three Pentecost prayers, and fourteen prayers for what is termed "Time of the Church," known as Ordinary Time in Roman Catholic terminology.

<sup>18</sup> On the night of August 16, 2005, Brother Roger was killed by a deranged woman while he was attending prayer in the Church at Taizé. Brother Alois, who had been named successor some years earlier, was notified of Brother Roger's death while he was attending the World Day of Youth in Cologne, Germany. He returned to Taizé that evening and was sitting in the prior's place in the Church for morning prayer on August 17, 2005. Author's conversation with Brothers, September 22, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms I. 1-72* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1983): 146. Stuhlmueller's comments on Psalm 22 are particularly compelling: "Unlike the Book of Job there are no 'philosophic' disquisitions on the nature of suffering. The words are clean of any dourness or bitterness. We meet a simple abandonment into the hands of God, and in this surrender to God there is peace. The psalmist asks so little of God: Only that God hear this cry

of abandonment (v. 2). Once God induces a mystic presence so that the psalmist can whisper, 'you have heard me' (v. 21 according to the Hebrew), the psalm modulates into a Song of Thanksgiving."

<sup>20</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 1: (Psalms 1-72)* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1983): 158, 226, 180, 165, 134, 299, 184, 256, 158, 51, 146, 127, 115, 152, 134, 187.

See also Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 2: (Psalms 73-150)* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1983): 49, 171, 90, 191, 171, 68, 142, 202, 219, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Brother Roger. *The Wonder of a Love: Journal 1974-1976*. (London: Mowbray, 1981): 61.

<sup>22</sup> Brother Roger, *Parable of Community: The Rule and Other Basic Texts of Taizé* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981): 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> KeesWaaijman and John Vriend. *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*. (Louvain: Peeters, 2002): 262.

<sup>25</sup> Taizé, *Seeds of Trust: Reflecting on the Bible in Silence and Song* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005): 48.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Berthier. *Chants from Taizé*. (Taizé, France: Ateliers Et Presses De Taizé, 1991): 12.

"Mon âme se repose en paix sur Dieu seul: de lui vient mon salut. Oui, sur Dieu seul mon âme se repose, se repose en paix."

<sup>28</sup> Brother Roger, *The Wonder of a Love: Journal 1974-1976*. (London: Mowbray, 1981): 51.

<sup>29</sup> Brother Roger, *A Path of Hope: Last Writings of Brother Roger of Taizé* (New York: Continuum, 2006): 30.

<sup>30</sup> K. Hillenmeyer, "Taizé's Tongues of Fire: Many Voices, One Spirit." *St. Anthony Messenger* (Vol.100, No. 4, September 1992): 28-34.

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# Praise to God from Mercy Farm

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Mary Quinn, R.S.M.

It is impossible to live here and not be taken with the beauty that surrounds Mercy Farm. The location of the farm in Benson, Vermont stimulates the senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. There is beauty and quiet. Peacefulness surrounds us and the stillness enables us to hear the whisper of God.

*Praise the God from the heavens; offer praise to him in the heights! Psalm 148:1*<sup>1</sup>

Many verses of Psalm 148 witness to the beauty in which Mercy Farm is immersed. The farm is located in the southern part of the Lake Champlain Valley, between Vermont's Green Mountains and the Adirondack Mountains of New York. These mountains looming in the distance are visible just a short distance from the farm. The mountains and hills are stacked one behind another and are easily discernible by the variation of color from a deep to lighter hues of purple against the sky. Wispy clouds reach vertically to the sky while the denser clouds linger horizontally along the mountain base or in the valleys. Others obscure the summits piquing questions of what may be hidden there. All offer beauty and wonder.

The trees are not seen distinctly but are viewed as a unit, a mass, a mountain. How does one approach a reflection on this Psalm to the Universe when one view captures so much beauty? One could focus on one aspect of nature, perhaps a tree, and yet would never exhaust or capture all that could be said. Its change of color with the sun as it moves from dawn to dusk or as the wind swirls its leaves inside out. As the life of a tree moves through time growing taller, increasing in diameter, adding branches, losing branches and the bark as it changes from a tender age increasingly becoming tougher, stronger, furrowed

into scaly ridges. The bark of some trees although tougher and stronger remains smooth. The bark may have moss or lichens growing on its surface. Others show signs of where deer have rubbed their antlers or where woodpeckers have pecked holes through the bark and into the wood providing a secure place for others to build a nest.

As the seasons change, a tree and all of creation, undergoes subtle as well as outrageously blatant transformation. Autumn is an artist's palate of brilliant shades of gold, or orange or red. After the last leaf falls the tree stands bare and appears chilled as temperatures fall into winter. The snows finally come and slowly creep up the trunk and rest on its limbs and at times weigh them down. Perhaps ice

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forms on the branches giving the tree different hues of color that change in the sunlight. Delightful chime-like sounds are heard as a gentle breeze rustles its icy branches. At times the tree stands stark, stately against a clear sky. Then one day there is noticeable difference. The air is warmer. Gentle rains nourish the awakening land. Trees seem to stretch their limbs shaking off thoughts of the long-endured cold winter. The warmth of each new day brings renewed strength and energy and with this the sap begins to run up the trunk nourishing branches, limbs, twigs and bud ends along the way. Sugar maples, previously tapped, now flow with sap that will be boiled down into maple syrup. Small budding leaves offer a variety of green shades giving the landscape a lace-like appearance.

Birds are seen, their songs heard. Look, closely up into the tree a nest is being built. Soon chicks will be seen with beaks open anxiously awaiting a tasty meal from a doting parent. Leaves burst forth, flowering blossoms break open and majestic tree canopies announce summer! Birds dart and soar through the sky. Some still feed their young; others

take leave of the nest for their first solo flight. Barn swallow chicks seem particularly delighted with this new experience as they swoop, dive and soar over and over again across the sky and through one barn door and out the other.

*Praise God, sun and moon; offer praise to him, all you shining stars! (Psalm 148:2)*

Much is known about many creatures including all those that crawl or walk on the earth, swim in the sea or fly through the air and yet secrets remain. Dawn bursts forth in an array of intense reds, oranges, yellows and even shades of purple announcing another day. Its setting is likewise spectacular and signals to the animal kingdom that the day has ended. The phases of the moon shine forth unencumbered and their intensity is appreciated. The night sky is just awesome! With little illumination from Benson, the sky is black and filled with immeasurable twinkling stars of different intensities. Some of the planets are also illuminated. A deeper look into the blackness finds one peering out beyond our galaxy into another and beyond. Each phase of the moon is clearly seen, its edges sharp and its surface characteristics defined. The light from a full moon is bright, lighting up the landscape. The Harvest Moon is spectacular and daunting as this huge, orange-colored sphere hovers over the horizon and rises moving slowly across the sky. As the blackness of night fades into dawn so do all luminaries. Meanwhile close to home, the June bugs and fireflies give off tiny bursts of flickering light as they flit about the night sky giving an added dimension to an already dazzling backdrop.

