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Pilgrimage, Prayer and Popular Spirituality

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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,



The theme for this issue, “Pilgrimage, Prayer and Popular Spirituality” rose spontaneously out of a discussion by the editorial board, starting with the pilgrimage theme. Perhaps this was from an instinct that Sisters of Mercy were known as “walking nuns.” They wore out their shoes on city streets and alley-ways to visit the poor in their homes. They walked out to gather and register students for newly-established schools, out to teach in ramshackle structures until bigger and more suitable buildings could be finished. They walked out to visit prisons, acting as the bridge between the incarcerated and their families. They walked out to nurse the sick in their homes, in make-shift city clinics, on battlefields, and in hospitals during all the phases of their development, from single floors into modern multi-building healthcare facilities.

Several contributors initiate readers into the pilgrimage theme. Sister Sharon Kerrigan, in “Pilgrimages to Sacred Places” gives an accessible, general overview of what pilgrimage means cross-culturally, from ancient times to the present. She describes her own participation in her parish pilgrimage to Rome for the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016.

Sister Julia Upton in “The Ways of the Pilgrim,” also treats the experience of pilgrimage historically. She includes examples of Chaucer, Abraham, and Jewish festivals to Jerusalem. Two of her students speak eloquently about their own pilgrimages, one to Hiroshima, the other the Islamic Hajj, as breakthrough “kairos” moments.

These two overviews are complemented and continued by Sister Marilyn King’s “Life as a Pilgrimage,” an interview with three sisters who have actually walked the miles along the traditional route of *El Camino de Santiago* in Spain—Sisters Marcia Kinces, Kathy Thornton, and Helen Marie Burns. The pilgrims, in response to the interviewer’s questions, share their reflections and feelings about this arduous journey.

Sister Anna Nicholls writes “Welcome Home: Mercy International Centre, a Pilgrimage Destination.” She invites readers to Baggot Street in Ireland and describes some of the “stations” where stories about the foundress are re-told. She reports the responses of a broad array of visitors to Mercy International Centre who enter the story of Mercy’s founding days, walking in the footsteps of Catherine McAuley and her first followers.

For the “prayer” theme, we receive Sister Katherine Doyle’s “Storming Heaven: Intercessory Prayer, an Indispensable Work of Mercy.” She surveys the theological inspiration, themes and liturgical settings for intercessory prayer, and the urgency of today’s needs. One fruit of her earlier work can be seen in the Mercy Prayerbook (1998) and her contribution to the intercessory prayers for Morning and Evening Prayer.

Recently I attended the western regional meeting of the Canon Law Society of America and enjoyed dinner with Maronite Chorbishop William Leser, who served as associate and pastor throughout the Los Angeles archdiocese for many years. In 1985, he was appointed by John Paul II to serve the Maronite, largely Lebanese Catholic community. I discovered during our conversation that he had been writing, over the years, a reflection on the Our Father. It had never been published. I persuaded him to let me share “Meditation on the Lord’s Prayer” with our MAST Journal readership. The first part appears in this issue; the second in the forthcoming issue.


For “popular spirituality,” it is fortuitous to gather women’s voices responding to present events, a way of “walking” in the present moment. Sister Mary-Paula Cancienne, in “Spontaneous Mournful Rituals after School Shootings,” integrates social ethics and ritual theory. She proposes that spontaneous public response to tragedies such as school shootings should be understood as rituals. Their dynamic has the potential to renew the Church’s traditional liturgical rituals, if we would only listen and consider what the people on the streets are saying about what is meaningful to them.

Angela Rausch, a laywoman, wife and mother, had occasion in her pastoral theology graduate program at Santa Clara University in California, to be the homilist for a local Eucharist. She reacts to the demonstrations by white nationalists and counter-protesters resulting in a woman’s death at Charlottesville, Virginia, August 11-12, 2016 . She reflects on the gospel of Matt. 15:21-28 about the Canaanite woman’s plea for Jesus to heal her daughter.

Several other homilies also demonstrate the power of women to interpret the scriptures as a response to public events. These homilies can be seen as expressions of “popular spirituality” --they arise as a religious response to a present moment “from the people” who are participants. Pastor Julie Webb, assistant pastor of a Lutheran Church in northern California, is a Mercy Associate. Her homily, “God Answers Hannah” is an example of preaching which offers inspiration for the community about what it means for God to answer our prayer. It’s also a caution to resist the lure of the “prosperity gospel.”

Sister Rose Weidenbenner’s Homily for the Feast of the Sacred Heart was delivered during the Institute Chapter in Buffalo on June 23, 2017. Sister Kathleen Erickson offered her Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter to participants at the West-Midwest Assembly participants in Chicago in April, 2018. Sister Mary Ruth Broz, during the same Assembly, spoke of getting your second wind at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, a fitting image for finding the grace to be re-energized after non-stop days and task-thick seasons.

Yours,



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

Pilgrimages to Sacred Places

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.

Our society is racist, violent and busy. As life's pace quickens, we desire something deeper, transformative and reflective.¹ Thus, people throughout history have engaged in sacred journeys to renew themselves.

From the Greeks to Christians today, people of all religious traditions have made pilgrimages to sacred places. I will explore this phenomenon as it is reflected in a few ancient traditions as well as my own pilgrimage to Rome during the Jubilee Year of Mercy (2016).

Ancient Religious Pilgrimages

The Hindus, Pre-Columbian People and Jews all traveled to sacred sites. From all over the world, Hindus journeyed to India to bathe in the spot where the Ganges River (goddess of life) and the Yamuna River (god of death) are joined by the Saraswati River (god of enlightenment). The Hindus believe bathing in this spot will illuminate them.²

Like the Hindus, the pre-Columbian people of Peru traveled to a sacred region. Each year after the harvest, thousands of people went to the slopes of Mount Ausangate for a three-day celebration. Here they honored the fertility mountain gods and the site where a young boy claimed Jesus appeared to him.³ The pre-Columbian civilization had been introduced to Christianity, but maintained their ancient traditions as well.