As darkness descends nature's symphony is on cue with the sounds from peepers to bull frogs, various insects and the scampering of nocturnal animals – skunks, raccoons and others move through the nearby woods. The night darkness brings the cries

of the coyotes off in the distance. Their yelping seems to surround the farm as they alert one another of their prey. Owls in nearby trees signal a morsel for their patient sitting and searching for just such a meal. As dawn approaches, bird songs ignite the air. And so, begins a new day as the sun's rays emerge through a now thin forest casting shadows across the frosted ground. The blades of grass like so many diamonds sparkle in the morning sun. On overcast days, the sun seems to wait patiently for an opportunity to shine forth—warming, delighting and blessing all in its path.

*All living things and creatures small and great give praise!*

Generally speaking, all creatures are unique having their own specific build, tolerance for weather and environmental conditions, choice of habitat, shelter design, food source, methods of acquiring food and the list continues. One needs only to look around and see the birds in the backyard. The variety of species, their body, beak and leg size and shape; their plumage: color, patterns and texture. What do they eat? Are they ground feeders? Do they nest? If so, where and what materials are used in building it? Could the brightly colored birds like cardinals, blue jays and Baltimore orioles be considered “ornamental” as opposed to the hawks, herons and ducks whose coloring is camouflaged, protecting them from predators? Much is known about many creatures including all those that crawl or walk on the earth, swim in the sea or fly through the air and yet secrets remain.

### **Vegetation and Bees Inspire Psalms**

The above thoughts might also be applied to all vegetation. There are countless classifications of grasses, moss, ferns, lichens, trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables. They also have specific characteristics, tolerance for weather and environmental conditions, the need of adequate rain

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or sunshine, soil type, pH level and the list goes on. Some provide food and beauty for humankind. Others provide food, shelter, concealment and protection.

There are many vegetable and flower gardens at Mercy Farm. Our gardens boast of a variety of salad greens, tomatoes, beans, onions, cucumbers and squash, to name a few. Their bright colored blossoms and fruit are a sight to behold and they delight the palate! The flower beds have an interesting collection of blossoms that include sunflowers, cosmos, calendula, beebalm, marigolds and sedum. All beautiful, exciting the senses and some were planted to specifically attract the honey bees. There is an interdependence between all creatures, all living things. This is perhaps clearly seen between all blooming plants and bees.

On warm sunny days, flowering wild flowers, vegetable and flower gardens in bloom draw the honey bees from their hive. It is flight frenzy, as the bees cannot get out of the hive fast enough nor can those laden with nectar get back in quickly. The Linden trees along the driveway create fragrant and nectar-producing flowers and the honey derived from the linden flowers is regarded as the best in the world. Honey bees may be seen flitting from one creamy-white flower to another and their fragrance floats through the air. The hive is all abuzz and the audible sound may be heard 12 or more feet away. The bees are not the only attraction in the Bee Yard. Ginger, golden ray, May apple and others make their appearance at their appropriate time. A rock formation fills the Bee Yard's east wall leaving the remaining area forested. Tree canopies make up the "ceiling" and the earthen floor is comprised of small gardens scattered among the natural vegetation all of which makes this space sacred. There are also two bee hives and benches for rest and reflection and enjoyment of the moment.

At Mercy Farm the flowering squash, peas, beans, cucumbers and other plants attract honey bees. It is a win-win situation. Worker bees (females) gather pollen into pollen baskets on their back legs, to carry it back to the hive where it is used as food for the developing brood. Humankind is totally dependent on honey bees to pollinate the crops.

Bees are one of a myriad of other fauna, including birds, bats, beetles, and butterflies, called pollinators. Pollinators transfer pollen and seeds from one flower to another, fertilizing the plant so it can grow and produce food. Cross-pollination helps at least 30 percent of the world's crops and 90 percent of our wild plants to thrive. Without bees to spread seeds, many plants – including food crops – would die off.<sup>2</sup> Almost all our food supply (except maize) depends on crop pollination by honey bees.

North America has 4,000 species of native bees, but the familiar honey bee came over from Europe with the settlers.<sup>3</sup> Honey bees are the only insects that produce food for humans. Honey is the only food that includes all the substances necessary to sustain life, including water. Honey never spoils.<sup>4</sup>

A walk about Mercy Farm is always filled with surprises and yes, inspiration. On a hot, sunny autumn day the meadow, filled with tall grasses, clover, golden rod, thistle, Queen Anne's lace, milkweed and a host of other plants sways to the rhythm of nature. The air above is dotted with flying insects and the sound of birds is heard as they gather for their flight south. White pines border the meadow and some hardwoods show signs of autumn's paint brush. Rising from the horizon are white pines standing majestically as they reach toward the pale blue sky with a scattering of small, white fluffy clouds. From this vantage point all that one can see is the work of God. Here in this meadow one is enveloped by nature, God's handiwork. The sights, sounds and smells are clear, clean and crisp. There

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**The sights, sounds and smells are clear, clean and crisp. There are no intrusions, no distractions. One stands alone with nature and with God. One is held, transfixed, mesmerized.**

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are no intrusions, no distractions. One stands alone with nature and with God. One is held, transfixed, mesmerized.

### **Waters and Streams**

Late summer of 2015 the water level of a stream that feeds the Hubbardton River had begun to rise. A blockage downstream? The stream slowly continued to swell little by little. After the leaves had fallen in October a dam was seen from a high point in the meadow. The sight of the dam prompted a walk through the thick underbrush to the site that revealed a small pile of branches which stretched across the stream that was eventually breached by days of heavy rains that November.

One day this spring on the River Trail we saw a large gap in the bushes adjacent to the stream and on the other side of the path, a downed tree. The tree was stripped of branches and a freshly cut stump was spotted on the other side of a wire fence. These tell-tale signs confirmed our suspicion that beavers, nocturnal rodents, had become tenants. Their dam and lodge are located within the eight acres of Mercy Farm land that is held in conservation.

Although we don't see them, beavers' ingenuity, skill, craftsmanship, patience and persistence are visible. Their massive dam, creating a large pond, now lies constructed across a tortuous tributary of the Hubbardton River. A distance away is a small "hut" on the bank of the river and now a total of four fallen trees.

Beavers select, cut, limb and haul trees to their lodge. All of this hustle and bustle occurs during September and October as beavers gather their food supply to sustain them during the winter months. Their preferred trees are poplar, willow, alder and sugar maples, some of which are located near their lodge. The branches are carried to the pond and hauled through the water to the lodge. When they approach the lodge, the beavers dive down and push

the butt end of the branches into the mud at the bottom of the pond and proceed to weave additional layers of branches into them. Near the entrance to the lodge is their cache or winter food supply pile. This cache consists of 1,500 to 2,500 pounds of edible saplings, bark, twigs and leaves! <sup>5</sup>

### **Bailey and Dexter: Mother and Son**

All living things – the hens, Guinea fowl and sheep – “let them praise the name of the Lord ... his majesty is above the earth and the heavens.” Mercy Farm has French, Araucana and Samatra hens, Guinea fowl and two sheep. As a single tree “represented” the natural world, the latter, Bailey and

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**All living things –  
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Dexter will be reflective of the animal kingdom. The origin of this breed was West Africa. Katahdin sheep, a breed of Hair Sheep, were created intentionally by Michael Piel of Maine in a process that ranged from the late 1950's into the 1970's. <sup>6</sup> Notable characteristics include: low maintenance sheep that produce superior meat. They do not produce fleece and therefore do not require shearing. They are medium-sized and efficient, bred for utility and for production in grass/forage-based management systems. <sup>7</sup>

Bailey was about three years old when she arrived at Mercy Farm and Dexter, her son, was five months. Therefore, the most noticeable changes are seen in him. He has grown in physique and now is taller and broader than Bailey. Katahdins keep their “baby coat” for a year or so and then shed it as the warmer weather approaches. Although Dexter still has some of his “baby coat,” his winter coat, about three inches in length, coarse and dense develops as the temperature drops. Their hair is medium blond in color with dark brown spots that are more pronounced in the summer when their hair is an inch long. Their diet includes meadow grass and vegetation during the summer months and hay during the winter. They enjoy a treat of carrots, vegetable



peels and cores. Alfalfa pellets are a special treat and is also used to entice them back to the meadow when they “escape” through an open gate.

We find them to be docile, gentle, extremely sociable, nose-y, alert and beautiful. They are acutely aware of their surroundings. They hear a car and rush to the fence and bleat, “Come see us!” A quick move or something out of the ordinary startles them. They are entertaining as they smile at you, run, chase each other or enjoy time together just ruminating. When someone talks to Dexter he often turns his head sideways and looks, as if to say, “This is all very interesting, but how about some hay?” An open gate is an unexpected opportunity for them to flee making the adage “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” true!

Bailey and Dexter lend an ear for a whisper, their gentle look gives comfort; their presence brings peace; their physique, offers strength, hope and someone to lean on. These are glimpses of what our sheep’s presence mean to us and to our guests.

*Let them all praise the name of God, whose name alone is exalted; God’s majesty is above the earth and the heavens. (Psalm 148:13)*

Mercy Farm is an eco-spiritual center, where guests come for a change – to connect with nature to make a retreat or to rest and relax away from the hustle of daily life. It is also a working farm located

in Benson, Vermont, a rural farming community.

Bailey wears a bell around her neck, initially to let Dexter know who his mother is or where she is in the flock or grazing. Her bell is now heard gently ringing as she and Dexter roam the meadows. It is a tranquil sound calling us back to the beauty and peacefulness that is Mercy Farm.

A walkabout is a revealing and rewarding experience. The sights, sounds, odors, tactile sensations and even a taste of nature are delightful! All join together to create an enticing experience causing one to exclaim, Praise the name of God, whose name alone is exalted; God’s majesty is above the earth and the heavens. (Psalm 148:13) ♦

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Psalms: St. Joseph New Catholic Version.* (NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Corp, 2004, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See

<https://www.nrcd.org/sites/default/files/bees.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Pleasant. “Buzz-Worthy Plants: Attract Native Bees to Your Organic Garden.” *Mother Earth News*, August/September 2013. p. 70-74.

<sup>4</sup> See

[www.betterbee.com/fun-facts/](http://www.betterbee.com/fun-facts/)

<sup>5</sup> See

<http://naturallycuriouswithmaryholland.wordpress.com>

<sup>6</sup> See

<http://www.katahdins.org/about-the-breed/history/>

<sup>7</sup> See

[www.katahdins.org](http://www.katahdins.org)

Katahdin Breed Characteristics.

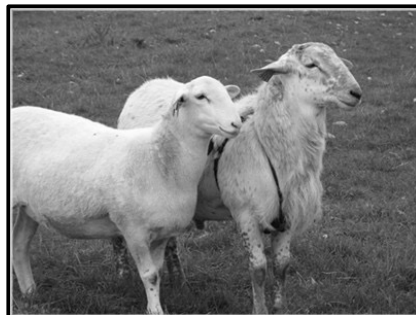


Photo provided by Katahdin Hair Sheep International  
<http://www.katahdins.org>

# What's in a Name?

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*Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M.*

Despite the passing of millennia, the Psalms still resonate today. These one hundred fifty far-ranging, emotional, wrung-from-the-heart songs attributed to King David practically pray themselves. The Psalms give voice to whatever we are feeling. The Psalms hold nothing back. They express the full scope of our humanness. Thirst. Hunger. Anger. Longing. Abandonment. Guilt. Conflict. Distress. Resistance. Fear. Repentance. Vulnerability. Vengeance. Jealousy. Joy. Grief. Gratitude. Praise. They encompass our basest instincts as well as our most exalted desires. Through the Psalms, all of our feelings -- raw, uncensored, tumultuous, exuberant -- become authentic *prayer* claiming God's attention.

The Psalms are universal. The immediate context of our lives, however, determines how we read and pray them. I, for example, live in a powerful country. I have a comfortable lifestyle. I am housed, educated, supported and safe. When the psalmist speaks of hunger, I don't connect it with physical deprivation; the meaning gets applied metaphorically to my deep hungering for God. When the psalmist mourns of exile, I translate it into coping when God seems distant. When the psalmist pleads for rescue from his enemies, I mull over minor slights and try to pray for colleagues who have not been easy to work with.

But let's be clear: the Psalms describe real hunger and real thirst, real danger from the elements and real threats from one's enemies, actual bloody sacrifices, panicked cries for shelter, a mother's anguish at irreparable loss. I do not experience these things in my daily life but I have the privilege of working with displaced people who do. Refugees living in war zones and refugee camps have taught me what it means to live on the thin edge between

life and death. They are the ones whose prayers truly echo the Psalms.

In my work in South Sudan I have come to know many of the young women whose education is being supported by *Mercy Beyond Borders*. Their stories and their names evoke the Psalms.

## **Achai**

My name means *Sacrifice*. Long ago, due to the endless civil war, my grandparents were forced to migrate from Abyei to Upper Nile. Along the way they were confronted by the huge swamp [The Sudd] and could not cross over, yet their enemies were chasing them. My grandfather then called on the name of his forefathers, remembering the story about how his ancestor had faced a similar crisis, and how that man's first-born daughter,

Achai, had said, "Father, sacrifice me to the water and you will be able to cross over safely." Her father at first refused but she insisted until it was done. Before she died she asked her father to make sure that every first born in our family would be called Achai in remembrance of her unselfish sacrifice. I am the first-born in my family, so that is how I came to be called Achai.

Achai inherited an ancestral mantle of sacrifice. Who knows its

original details? It calls to mind biblical Abraham grappling with killing his son Isaac in place of a ram or Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea. It suggests ancient cultural practices of human sacrifice for appeasing the gods. Whatever the precise details from her own family history, Achai's name shapes her awareness of how to be in the world. Now that she has a scholarship enabling her to attend school and thus avoid early marriage, she prays Psalm 116, "O Lord, I am your servant...You have

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**Refugees living in war zones and refugee camps have taught me what it means to live on the thin edge between life and death. They are the ones whose prayers truly echo the Psalms.**

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loosed my bonds. To you I will offer sacrifice of thanksgiving..."

### Imoya Kuyya

My name is Imoya Kuyya. The meaning of my name Imoya is "*Journey*." I was given that name by my parents because I was born during a difficult and dangerous journey from Hiyala to Ohire. My parents walked that long journey to seek food because the harvest in our village that year yielded only groundnuts [peanuts]. Everything else failed. The villagers could not survive on groundnuts alone, so they carried their groundnuts to exchange for maize. The long road to Ohire was along a dangerous path, so the journey was in the hands of God. My other name, *Kuyya*, means '*Who knows?*' Only God knew if we would survive.