On the second day of the celebration, some of the pilgrims climbed higher up the mountain to honor the mountain gods and to secure ice from the glaciers. They brought back enough blocks of ice for the entire community. Together, the congregation celebrated mass in the chapel built on the site where the child once saw Jesus. After Mass, the people returned home with their ice to water the fields before planting another crop.⁴ These pilgrims integrated

their ancestral belief with their adopted Christian religion.

The Israelites, like the Peruvians, made annual pilgrimages. According to the Jewish law, all male Jews were required to visit the Temple three times a year (Ex. 23:17). They made their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the festivals of the Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. The temple was destroyed, but Jews continue to visit the Temple of the Mount because of its religious significance. It is thought by some Jews to be the site of the first Temple.⁵

The Israelites, Peruvians and Hindus all engaged in sacred pilgrimages to re- connect with a deity. Similarly, Pope Francis announced a Jubilee Year of Mercy to encourage Christians to be more open to the Spirit of Vatican II.⁶

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A Contemporary Pilgrimage

The tradition of a Jubilee Year has biblical roots. The Israelites believed a Jubilee Year should be celebrated every 50 years (Lev. 25:10). A Jubilee Year was a time of joy, remission of debts and universal pardon. Therefore, prisoners were freed, debts forgiven, and the mercy of God manifested by the way people treated each other. (Lev. 25).

Jubilee celebrations are also part of the Christian tradition. The Church usually designates a Jubilee Year every 25 years. Despite this tradition, Pope Francis proclaimed a Jubilee Year in 2015. This Jubilee Year was considered an extraordinary one because it was several years short of the normal 25 years between celebrations.

A Jubilee Year of Mercy

On April 11, 2015, Pope Francis formally announced a Jubilee Year of Mercy by way of an apostolic letter. In *Misericordiae Vultus*, Francis says the world needs to experience God's love and

mercy. He reminds us that God sent his Son to reveal that love and mercy.⁷ Jesus, therefore, is the Face of the Father and his words and actions reflect God's mercy (Jn. 8:4-12; Lk 17:12-19; Mk. 10:46-52).

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be a living sign of God's love in the world. At the same time, the role of the Church is to be a source of spiritual renewal for all.⁸ A Jubilee Year provides us with an opportunity to experience God's love and mercy anew.

The Year of Mercy began with the opening of the door of St. Peter's Basilica on December 8, 2015 and concluded with its closing on November 20, 2016. Pope Francis encouraged Christians to make a pilgrimage to Rome and walk through the door of St. Peter's as a sign of their openness to God's love and mercy.⁹

For those who accepted Francis' invitation-- prayed for his intentions and received the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist-- a plenary indulgence would be granted. Pope Francis especially urged parishioners throughout the world to participate in a pilgrimage during the year. These pilgrimages could be made at designated local churches and/or St. Peter's in Rome.¹⁰ The parishioners of Saint Elizabeth Seton chose the latter.

Parishioners of Saint Elizabeth Seton's Pilgrimage

In the summer of 2016, the pilgrims of Saint Elizabeth Seton set out for Rome. I was invited to join them. We toured Florence, Siena, Assisi and Rome. On June 14, we joined thousands of other pilgrims to walk through St. Peter's Square and the door of the Basilica.

Each parish was assigned a cross-bearer who led the group to St. Peter's. As each parish group moved toward the Basilica, we all could hear singing and praying in various languages. As each parish group

approached the door, a moment of silence was observed out of respect for each person's openness to the spirit.

After all of Saint Elizabeth Seton's parishioners passed through the door, we walked as a community to a crypt beneath St. Peter's to celebrate Mass. The prayers we said together, especially the penitential rite, took on a new meaning for me that day because as I walked through the door, I publicly asked for God's mercy and renewed my commitment to embrace the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. A similar inspiration may have been behind Pope Francis' announcement of the Jubilee Year of Mercy.¹¹

Pope Francis sees our world moving toward destruction, much like the community addressed by the prophet Hosea (Hosea 11: 1-10).¹² Therefore, Francis invites each of us to resist corruption in the world, to acknowledge the people on the fringes of society and to be a voice of God's mercy to others.¹³ He believes these actions will promote peace in the world. The parishioners of Saint Elizabeth Seton have taken the first step in meeting Pope Francis' expectation.

Summary and Conclusion

All religious traditions seek a unity with transcendent holiness. The ancient Hindus, Peruvians, Israelites and contemporary Christians visit sacred places to reconnect with the divine. Pope Francis initiated the Jubilee Year of Mercy to bring forth the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet Isaiah (Is. 61:1-2).¹⁴

Like Jesus, Francis says Christians should convey a word or gesture of consolation to the poor, proclaim liberty to those bound by new forms of slavery, and restore sight to those who are blinded by being caught up in themselves.¹⁵ Pope Francis hopes the pilgrimages might animate each person to bring God's mercy to a troubled world. He envisions a

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future world where love and mercy prevail. I want to promote this vision of Francis and pray that it becomes a reality. My pilgrimage to Rome gave me a way to endorse and spread that vision. ♦

Endnotes

¹Keith Bellow, ed., *Sacred Places of a Lifetime* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Publishing Company, 2008 and 2014), 6.

²*Ibid.*, p. 31.

³*Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, (April 11, 2015), §4.

⁷*Ibid.*, §1.

⁸*Ibid.*, §3.

⁹*Ibid.*, §14.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, §22.

¹¹*Ibid.*, §14. Mercy is central to God's attributes and is at the heart of Pope Francis' theology.