Consider the theme of Journey. Traveling in South Sudan means walking. It means peril. It means avoiding lions and snakes and malarial mosquitoes by night, and evading enemy tribes by day. It means not knowing where the next source of water will be. It means facing the terror of the unknown. Imoya's mother walked many days. She walked while nine months pregnant and near starvation, literally surviving on peanuts. Imoya was born along the way, into that world of famine and fear and displacement.

For Imoya, Psalm 105 describes her own family: "When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in it, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people...."

Imoya understands Psalm 121 from personal experience. First sung by the Israelites on pilgrimage to the Temple, later it became a blessing recited for anyone leaving home or undertaking a great risk: "May the Lord guard your coming and your going, both now and forever."

I raise my eyes toward the mountains.  
From whence shall come my help?

My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.

He will not allow your foot to slip or your guardian to sleep.

Behold, the guardian of Israel never slumbers nor sleeps.

The LORD is your guardian; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.

The LORD will guard you from all evil; he will guard your soul.

The LORD will guard your coming and going both now and forever.

It isn't likely that Imoya's parents knew the words of Psalm 121, but surely they felt its initial anxiety. From whence shall come our help? How will we survive crossing the mountains? Where will we find shade from the noonday heat, protection at night, and ultimate safety? Will God be with us?

Surely, they prayed to whatever god they knew, to guard their steps and shelter the child born on this difficult journey so far away from home.

*Who knows?* Yes, Imoya also carries the name meaning *uncertainty*. "Only God knew if we would survive." Survive the famine. Survive the travel. Survive the pregnancy and birth (one in every seven women in South Sudan dies in pregnancy or childbirth). Displaced as an infant

from her village, born in the bush, and now living far away at St. Bakhita School, Imoya places her trust in God day by day. We who are relatively well-off can slip into the illusion of being in control. Imoya would laugh at that. She knows in her bones what it means to be forever on an uncertain journey, not knowing what lies ahead.

### Pilot

My name is *Pilot*. My mother gave birth to me during a time of war and of great hunger. The crops had failed and the hunger was very strong in

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not knowing what  
lies ahead.

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our village. Hundreds of people died of starvation. During that terrible time an airplane arrived in our area for the first time, dropping sacks of sorghum. All the people rejoiced! My father left home to find the place of the second coming where the airplane was again bringing food. Everyone was traveling to that place of sorghum, but not my mother. She was heavily pregnant with me and could not move. Her baby (me) was complaining to come outside and finally I was born. Then the pilots from the airplane arrived at our hut at the same time that my birth was being celebrated. I was given the name Pilot because of those people who saved our village.

Miracles upon miracles: First, an airplane dropping food instead of bombs on a starving village; second, a healthy baby born; third, *muzungu* (foreign) pilots coming to the hut to congratulate the parents of the newborn child.

People who live in war zones pay attention to the skies. I visited South Sudan for the first time in 1992, at the height of the long civil war. The driver who escorted me was constantly craning his neck to scan the skies. "If you hear an airplane," he told me, "jump out of the vehicle and lie flat in a ditch. No planes are flying here except those dropping bombs."

A few years later, humanitarian relief flights began. How utterly unexpected it must have been for the heavens to rain down sorghum instead of death and destruction. Those villagers might have voiced their thanks in the words of Psalm 78: "God commanded the clouds above and opened the doors of heaven; he rained manna upon them for food and gave them food from the heavens." Or Psalm 71: "Your righteousness, O God, reaches to the heavens, You who have done great things. O God. Who is like You?"

Pilot is now in high school on a scholarship from *Mercy Beyond Borders*. True to her name, she intends to become a pilot!

### Acheng

The name Acheng in our language means "dry season" or "extreme heat." During that time when I was born there was conflict in our village of Aliya. Because of fear and insecurity, my parents fled to another village for safety. In that village, there was no rain and no water. People were suffering terribly from thirst and famine caused by the extreme heat, and so they named me Acheng.

In my world, when I am thirsty or hungry I get a drink of water from the tap or reach into the refrigerator for a snack. Not so for refugees. There are no such conveniences in their lives. Even when there is no war there are still "the hungry months" every year when food stocks are depleted but the new harvest is not ready. In time of war, *all* the months are hungry months. Violence forces people off their farms. If they cannot plant they cannot eat. They will tell you that hunger is awful but thirst is infinitely worse. Thirst consumes you entirely, parches your throat, swells your tongue, makes you crazed, willing to do anything for a single drop of water.

The Psalms often liken our need for God to the desperate search for water. In Psalm 143 we read: "I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like parched land." In Psalm 32: "My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." And Psalm 42, "As a deer longs for running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God."

Acheng carries the memory of her family being parched and desperate, but in her name, she also carries the promise of Psalm 33: "See, the eyes of the Lord are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness, to deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine."

### Najore

The name Najore means *war*. I was born during the war when people were fighting among themselves in Juba [the capital of South Sudan]. My father, along with all of our neighbors, was taken to prison. The next morning, I was born

**The Psalms often  
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while the fighting continued. After three weeks, my father was released from the prison. Then my mother asked him what name he had given me. My father said, *Najore*, because I was born during the time of conflict.

What a heavy burden for any child, to carry the name War and to keep alive the memory of her father's imprisonment. The Israelites knew the experience of being dominated by a stronger force, being occupied and being exiled. Psalm 12 decries the enemy's violence: "He lurks in ambush near the villages, in hiding he murders the innocent.... He waits in secret like a lion in his lair; he lies in wait to catch the afflicted.... Rise, O Lord! O God, lift up your hand! Forget not the afflicted! Psalm 142 is the prayer of a prisoner: "I have lost all means of escape; there is no one who cares for my life.... Lead me forth from prison that I may give thanks to your name."

After only 2 years of peace as a new nation, South Sudan is once again embroiled in civil war. Najore has seen more than enough of war. She has reason to voice Psalm 42, "Why do you forget me? Why must I go about in mourning with the enemy oppressing me?" Yet even from the depths of conflict, her prayer ends in hope: "Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why do you sigh within me? Hope in God! I shall again be thanking him...." War may be her name but it is not who she wants to be.

### Humwara

My name is Humwara Barnaba. *Humwara* means peace, unity and harmony. In our village at the time I was born there was a conflict between the Ileu and Kiyala people. Then some of the political

leaders visited those villages. They witnessed the fighting and killing taking place in the bush. The visitors introduced a reconciliation process that led to the end of the violence. When my mother gave birth to me, she named me after that peace agreement.

This is every mother's dream, of course: That her children and all children can grow and thrive in peace. Psalm 85 expresses it magnificently: "I will listen for the word of the God of peace. Surely the God of peace will proclaim peace to God's people, to the faithful, to those who trust in the God of peace ... Kindness and truth will embrace; justice and peace will kiss. Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven."

Humwara also bears the name Barnaba, meaning one who consoles or encourages. She wants to be a peace-maker in her troubled country.

### Womens' Names are Living Psalms

Each year *Mercy Beyond Borders* gathers its high school and university scholarship recipients together for leadership training. Each year I look out at the assembled young women. There I see Journey, Pilot, Extreme Heat, War, and Peace. I also see Hunger, born in time of famine; Substitute, born following the deaths of 3 older siblings; Spotted Cow, the animal being more valuable than the girl-child; Night, born in the darkness of a moonless night; Unlucky, born in a refugee camp; Forest, born in the bush

while her mother was fleeing a rebel attack; Abandoned, born after the father disappeared; Do Not Fear, named to be strong; Joy, born of a mother who believes better times will come. All of these, and so many more. ♦

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I see resilience  
and blessings. I  
see young women  
who teach me  
how to pray. I see  
living psalms.

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## *Tell Me*

Whispering cypresses tell me what you know of  
this region, bleak and bare.

What of some long distant dawn when the surge and  
swell of the sea became mirrored in molten sand grown cold?

Tell me what you know of the mighty  
subterranean forces that pushed their way to  
the surface. Is this what caused land and rocks  
and stone to be as twisted as you yourself are?

And tell me of your constant companion, the Wind.  
Does the roaring wind over the sea come to  
whisper among your branches the secrets of the  
Mighty One?

And when it whispers and caresses, does it tell of  
His Love?

Whisper to me, O Cypresses, the secrets of the  
Mighty Sea below!

Does the mighty roar of the sea tell you of the  
surging power and life within it?  
Besides the frightening roar of an angry sea, do  
you also know of the playful and joyful sea?

Tell me of the times when you have seen the peace  
and joy of God reflected in the sea.  
Did you ever see the sea rush up with joy to the  
rocks and leap to the sky and then leave  
reluctantly with trailing fingers caressing each  
nook and cranny?

Did you see the deep blue below the marbleized  
surface!  
And as the sea weed danced around the rocks, did  
you see the flashes of emerald turquoise?  
Tell me whispering cypresses, of the pounding,  
twisting, bending and shaping done by the wind  
and sea.  
Do they do this in order to carry on the work of the  
Creator...  
Just as He shapes, forms and transforms us?

Join me Wind and Sea and rocks and flowers and  
you cypresses!  
Let us praise the Lord!

*Maria Juanita van Bommel, R.S.M.*



# Homilies from the Institute Chapter 2017



June 20-29, 2017

**Linda Bechen, R.S.M.** – June 20, 2017

*First Reading:* II Cor. 8:1-9—“I say this not by way of command, but to test the genuineness of your love and your concerns for others.”

*Responsorial Psalm:* Ps. 146:2, 5-6ab, 6c-7,8-9a—I will praise the Lord all my life.

*Gospel:* Matt. 5:43-48—“You heard it said...but I say to you...”

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of God....”

May 27, 2017 was a typical Friday afternoon before Memorial Day in Portland, Oregon. People were looking forward to a long weekend filled with activity, food, and family. Commuters, anticipating and awaiting their destinations to begin their festivities, packed the trains.

Suddenly, without warning and coming out of nowhere, Jeremy Joseph Christian’s yelling reverberated throughout the train. One news report described it as speech filled with hateful slurs pointed at a variety of ethnicities and religions. Two female teenagers, one of them wearing a hijab, were the victims of his verbal attacks. “Get out of my country” ... “You aren’t anything” ... “You should kill yourself” ... were just some of the hateful words he targeted at them. The savageness of his ranting escalated. His remarks taunted and demeaned the women, while others in the train car were paralyzed with disbelief and horror. Three men-- Ricky John Best, Taliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche, and Micah David-Cole Fletcher, intervened, came forward and tried to calm Christian by engaging him. Foremost, they desired to protect the young women and others on the train, and de-escalate the situation. Their intervention resulted in each of them being stabbed. Best died shortly after being stabbed. Meche died later at the hospital. Only Fletcher survived.

While she was waiting for emergency assistance to arrive, Rachel Macy, a passenger on the train, went to Meche’s aid and tried to comfort him by saying, “What you did was total kindness. You’re such a beautiful man. I’m sorry the world is so cruel.” His last words to her before being taken away on a stretcher were, “Tell everyone on this train I love them.”

As Paul says of the Macedonians, “In a severe test of affliction, their abundance... and their profound poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity....”

Unfortunately, this story is a repeat of tragedies impacting people in Alexandria, Virginia, Orlando, Florida, and San Bernardino, California. The list goes on. These tragedies have imprinted themselves on our consciousness and etched their haunting details onto our hearts. Like the passengers on the train, we may find ourselves at times paralyzed by shock, and numbed by the intensity of words that undermine God’s goodness in our world. It is God’s goodness and God’s mercy that makes all the difference.

The same weekend as the stabbing deaths in Portland, I was attending a leadership development gathering in Chicago. One of the questions posed that weekend, that has been a part of my personal reflection ever since, was, “How am I radically available”? Ricky, Meche, Micah, and Rachel were radically available on that commuter train that day.

They witnessed blatant injustice, the degradation of persons, and lack of respect for diversity of religious beliefs. They responded instantly, embraced danger unreservedly, expended compassion wholeheartedly, and put themselves at risk generously in a way that they had probably never imagined. Two paid the cost of intervention with their lives-- to protect the dignity and safety of the women. Even in his last moments, Meche reminded everyone that it was love that motivated him to do what he did.

From this reflection, it is my prayer that we and

those we love are never put into a dangerous circumstance like this. I hope we never have to encounter face-to-face an enemy who wants to do physical harm to us or someone near us. May we keep in our prayer all who are persecuted and die for their beliefs. The question that all four faced in those brief moments is our on-going reflection: How am I radically available to what is God's desire for us and for our suffering world in these days? Our answer resounds with Meche's last words, "Tell everyone on this train I love them!"

## Joy Clough, R.S.M. —June 22, 2017

*First Reading:* I Cor. II:1-11—If only you would put up with a little foolishness from me!

*Responsorial Psalm:* Ps. 111:1-2, 3-4, 7-8-- I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart.

*Gospel:* Matt. 6:7-15—This is how you are to pray: "Our Father...."

Sisters and brothers, if only you would put up with a little foolishness from me! Please try. For what is a poor homilist to do when the text of the day has Jesus warning against "many words"? I will try not to "babble on."

In the "Our Father," offered to us in today's gospel, Jesus gives us the essentials of prayerful discipleship in a mere 55 words. Heeding his warning about "many words," I honed the first draft of this homily to a crisp 57 words. But then I began thinking about the context of our being together at Chapter. I guess you could say that led me into temptation --the temptation of more words.

We are a community identified as Mercy, dedicated to living from and witnessing to God's compassion. We are seeking, especially during these days, to be attentive to the Spirit. What might we hear if we reflect anew on Jesus's words about prayer and discipleship in the context of our being gathered as Chapter? Let us muse together.

- Jesus begins with the word "our" and all the pronouns in his discourse are plural. So, as his disciples, we are always community. And here, gathered as Chapter, we are asking how best to be "for one another."

- Jesus names or images God as lovingly parental ("Father"). So-- a caring divinity approaches us with compassion. And here, gathered as Chapter, we are calling on "God of Mercy."