¹²*Ibid.*, §21.

¹³*Ibid.*, §15.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, §16.

¹⁵*Ibid.*



The Ways of the Pilgrim

Julia Upton, R.S.M.

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open ye,
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages:
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmers for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke.

Is that text familiar to you? Sister Mary Paschal had us memorize those opening lines in Middle English from the *Prologue to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* our senior year in high school. Although it seemed like a fruitless effort at the time, the whole text has stuck with me for over 50 years and even came in handy when as grad students we were required to perform a section of Chaucer's work. And when April rolls around each year I find myself beginning again to recite the text, and to recall all the unique characters on that pilgrimage.

In virtually every time and place known to history, men and women have gone on pilgrimage. In the ancient Near East, for example, pilgrimages were commonly a seasonal affair. Farmers brought the first fruits of the harvest, and herders culled the best of their flocks, to offer in sacrifice at a tribal or

familial shrine. And do recall perhaps the earliest recorded pilgrimage of Abraham, who left Ur 4,000 years ago seeking God across the vast desert. The Israelites adapted several Canaanite pilgrimage shrines for their worship of the God who had brought them out of Egyptian bondage and had made them a people uniquely his own.¹

Jerusalem, of course, became a great pilgrimage destination after King David brought the Ark of the Covenant there and made it his capital. On three occasions each year the Israelites were instructed to come before the Lord in Jerusalem: Passover; Shavuot (Pentecost) which commemorated the gift of the 10 Commandments; and Sukkot (Booths, or Tabernacles), a memorial to their wanderings in the desert. Jesus would have made these pilgrimages with his family for High Holy Days, perhaps singing Psalms 120-134, the "Psalms of Ascent."

Christians adopted the practice of pilgrimage from their Jewish ancestors. Once the era of persecutions ended in the early 4th century during the reign of Emperor Constantine, pilgrimages to the Holy Land-- to visit the sites associated with the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus --became spiritually fashionable. Constantine's mother, St. Helena, was an early and influential pilgrim who encouraged these important, once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimages.

I titled this essay the WAYS of the pilgrim as a sort of play on the title of the famous 19th century Russian classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*. In that story, actually made famous in the United States by J. D. Salinger in *Franny and Zooey*, a mendicant monk travels across Russia in search of enlightenment, trying to discover how it is possible to "pray without ceasing," as St. Paul instructed the Thessalonians. What that pilgrim learned along the

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way, we have come to know as the Jesus prayer—"Jesus mercy!" or more formally, "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

In this essay we will look at a few WAYS of the pilgrim—contemporary pilgrims such as you and me, for example. There is nothing outmoded about pilgrimages. Rather a pilgrimage is a timeless model of respectful and reverential journeying—to places far or places near; in the company of others as we see with Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury, or alone as our Russian mendicant friend. Within two weeks of St. Thomas Becket's martyrdom in 1170 at the high altar of his Canterbury Cathedral, pilgrims began flocking there and continue to visit almost a millennium later.²

Pilgrimages, Actual and Virtual

We have been blessed to have a remarkable account of a Holy Land pilgrimage at Easter time in the late 4th century left to us by a woman named Egeria.³ Her exquisitely detailed account of all the religious services that took place in Jerusalem holds a unique place in liturgical history. Some say that she wrote this account for her friends; others, for her spiritual director. Regardless, it remains an invaluable legacy of how Christians lived and worshiped together in that era.

The labyrinth at Chartres, perhaps the most famous labyrinth in the world, is thought to have been constructed in response to the loss of Jerusalem to Moslem forces in 1187. "By presenting the faithful with a richly meaningful image of the city of Jerusalem ... it invited its audiences to perform an imagined pilgrimage to this sacred center."⁴

The Franciscans recognized that not everyone was able to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and walk the Via Dolorosa. Although the Franciscans have been present in the Holy Land since 1217, they were officially given custody of the Holy Land in 1342 with the Bulls *Gratias agimus* and *Nuper carissimae*.⁵ In 1686 Pope Innocent XI gave the Franciscans permission to put pictures of what we now call the "Stations of the Cross" in their churches. Franciscans who prayed the stations, as if on an

actual pilgrimage to the Holy Land, were granted the same indulgences. Pope Benedict XIII extended that to all the faithful in 1726. Five years later, Pope Clement XII permitted stations to be set up in all churches and fixed the number at 14. In the last 50 years or so a 15th station has been added emphasizing the Resurrection. Although I do not know if indulgences have been extended, it is now possible to make a virtual pilgrimage on the Internet at <http://seetheholyland.net>.

Pilgrimages Today

"Pilgrimage means following in the footsteps of somebody or something we honor to pay homage. It revitalizes our lives and reinvigorates our souls," as Phil Cousineau has put it in his book *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*.⁶ What marks the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim is intentionality—a longing to break away from the ordinary and to go deeper. Sometimes it even catches us by surprise as one of my students discovered this semester.

During our theology course, Spirituality of the Educator, two of the students had the good fortune to go on pilgrimage—one intentional, the other not. We had spent a good bit of time during the semester talking about the impact technology has had on our lives as we dart from one thing to the next, somehow convinced that multi-tasking is possible. Students shared how difficult it is for them to detach from it all and enter the NOW. Anisa Afiz was surprised to experience that detachment first hand. She wrote:

About a week ago, I travelled to Hiroshima and visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Growing up, I learned about World War II and the atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima a number of times over the course of multiple grade levels. I know all of the dates, the background information, and the events leading up to the morally horrible atrocity. I understood all of the information involved, but none of it really sunk in for me until I was standing in front of the A-Bomb Dome, the Children's Peace Monument, the Peace Flame, Memorial Cenotaph, and all of the other monuments,

at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. The gravity of the event finally hit me tenfold, and I was deeply affected by it. Being in that space, I felt a million things at once. I felt the extent of human cruelty as I thought about the destruction and loss of life that was inflicted upon the beautiful city by human hands. I also felt the perseverance of human beings and their capacity to heal as I thought of the rebuilding of the city. There was an emotional overload as I processed my surroundings. It is a moment that I still have trouble describing, but I know that I will never forget the feelings that I experienced.