- Jesus speaks of "heaven," not a place, but a realm of being beyond our earthly experience. So-- there is more to life than we perceive. And here, gathered as Chapter, we are calling on the "God of Mystery."

- Jesus places first importance on honoring God's being ("name"), God's vision ("Kingdom"), and God's will ("making earth like heaven"). So-- it's not about us



and our needs and wants. It's about God, God's vision and dream for all creation. And here, gathered as Chapter, we are asking about the "God of Wisdom's" desires for us, and beyond us.

- Only at this point, Jesus tells us, might we ask for what we need: "daily bread," yes, both bodily and Eucharistic bread, but daily, that is, day by day. So-- it's a call to trust, to truly rely on God. And here, gathered as Chapter, we are listening for clues about how God might "continue our transformation."

- Among what we ask for, Jesus emphasizes requesting "forgiveness" for ourselves, and the ability to "forgive others." Ah – is this not often the deepest and most difficult expression of compassion? And here, gathered as Chapter, we are voicing hunger for "greater integrity of word and deed."

- Finally, Jesus instructs us to seek God's compassionate protection or rescue or

help in recovering from "temptation" and "evil." So-- there are diabolical powers beyond our ken that continue to impact our world, even though Christ has overcome the world. And here gathered as Chapter, we are asking God's insight about how to be "for our suffering world."

The "Our Father" – an ancient prayer.

The Chapter Discernment Question – a new context.

Prayerful discipleship – an ongoing journey.

For all things, Paul reminds us, as he once reminded the Corinthians, of the one thing necessary-- "a sincere and pure commitment to Christ."

But back to Paul's "foolishness" and Jesus's warning about "babbling on." Jesus said it all in 55 words. Paul? Well, Paul went on for 261 words. But, my computer tells me, I've gone on for an embarrassing 588 words.

Thank you for "putting up" with me.

## **Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M.** – Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 25, 2017

*First Reading:* Jer. 20:10-13 "I hear the whisperings of many: "Terror on every side!"

*Responsorial Psalm:* Ps. 69: 8-10, 14, 17, 33-35—For your sake I bear insult.

*Second Reading:* Ro. 5:12-15—But the gift is not like the transgression.

*Gospel:* Matt. 10:26-33—Jesus said to the Twelve: "Fear no one...."

At first hearing, today's Scripture readings may prompt a spontaneous "Good Grief! or even a "Yikes!" We hear words like: "Terror on every side"... "Denounce him"... "destroy both body and soul." Certainly, none of these phrases is very cheery! However, if we go deeper, and place the readings in context, I believe we can identify with much of our own lived reality as Sisters of Mercy.

Jeremiah served as God's spokesperson for about forty years – from 626 until 587 B.C.E.-- in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. It was a time of great upheaval and chaos during which God's people repeatedly violated the Covenant. When God called Jeremiah to challenge the sins and injustices of the people, he did not really want the job. Remember his excuse: "But, God, I am too young." Of

course, that did not get him off the hook. It did, however, gain him the title “The Reluctant Prophet.” As we see from today’s passage, it did not keep him from complaining and asking God to retaliate against his persecutors.

Poor Jeremiah! He just wanted to be liked, which is not always helpful if you are a prophet called to speak the truth in God’s name. In order to further appreciate today’s reading, we need to understand that is part of a longer section referred to as “Jeremiah’s interior crisis” or “Jeremiah’s despair.” Let me put it this way. Jeremiah had been preaching and advocating for the Critical Concerns for a long time. Not only were the Jews not heeding his words, but they had also turned against him and his message. They were trying to silence him in all sorts of violent ways. In today’s reading, Jeremiah has had enough! He gives vent to his anger, fear and frustration.

Immediately preceding this segment, Jeremiah had protested to God: “You seduced me, God; and I let myself be seduced.” Jeremiah felt that God had tricked him by promising plans for his welfare and not for his harm. As a result, Jeremiah decided, much like a pouty child, that he would no longer speak in God’s name. But that decision did not last. Jeremiah could not help himself because the urge of prophetic inspiration is irresistible. It cannot be quenched—regardless of the negative consequences.

How often during this week have you heard the prophetic word spoken by another? How many times have you experienced the fire burning in the heart and words of your Sisters? The urgency is so that the Reign of God’s mercy and justice might prevail throughout all of creation – regardless of the cost.

Of course, it is a lovely surprise, once in a while to receive recognition for our efforts by way of a public citation, as we received on Friday from Mayor Brown, designating June 23 as Sisters of Mercy Day here in Buffalo. Wouldn’t Jeremiah have loved one of those awards for himself! But, clearly, receiving citations or days set aside in our name are not our goals.

I think one expression of our goals is found in today’s gospel. The passage is part of what is referred to as the “missionary sermon” in chapters 9 and 10 of Matthew. Jesus is sending the apostles out to proclaim the “good news” on a scale that was not possible to do by himself. The apostles had learned the “secret” of the reign of God in a hidden, intimate setting with Jesus.

How often have you and I rediscovered in prayer and intimacy with Jesus a deeper understanding of God’s desires for us and for our world? Just like the apostles, we are intended to take that profound message of hope and healing, truth and freedom, forgiveness and mercy everywhere. We are to proclaim by the integrity of our lives, that sin and death do not have the last word. That grace abounds! And, despite the “terror on every side” that we seem to experience in our day, Jesus reminds us not to be afraid.

This holds true even when, like Jeremiah, we are not received well. Jesus says that despite any rejection, frustration or discouragement, we are all of inestimable value in God’s heart. It is that conviction that will sustain us. It is, in truth, what sustained Jeremiah and empowered him to proclaim: “God is with me like a mighty champion and my persecutors will not prevail!”

Sue Sanders, R.S.M.- June 26, 2017

*First Reading:* Gen.12:1-9 –“Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk...to a land that I will show you.”

*Responsorial Psalm:* Ps. 33:12-13, 18, 19, 20, 22--Blessed be the nation whose God is the Lord.

*Gospel:* Matt. 7:1-5—For as you judge, so will you be judged.

Wooden beams and planks. Splinters and specks. In the beginning of today's Gospel passage, one that comes midway in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the memorable images of wood to make three things clear to those new to discipleship.

*First*, they should not judge others;

*Second*, they should not be stingy in what they measure out to others.

And *third*, attend to the wood beam, the splinter.

Jesus says: “You hypocrite. Take the wooden beam out of your own eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in the eye of another.” What caught my attention in this very memorable passage was the strong wood image, surely, but also the word Jesus used to introduce this adage. “You hypocrite!”

Why does Jesus seem to call out his disciples by using such an apparently harsh, condemnatory word, a word usually reserved for Scribes and Pharisees and other groups referred to as “brood of vipers” and “whited sepulchers”?

That question drove me to look up the origin of the word “hypocrite”, and-- spoiler alert--guess what? The word “hypocrite” in Jesus's time did not mean a pious, duplicitous pretender, or a faker. That meaning came in only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, in the first century, the word “hypocrite”<sup>40</sup> meant “actor.”

“Hypocrite” was a word of the theatre, of Greek origin, from the linking of two words that

mean “underneath” (*hypo*) and interpreter (*krites*). Thus, we understand “hypocrite” as a “one who interprets from underneath.” In Jesus's time, “hypocrite” meant an actor.

And what was an actor “interpreting from underneath?” A very large mask. In Jesus's day, it was common for actors to play their parts by wearing large masks. They did this to help the audience know which character they were playing. It also signaled to the audience that the role the actor played on the stage was not the reality the actor lived when off the stage. So, what can we take from this Gospel passage, including its obvious link to our desire for greater integrity of word and deed?

What might the theatre, with its actors and masks, offer for reflection by this Sixth Institute Chapter body? Sisters of Mercy seem to know a thing or two about masks. We talked about them in the 2011 Chapter Declaration. Remember how we said that we are “led to unmask and address” – the underlying causes of our Critical Concerns and the interconnections among them?

In reflecting on these past six years, I think we have actually done a pretty good job at unmasking the **causes** of the Critical Concerns. Had we not at all begun to try to unmask the causes of our critical concerns, our conversation about mineral extraction and corporate investment might not have occurred at all, much less with such passion and intensity.

Had we not already begun to try to unmask the causes of the Critical Concerns, there would have been far fewer of us at the DAWN meeting, and even fewer who are struggling with the complex more pain than it seems to be healing.

But, as with all things Mercy, we seek to go deeper. Because it is not enough that we only unmask the causes, but, as our Chapter Declaration says, **address** the causes.

What might it take for us to both unmask and address the suffering among us? As I listened to the video last week with the NONES, I wondered if perhaps we need to unmask the real power that we have in the credibility others, like the NONES, truly believe we have. Then, perhaps, we would be better able to speak out more forcefully for those who are poor in spirit, or poor in purse.

What would happen if we shed any remaining masks of political correctness, racism, or pretense that muffle or even mute our ability to offer the corporate voice of solidarity with those seeking justice and peace? And perhaps most importantly, what would it take for us to unmask, and work our way through, the real differences among us, differences of approach or strategy, about how to address the Critical Concerns? Differences of opinion, perhaps, about our feelings of civil disobedience in the area of immigration, or ecclesial disobedience in the area of LGBTQ issues; or about the efficacy or complicity of shareholder investments.

Can we trust each other enough to do more than agree on the issues and the values and the desired outcomes to work our way through differences of perspective or philosophy or strategy or theology? Can we, as Pope Francis suggests, move intentionally to places of encounter of difference, both within and outside the Sisters of Mercy? And once there, do we have the heart, the core, the mercy, to engage each other in real conversations -- the heart of conversion -- about our shared values but also our own sufferings and vulnerabilities? Can we engage each other with the respect we easily accord others and respond without judgment or blame?

What will hold our Mercy Community together when we engage in deep conversations of strategy or approach? Nothing less than our union and charity, and our love for each other and of God.

Next time you hear someone use the word “hypocrite,” cut them a little slack. Because maybe all they are doing is struggling with a way to greater integrity of word and deed, and trying to unmask and address the causes of the terrible suffering among us.

## **Aline Paris, R.S.M.** - Feast of Peter and Paul, June 29, 2017

*First Reading:* Acts 12:1-11—“Now I know for certain that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me....”

*Responsorial Psalm:* 14:2-9—The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him.

*Second Reading:* Tim: 4:6-9, 17-18—I Paul, am already being poured out like a libation.

*Gospel:* Matt: 16:13-19—Peter said in reply, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

Today is the Feast of Peter and Paul, two of the principal leaders of the early Church. I would like to add Mary of Magdala to the list in order to recognize the influence that she had on the early church. But we’ll get to celebrate her in a few weeks.

What is the wisdom of the Church’s celebration of Peter and Paul together? I see a lot of symbolic value to this combination, especially as it applies to us in Chapter. Because of today’s gospel reading we sometimes put a lot of focus on Peter as the “first pope,” but this is actually anachronistic.

Popes claim succession from Peter, but he certainly was never recognized as a pope. In fact, by the second century the Church recognized five patriarchates with each patriarch having the title “pope,” but I digress.

What is the symbolic value of combining the feasts of Peter and Paul? Each of them is important enough in the history of the early church to have his own day, but, in the combination of the two, isn’t the Church offering us a paradigm for understanding the faith of the early Church?

Celebrating them together reminds us that a “golden age” in the Church where there was perfect unanimity is a myth. From the beginning, there were clear differences in theological approaches. There were clearly different interpretations of the “how” for being a follower of Christ. Peter and Paul and their followers were united in the essentials. Faith in Jesus Christ was their “common ground,” but they certainly disagreed in some of the particulars, mainly on the importance of the Law.

The early church even needed to call a “Chapter” to resolve these tensions and differences. Ultimately, the Church chose to practice “union and charity” rather than uniformity.

How did Peter and Paul come to their different insights? You couldn’t have two more different characters. Paul was a highly educated man, a zealous Pharisee (or lover of the law) and a Roman citizen, while Peter was a laborer of a lower social class than Paul. Yet God used both of these men in proclaiming God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ. These two men did not come to their new insights about Jesus immediately. It was a gradual process that eventually led them to common ground. Each needed a spiritual awakening, a vision which motivated each one with willingness to suffer for his new perspectives.

Paul’s vision caused blindness, as recorded by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. For me, Paul’s blindness is a metaphor, not just a literal fact. Just think, everything that he had believed for so long, strictly following every provision of the Law, was

put into question. He needed to lose his bearings in order to let go of the security that he had built for himself. Peter, also, needed a vision. You may recall the dream of the unclean food in Acts of the Apostles—when he heard a heavenly voice telling him to eat the animals, and a declaration that what God has declared clean cannot be unclean. Can we not apply this to some of our passionate discussions this week? The important thing is that ultimately both Peter and Paul cooperated with their visions, even though this entailed additional suffering for each one along the way.

This is why I see the celebration of this particular feast day so appropriate for our last day of Chapter. Like Peter and Paul, we have different visions or understandings regarding many issues. In our LGBTQ discussions, there was a real dilemma in reconciling our desire for justice and our role or public witness in the Church. In our discussion of investments there seemed to be competing insights regarding the importance of staying at the table versus the possible collusion with unjust practices. Regarding our internationality and interculturalism, while there was celebration of the many countries which make up the Institute, some felt that there was insufficient attention to sisters within the United States who have lived a different cultural reality due to color, language, or the particular geographical area where they live. These are some of the tensions that we have brought to our journey of oneness.

Peter and Paul’s being remembered on the same day provides us with a profound metaphor. Unity is not an “either/or” proposition; rather it is “both/and.” If the early Church was big enough for both of them, then the Church today, particularly our Institute, also needs to be big enough.

A few years ago, when there was a push to canonize John Paul II, Pope Francis supported it, but he also included the canonization of John XXIII (to the dismay of some ardent supporters of John Paul II). I felt that Pope Francis was providing the Church with a symbol of “both/and.” It’s true that

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(or another metaphor if my image betrays my age). Without tension, the line becomes useless.

So, let us be grateful for multiple and competing visions. Let us celebrate the tensions that sometimes occur as a result of these visions. And let us think of Peter and Paul as models that the Church provides for us on the art of compromise or mutual respect.