Taken by surprise because the time was right, the pilgrim was ready to receive the gift of insight, forever changed. Anisa Afiz will probably be telling her grandchildren about this encounter in years to come.

Farhana Bhuiyan's pilgrimage, by contrast, was planned—long planned as she described it:

One of the most life changing experiences of my life took place between March 17th-March 26th. My family and I took part in Umrah, a simpler but equally rewarding version of the mandatory pilgrimage all Muslims strive to perform, which is Hajj. Although my family could not afford Hajj, Umrah gave me a glimpse into what true spirituality feels like.

Simply put, this experience is as close to transcendence as one can be. The smell of the air--distinct, fresh, a natural perfume that enveloped me every time I set foot into the holy place. The sound of birds chirping during the prayer before dawn. Circling the Kaaba seven times and managing not to drop a sweat. Walking back and forth between the mountains of Safa and Marwa, reliving the urgency that Hajar experienced to find water for her thirsty child until Allah (God) sent forth a spring of water, a miracle.

Moving in unison with thousands, and thousands of other Muslims, faces from all over the world--every color, every background. We were one.

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My spirit was soaring. The closer I am to God, the more love I feel. The more love I feel, the more I have to give.

Both Anisa Afiz and Farhana Bhuiyan, I believe, recount experiences of entering the *kairos*—that time within time or beyond time where the *chronos* (or clock-time) falls away and we enter into the timelessness of the eternal NOW. One cannot plan these experiences or program them. They are blessed gifts that can find us when we are ready and available.

I had a similar experience last year during my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I went without expectations and was completely overwhelmed when I seemed to enter the *kairos* on the Sea of Galilee. Like Farhana I felt my spirit soaring, and like Anisah I am still

trying to process it all but know I have been re-shaped and re-calibrated by the experience that has not left me a year later. Surely there are as many ways as there are pilgrims, but they all lead to the same place—the sacred center at the heart of the world. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2012).

² <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/becket.htm> (accessed 5/18/2018).

³ Some sources also refer to her as Etheria or Aetheria.

⁴ Daniel K. Connolly, "At the Center of the World: The Labyrinth Pavement of Chartres Cathedral," in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, eds. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 285-314; here 287.

⁵ <http://www.custodia.org/default.asp?id=425> (accessed 5/16/2018).

⁶ Cousineau, op cit.

Life as a Pilgrimage

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

In April of 2015 Pope Francis issued a Bull of Indiction (*Misericordia Vultus*) inaugurating the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy to be celebrated during the Holy Year of Mercy. In this document he promoted the practice of pilgrimage as a special way to enter into the spirit of the Holy Year. He wrote that as the Holy Year of Mercy calls us to be instruments of God's mercy, the engagement in pilgrimage offers a way of dedication and sacrifice, leading to conversion. While walking the way we can "find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us." (§14)

The pilgrimage has held a place in Christian spiritual practice for centuries, at least 1,200 years.

Various reasons for making a pilgrimage arose over the years, e.g., desire for healing, doing penance, expression of faith, and more recently--protest. Certain geographical places have been selected as goals of the journey.

One of the most noted pilgrimage routes of today is "The Way of St. James"—*El Camino de Santiago*. Legend has it that the remains of St. James, the brother of St. John, had been carried to northern Spain where he was buried. In 814 A.D. this tomb was discovered and from that time pilgrims came from all around to honor his remains. There are many routes that crisscross Eastern and Western Europe leading to Santiago, but the principal one stretches 500 miles, starting on the French side of the Pyrenees, extending into Spain, where the remains of the Apostle St. James the Greater are revered in the Cathedral of Santiago.

The numbers of pilgrims rose and fell over the centuries, but in the latter part of the 20th century the

numbers of pilgrims dramatically increased when the route was declared the first European Cultural Route. In 2017 there were over 300,000 pilgrims walking the *Camino*. Modern day Pilgrims take over 30 days to complete this *Camino*, but the medieval Pilgrim, who started from the doorstep of his/her home might take a year to complete the journey.

In recent years several of our own Sisters of

Mercy have chosen to engage in this ancient spiritual practice. What follows are reflections on questions posed to three of these Mercies who have recently walked the *Camino*: Helen Marie Burns in 2014, Marcia Kinces in 2004, 2013, and 2017, and Kathy Thornton in 2013. (Hereafter cited as HMB, MK, and KT)

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Why did you choose to make the pilgrimage?

HMB: I am a lover of literature and, since my Canterbury Tales days, have been intrigued by the concept of pilgrimage. My interest was further energized in my years of leadership as I heard from our Sisters in Argentina of the pilgrimages to Our Lady of Lujan cathedral. These were an opportunity for persons to quietly protest the military regime while expressing devotion to the patroness of Argentina. I even had an opportunity to join the throngs of young pilgrims on one unforgettable October weekend in Argentina. Given this thread of interest, I was inclined to answer quickly and affirmatively when a friend asked in the summer of 2013, "Would you ever think of walking the *El Camino* in Spain?"

MK: The seed of this call took root in me during my first trip to Europe in 1985. While in France, I spent an overnight in two towns that were on the *Camino*! I had never heard about this Pilgrimage and was fascinated with this aspect of

medieval spirituality. I was invited twenty-three times by the Knights of Malta to accompany their annual May Pilgrimage and their summer youth groups to Lourdes in France as part of their medical team. This exposed me to men and women who had knowledge of this *Camino* and who had actually walked portions of it. With these experiences, the “call” deepened, but I was not free to stay away from home or ministry for an extended time period.

In 2004, a year after my mother died, I felt I could no longer put off making this Pilgrimage. I arranged to do it in conjunction with the Malta Lourdes Pilgrimage. When a friend from my parish, Rose Flahaven (who had been on one of the Malta Pilgrimages with her daughter) heard of my planned *Camino* adventure, she decided to join me. I felt blessed to have been able to make this dream come true and never thought I’d repeat the experience. I believed it was a once- in- a- lifetime opportunity.

Then I was invited by Sister Kathy Thornton, R.S.M. to join her in 2013 on her *Camino*. She was beginning a Sabbatical year when her time in community leadership ended and the *Camino* was calling her. Being a nurse and a *Camino* veteran helped. Thus, *Camino* #2 happened. Then four years later I felt a strong desire to return again to the *Camino* while I was physically able (I turned 76 while on this *Camino*). It was a “call,” or perhaps an addiction? So, *Camino* #3 was born, and in 2017 I completed my third *Camino*, this time alone, taking a little over seven weeks to walk it in its entirety.

KT: As a potential pilgrim companion to Marcia, I was encouraged to identify my personal and religious reasons for going on pilgrimage. I came up with three reasons:

1. To immerse myself in the Suscipe of Catherine McAuley.
2. To take time for a “sorbet”—to cleanse my pallet for the next entree of my life. What is in store for me next?
3. To enjoy every step of the way. Some people think this will be the hardest to do! I was sure my enthusiasm will carry me along the way.

What preparations did you have to make?

HMB: Well, as noted by Thoreau, “The [person] who goes alone can start today; but [one] who travels with another must wait till that other is ready.” Both my friend and I had to work diligently to free time on our calendars according to the following criteria: 1) months for which the weather in Spain was more likely to be hospitable to hikers; 2) a block of days that would allow time for a short version of the *El Camino* and a brief tour of Madrid and environs; 3) a schedule that would happen sooner rather than later as I, for one, was nearing my seventy-fifth year; 4) we also wished to allow time to budget the venture in the normal budget processes of the congregation and to seek consultation from those who had made this pilgrimage ahead of us.

Within a few months we had determined the outline of our adventure. We would join an established tour group—“206 Tours”—on October 2014. The walk itself would start in Sarria, Spain and conclude in Santiago de Compostela, seven days later. We would walk an average of 10 – 11 miles each day in order to cover the 65 miles necessary to receive our *Compostela*, a document given to pilgrims that certifies the completion of their pilgrimage. Since we were participants of a tour group, lodging and meals were arranged for us. In addition, we had a participant chaplain who

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fascinated with this aspect
of medieval spirituality.

celebrated liturgy each morning in one of the many small churches which dot the countryside of Spain. As I and my companion often remarked: “Ours is a wimpy version of the *El Camino*.” Nevertheless, we were delighted to be trudging the ancient trails with our companions and innumerable wayfarers whose pilgrimage was both longer and more arduous than ours.

Once the details of the pilgrimage had been determined, we began to prepare our bodies for the trek. Each of us developed a regime of walking which began gently with one or two miles at a time and grew to ten to twelve miles at a time. We also consulted web sites and persons who could provide information on the pilgrimage: What to wear? What to carry? What to eat? Advice was abundant, detailed, and overwhelming. Eventually, each person has to decide what might be necessary for them. The common advice, however, stressed less rather than more, comfort rather than style, layers for variable weather patterns – and, always, sound and durable footwear!

MK: My third *Camino* was a quasi-Sabbatical for me. I was still actively engaged in nursing but was able to accumulate sufficient vacation time and holidays to take two months away from my ministry. For 52 days I unplugged myself from ministry, Community, friends and family. I did carry a phone (for local Spanish calls to secure nightly lodging) and a mini- iPad for blogging.

What were the challenges you met and how did you deal with them?

HMB: Other than the challenge of steep inclines, rough river-bed trails, pouring rain, and weary bodies, ours was an uneventful pilgrimage. The first full day of our walk was probably the most difficult, as the skies opened up in a downpour that was heavy, constant, and occasionally wind-driven. We were soaked from head to toe, even with

adequate rain gear. The dry river-bed in which we were walking soon became a small torrent, which challenged our balance and slowed our steps. As we attempted rather unsuccessfully to dry our clothing that evening, one of us commented: “And we are paying good money for this opportunity?!” The good news, however, was this proved to be the last day of rain of any kind.

Blisters and muscle strain are frequent challenges. We experienced both, but only minimally as we had received good advice regarding footwear and pacing ourselves on the journey. My companion and I were the oldest in our pilgrim grouping, but luckily managed to pace our walking so that we stayed in the middle of the pack. We were never the first to arrive at our next destination, but also, never the last!

MK: So, what is this powerful call that has urged me to walk three *Caminos*? Many Pilgrims I met along the way have walked many more; some even try to do it annually. I am not an athletic person and I did very little training for this marathon walk. The *Camino* is the most strenuous activity I have ever done. I sustained injuries on my first two *Caminos* that caused me great pain in walking, lasting weeks after I returned home. Why do it again? I cannot answer that question because I do not know the answer. I only know that deep within me was a “call” to do it.