We have been standing on this shore for some time now.  
Being adrift in the open waters all that time  
next step  
The path awaits, invites us Has made us motionless, inert

Now with in, the need, the desire, for contact  
To move together consumes me.

This is what needs to happen before all else  
And then—all else will.

We have to make the next step  
The path awaits, invites us  
I am ready  
Are you?

*Ingrid Solle*



## *Contributors*

**Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.** (West-Midwest) has a B.A. in history, an M.A. in Educational Administration from the Univ. of San Francisco, and an M.A. in Liturgical Studies from St. John's Univ., Collegeville, Minnesota. For a couple of decades, she served as Pastoral Associate and Director of Adult Formation for Holy Spirit Parish in Sacramento. Katherine served in community leadership from 1994-2004 and was Director for Mercy Center Auburn, engaged in retreat work and spiritual direction for over twenty-five years. All the while, she served as congregational archivist for the Auburn community. She is the author of several publications including *Like a Tree by Running Water: the Story of Mary Baptist Russell*. She has been a regular contributor to *The MAST Journal* on the charism of Catherine McAuley, the saints of the Original Rule, scripture, and spirituality. She is presently serving as Director of the Institute Novitiate.

**Jean Evans, R.S.M.** (West- Midwest) holds an M.A. from the Univ. of San Francisco in Applied Spirituality and a D.Th. in Christian Spirituality from the University of South Africa. She is spiritual director at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California. After teaching high school in California for fifteen years, Jean volunteered with the Sisters of Mercy of Johannesburg, South Africa. From 1984-2012, she was engaged primarily in the academic and vocational training of adults and marginalized youth in Winterveldt, Mmakau, Soweto and Pretoria. She introduced students to the prayer of the Taizé Community (France) and facilitated youth and young adult retreats. She was executive secretary of the Catholic Theological Society of Southern Africa from 2005-2010. She was adjunct professor at St. John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria and St. Augustine College in Johannesburg. She returned to the U.S. in 2012. Now she is Vocation Minister for West-Midwest and also the chant-leader for Taizé Prayer Around the Cross at Mercy Center in Burlingame on First Fridays. She has published in the *Journal of Religion and Health*, *Catholic San Francisco*, and has several past articles in *The MAST Journal*. She continues to write and publish articles on spirituality, faith and society.

**Marilyn Lacey R.S.M.** (West-Midwest) holds an M.S.W. from Univ. of California at Berkeley, and a number of honorary doctorates. Her former ministry was secondary education. She is founder and Executive Director of *Mercy Beyond Borders*, a nonprofit partnering with displaced women and girls in South Sudan and in Haiti to alleviate their extreme poverty, provide general vocational education and training in nursing. She has engaged in work with refugees, migrants and displaced person for over 30 years. Marilyn was personally honored by the Dalai Lama in 2001 as an "Unsung Hero of Compassion" for her life's work. In 2009 Marilyn wrote a memoir which continues to be influential: *This Flowing Toward Me: A Story of God Arriving in Strangers*. She has contributed several times to *The MAST Journal*.

**Mary Quinn, R.S.M.** (Northeast) is Co-Director of the Eco-Spiritual Center, Mercy Farm in Benson, Vermont. She has certification as a registered Radiologic Technologist from Mercy Hospital School of Radiologic Technology. She holds a B.A. from St. Joseph's College (Maine) and an M.S. from the Univ. of Southern Maine. Her past ministries include staff radiography at Madigan Memorial Hospital and Aroostook General Hospital in Houlton, Maine, and at Mercy

Hospital in Portland, Maine. She served as program director for Mercy Hospital School of Radiology, director of development for Catherine McAuley High School, and director of communications for the Portland Sisters of Mercy. She now co-directs Mercy Farm's projects of hospitality, retreats, community education, gardening, bee-keeping and food-bank coordination. And she writes the enchanting Mercy Farm newsletter.

**Kathleen Rushton, R.S.M.** (Nga Whaea Atawhai Sisters of Mercy of New Zealand), holds a Ph.D. in Scripture from Griffith University. She studied at the Katholieke Universiteit, and the Brisbane College of Theology. Her previous ministry was secondary education. She teaches Scripture for The Catholic Institute of Aotearoa New Zealand, contracted by the Christchurch Catholic Education Office. She does spiritual direction, organizes parish retreats and is a consultor for Te Wairua Mahi: Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition. Since 2010, she has served as a trustee of Marralomeda, a Christian community for people with intellectual disabilities. Integrating scripture and tradition with science, cosmology and ecology, she undertook a research project on the Johannine Prologue as the 2011 Cardinal Hume Visiting Scholar at Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, UK. She writes a monthly reflection on the Sunday Lectionary gospels in *Tui Motu InterIslands* ([www.tuimotu.org](http://www.tuimotu.org)). She has recently been a fellow at Vaughan Park, working on a book that treats the themes of cosmology and right relationship of people with God and right relationship of people with the land.

**Judith Schubert, R.S.M.** (Mid-Atlantic) holds a Ph.D. in Theology (New Testament) from Fordham University, an M.A. from Providence College and a B.A. from Georgian Court University in Lakewood, New Jersey. In her prior ministry teaching music at Mount Saint Mary's Academy in Watchung, New Jersey, Judith substitute- taught an Old Testament class and found her passion-- teaching Scripture. She is now Professor of Theology at Georgian Court University, having served on the faculty since 1978. She is the former department Chair, and former Director of the Graduate Program. She's taught all the biblical courses at the undergraduate and graduate level and been lecturer in Women of Wisdom Series. She has published *The Gospel of John: Question by Question*, many journal articles, and recently *101 Questions and Answers on Women in the New Testament* (Paulist Press).





## *Discussion Questions*

**(Doyle)** *“In the laments we discover that authenticity is the key to prayer. There is no attempt to ‘clean up’ one’s feelings to cover over one’s feelings, to cover over the rage or anguish that is felt...the power of raw emotion, an urgent cry for God to act.”* What public crises today would you bring to the composer of psalms as appropriate subject for a lament, and what would be the feelings you would want expressed?

**(Evans)** If you have participated in a celebration of Taizé prayer, what makes this a unique liturgical experience? How is it different from a Eucharist or Liturgy of the Hours? What elements of Taizé prayer could enrich other forms of prayer that you practice?

**(Lacey)** *“The psalms describe real hunger and real thirst, real danger from the elements and real threats from one’s enemies, actual bloody sacrifices, panicked cries for shelter, and a mother’s anguish at irreparable loss.”* Do you know people in your ministry whose lives would express the desperation and need voiced in a particular psalm?

**(Quinn)** How do people who live in an urban setting possibly understand the world of the Psalmist who speaks in Psalm 148? In a natural setting like Mercy Farm, or in a rural setting, what makes you feel a spirit of happiness or exhilaration—mountains, trees, birds, bees, farm animals, sky, flower and vegetables growing, seasons, rivers, streams, rain, snow?

**(Rushton)** What expressions in women’s spirituality have changed since the days Catherine McAuley prayed the penitential psalms, and what sentiments in these psalms have remained enduring and timeless?

**(Schubert)** In your reflection on Psalm 42 or Psalm 84 from the *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, how would you recognize and name the range of emotion in your chosen psalm?

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