KT: While on one of my training walks, I asked myself how will I remember all the people for whom I have promised to pray while I’m on the pilgrimage? A helpful answer came to me: When my back begins to ache, I will remember religious life, all the transformation that is occurring within us, the Institute, the WMW Community, the Sisters, Associates, Mercy Volunteer Corps, the staff, Companions as we move together making God’s mercy evident in our world. When my legs and feet begin to ache, I will remember family and friends who have walked with me throughout my life—there

We would walk an average of 10 – 11 miles each day in order to cover the 65 miles necessary to receive our *Compostela*, a document given to pilgrims that certifies the completion of their pilgrimage.

are weddings pending, babies on the way, new jobs, no jobs, friendships, and all the stuff of daily life. When my arms and hands begin to ache, I will remember all those suffering in our wounded world—and the ministry we all do to embrace those next to us and those far away with the compassion of God.

Actually, as I was on that walk all those aches appeared so at least I got the reminders.

What was an unexpected gift from the experience?

HMB: I was continually surprised and moved by the number and the variety of the pilgrims in terms of age, background, ethnicity, financial means, and spirituality. Our group alone represented a microcosm of the United States reality, a range of ages (40's – 70's), a gamut of financial means, and a spectrum of theological and religious understandings and viewpoints. One gentleman had recently recovered from a serious heart attack; another woman suffered from serious back pain. A single woman joined the pilgrimage to celebrate her fiftieth year by “doing something quite different and by myself.” Meals--morning, noon, and evening--provided ample time for story-telling and communal sharing, which happened in fluid circles of engagement. On the way itself, conversation was minimal as persons walked at their own pace and in their own space – silence was the norm – a nod or a smile often the extent of conversation. Still, I was surprised at how many persons I met along the way and I how much I knew about their place of origin, their time on the path and their commitment to the journey.

MK: The *Camino* helps build Community. We walk together. We share meals. We sing and pray with each other even if our beliefs are different. What a wonderful opportunity to talk and share with people from all corners of the world, even if we don't always

speaking each other's languages. We tend to each other's blistered feet and rub each other's aching shoulders. We share our dreams, fears and tears.

What is a lasting memory you have from the experience?

HMB: I was delighted to be present at a liturgy which included a blessing with the giant incense burner at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Several men are required to raise and lower this burner and to propel its smoking container throughout the long nave of the church. The blessing happens on rare occasions and on very special feast days. We were told by our guide that the liturgy we would attend was not likely to qualify for incensing with the giant burner. My intuition told me differently, however, and, while I was not surprised, I was delighted to see the flurry toward the end of the morning liturgy which signified the lighting of the incense and the preparation for the grand sweep through the cathedral! Truly I understood the awe of medieval worshippers for whom such a spectacle would have been even more magnificent and wondrous.

MK: While walking the *Camino* I found myself connecting to Nature. Instead of being overstimulated by the sights and sounds of traffic, blaring music, cell phone alerts, hospital noises (overhead announcements, phones, pages, patient call lights and other medical equipment alarms), my spirit was softened and relaxed by bird song, crickets, cuckoo birds, rushing rivers, rain and thunder. I came into intimate contact with the earth while experiencing weather in all its forms—sun, wind, rain, fog, the heat and the cold. I climbed over mountains, crossed rivers, walked through forests and across flat plateaus and I was invigorated.

Exposure to nature boosts endorphins, which improves our immune system, our mood and self-

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esteem and decreases pain, stress, anxiety and depression. I followed the path of the sun from break of dawn to its setting and was awed, taking delight in the variety and intensity of the colors and patterns visible in the skies and reflected in the lakes and rivers and dew drops.

What effect did the experience have on your own spiritual life? on your Mercy life?

HMB: Going on pilgrimage connects you in a particular manner with persons who have journeyed that path before you and persons who currently journey the path with you. There is also a heightened awareness of one's body and of the earth around you. I was immersed in both of those experiences day-to-day, not so much a matter of the mind as a matter of the spirit. My prayer was being, appreciating and connecting without too much thought or too many words. Since I was nearing a transition in my own life journey from full-time ministry to more flexible ministerial options, I felt the pilgrimage a metaphor of what might await me-- new experiences, new companions, varied rhythms and varied activities. Those thoughts were gentle and occasional, however, as day-to-day the experience was ordinary wonder and ordinary being.

MK: For me, walking is a meditative and prayerful activity, especially in the early morning. It allows my mind to wander which helps promote a mental state conducive to innovative ideas and "aha" moments. It helps me sort out my life and set priorities. The Greek philosophers believed there is a deep intuitive connection between walking, thinking and writing. Our hearts pump faster, giving more oxygen to the brain, helping clarify thought.

One day after I spent a little time in the Chapel of San Marcos I set off down the hill toward Santiago. During this time, it dawned on me why I was making this pilgrimage. Earlier I was unable to articulate it, I only knew that I felt called to walk the *Camino* again.

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I've been a bedside nurse for 45 years, which is a ministry I love. The *Camino* was calling me to take time out, to slow down, to take delight in everything. It called me to this Sabbath time. It's as simple as that! The *Camino* taught me to be more receptive-- to give and to receive, to have patience with myself and with others, to help when help was needed, and to ask when I needed help. I realized that I must depend on myself and on the kindness of strangers. The *Camino* helped me know myself better and gave me a better insight into my strengths and weaknesses.

KT: One day after I was about five minutes on the path outside of the town Villadangos, I saw a cross with no corpus on it. It reminded me of our Mercy cross that is also without a corpus. It reminded me that we are to put ourselves there on the cross for the benefit of others.

Then another day in Leon I had this overwhelming experience of saying within, as if out loud, I LOVE MY LIFE! It was exhilarating. It came with a sense of contentment. I had been experiencing some anxiety, but this day I was reminded of the Suscipe-- "take from my heart all painful anxiety." and then the passage from the Gospel of John 10--"I have come that you may have life to the full"--came to me as well.

Any Other Thoughts?

HMB: People go on pilgrimage for many reasons. I would have to say mine were less dramatic than some. I was in no spiritual crisis. I had no particular estrangement from God and/or my neighbor. I felt the metaphor of journey appropriate to the transition from a more active and defined ministry identity to more fluid and open ministerial choices, but even this focus was a minor rather than major thread in my thoughts and in my prayer.

MK: I felt gratitude for being able to make this Pilgrimage and knew that few of my Blog readers would ever have this kind of an opportunity. My

main discipline during my days was being faithful to this Blog. I really wanted others to understand what the *Camino* is all about and to experience a bit of what I was experiencing. Also, I felt that those reading this Blog would be able to keep up with my progress and not worry about me.

(On Marcia's 2017 pilgrimage she created a Blog called "Walking the Sacred Ground" to send to her community, family, friends and coworkers so they "could keep up with me and not worry about my wellbeing." Also, she wanted to share in the joy of her experience through photos and reflections. The entire blog can be accessed at <https://files.acrobat.com/a/preview/fee50484-0c32-4bf4-ae8b-d7d983728cbf>.)

I felt an immense freedom in being able to take an extended period of time away from most of my regular responsibilities and activities. It was like putting my life on "pause." On the *Camino* my life

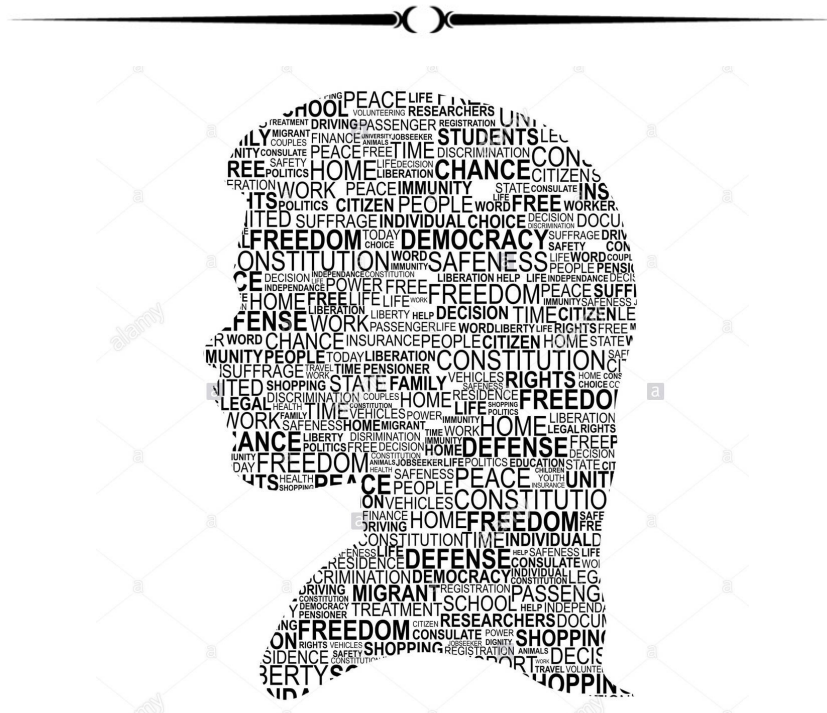
became quite simple – getting up in the morning, walking 5-8 hours a day, showering and washing my clothes each afternoon, and eating and interacting with other Pilgrims. Each day is pretty much a repetition of the previous day. This is an opportunity to live simply and experience how joy filled a life simply lived can actually be.

KT: We are given life to the full. How can we create conditions for all of us to have fullness of life here and now? Jesus models for us compassionate care for one another. Perhaps therein lies the answer to that perennial question.

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Concluding Remarks

Referring once more to (*Misericordia Vultus*) Pope Francis notes that because to be a human being is to be on the way to a desired destination. "[T]he human being is a viator, a pilgrim travelling along the road. Thus, "...everyone, each according to his or her ability, will have to make a pilgrimage." (par. 14) Life itself is a pilgrimage. ♦



Welcome Home: Mercy International Centre as a Pilgrimage Destination

Anna Nicholls, R.S.M.

In 1994, the house established by Catherine, having undergone a major re-vamping and modernization, opened as Mercy International Centre, a heritage centre that would be a place of pilgrimage for members of the Mercy family from around the world. Over the years the number of pilgrims visiting the centre has continued to grow. It is particularly pleasing to note that in 2017, there were approximately 8,500 visitors to the centre-- a number that continues to increase.

Who Comes to Baggot Street?

The pilgrim groups are varied. Some come for short tours of the House; others participate in programmes that may stretch over any number of days from three to thirty. Young people engage in the annual Young Mercy Leaders pilgrimage, or come as members of school groups to experience the story of Catherine and Mercy. Local schools often seek to use the beautiful chapel at the Centre for sacramental preparation and celebration. The Sunday Eucharist serves a weekly congregation. Special Mercy feast days are joyful opportunities for Mercy family and friends to gather. Community groups, such as St. Vincent de Paul Society, are accommodated for meetings, and those who ask for Bed and Breakfast hospitality also have the opportunity to benefit from the rich heritage of the Centre.

Many people experience their pilgrimage or visit as a “coming home.” This seems true whether they be Sisters of Mercy, people connected to Mercy Sisters as friends or relatives, or people who worked in Mercy organizations or volunteered in various Mercy institutions. There are those who attended

Mercy schools, were themselves parents of children attending Mercy schools. Some were just interested in the house as they had walked past it many times. All are greeted with a heartfelt “welcome home”— words that remind them that Mercy International Centre is a home for all in our Mercyworld.

Pilgrimage Preparation

When participants begin a programme, they are reminded that pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story. Paul Elie expands the phrase in his book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* and explains what a pilgrimage is about:

A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search of the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness. The pilgrim seeks not only to confirm the experience of others first-hand but to be changed by the experience.

Pilgrims often make the journey in company, but each must be changed individually; they must see for themselves, each with his or her own eyes. And as they return to ordinary life the pilgrims must tell others what they saw, recasting the story in their own terms.¹

In our case, the story is the story of Mercy. Our visitors have often heard the story already, and they come wanting to expand their understanding of the story. They come wanting to meet Catherine by walking the same floorboards she did, by praying in the Chapel she prayed in, listening, as Catherine did, for the ways that God calls them to respond with mercy in their own lives. However, some of them are being introduced to Mercy for the first time. When people join a pilgrimage, there are many points of

When people join a pilgrimage, there are many points of entry, and a whole range of opportunities to be enriched and inspired, both for those who are familiar with the story or new to it.

entry, and a whole range of opportunities to be enriched and inspired, both for those who are familiar with the story or new to it.

This reflection will first explore some stories that we share with pilgrims who visit the House of Mercy. Then I want to identify the importance of having a place to visit on pilgrimage. Last, I will examine the ways that pilgrims tell the story once they return home.

Preparing for the Journey and Arrival

The time of preparation for a journey to the House of Mercy is exciting, particularly for pilgrims who have wanted to visit Baggot Street for many years. Some ask if there is reading material they should review before their arrival! Appreciating that there is often much preparation necessary, we recommend that since they will be away from home or work for a length of time, they do homework after the pilgrimage, not before!

The moment of arrival at the House of Mercy, that Catherine herself had built in realization of her dream, is often a peak moment. The first glimpse of the statue and of the red door is a moment of great joy for many pilgrims. One pilgrim describes this feeling in her evaluation saying:

It was incredible to visit the House of Mercy. Standing in front of that red door that I have seen in pictures or online was very moving. Being able to physically touch such a bright symbol of Mercy was akin to completing a journey to something that you have seen for a long time from a far distance.

Another recalls:

When I arrived outside Baggot Street I put my hand into Catherine's hand and cried my heart out, they were tears of joy that I was finally here!

For many pilgrims, the tangibility of touching the door or sitting in the room where Catherine died, or visiting her grave makes the story of Mercy more

real. I have met pilgrims who have chosen to find a night's accommodation nearby so that when they arrive at the House for the first time, they are not straight off a plane and feeling jet-lagged. They want to savor the first moment more intensely.

Thin Places

The ancient spirituality of Catherine's birthplace includes an understanding of "thin places." A thin place, in metaphorical terms, is a place where it is believed that the door that separates this world and the next is ajar. Sometimes this gets described as the place where the veil that separates the two worlds is thinner. In such places, there is a surreal ability to feel in contact with those who have walked before us and to know that we stand on holy ground.

Mercy International Centre is one such place,

where pilgrims can feel connected in a particular way to those who have walked before them as well as being connected to the Divine. Participants are reminded that we, the staff of the Centre, cannot "conjure up" a thin space experience for them, but that we hope they will experience one, even if be for a fleeting moment. The staff delight in hearing the stories that pilgrims later share with them about some of the special moments that openness to such experiences

occasioned. Such moments can often include simple but sublime experiences-- walking down the granite stairs on which Catherine walked. Some feel connected to her as they stand on the original floorboards in her room. Some feel inspired as they pray in the place where she was laid to rest "in the ground like the poor."

Storytelling

Because of the diversity of pilgrims that come to Mercy International Centre, the staff also have a repertoire of stories to share with them. These give wonderful insights into aspects of Catherine's life. Such stories capture significant influences on

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Catherine's journey of discovering God's will for her. One such story links a visit she made to a millinery shop before her first meeting with Rev. Daniel Murray, who later became one of the most influential people in her work of Mercy and in the founding of the Sisters of Mercy. This story is often told today to pilgrims as they explore Catherine's Dublin – a tour of sites associated with Catherine and her family. At the Abbey Street stop, near the site of the millinery shop, the following account given by Mary Sullivan is shared:

One day she [Catherine] alleged some excuse for going into Dublin alone; she went to a Milliner's shop, and having purchased some trifling articles of dress, desired the servants to wait with the carriage until she should return. It was not far from the Roman Catholic Church, then in Liffey Street, and almost breathless with haste, and trembling from the excitement of her feelings, she applied at the residence of the clergymen and inquired whether any of them were at home. The answer was in the affirmative and she was introduced to the presence of Revd. Dr. [Daniel] Murray, then a curate attached to that parish, and afterwards Archbishop of Dublin.²

This story resonates with what Paul Elie indicated when he states "we want to be eyewitnesses to the story." In this case, Catherine felt the desire to learn more about her faith, to be an eyewitness to Christ, so she chose to make a journey of a few short careful steps. This action eventually led her down a path that resulted in her total commitment to follow the path of mercy for time and eternity. This commitment to faith is also recognized in the Chapel at Mercy International - to build a chapel of such size, as a laywoman not intending to found a convent, can be seen as a sign of the importance of her faith.

With all pilgrims, it is how the story changes an individual that makes it significant. The story quoted above is used to invite pilgrims that are teachers to

reflect on the ways that they form young people in their schools in preparation for the reception of the Sacraments, or to draw the attention of pilgrims to the ways that Catherine had her struggles in faith. It is in such reflections that pilgrims find moments of resonance with their own lives. A follow-up invitation offered for reflection is to call to mind similar transformative faith moments when the pilgrim has made a physical or symbolic journey that took them on another path.

The other dimension in this story is the meeting

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with Daniel Murray who is remembered as having been a supporter of Catherine and the work of the House. Pilgrims are invited to call to awareness the people they meet along the way, the chance encounters that lead to new relationships and opportunities. For the pilgrims gathered to hear the story, in the location where it occurred, the experience becomes even more meaningful than if they merely read the story themselves in a neutral setting. As one pilgrim wrote, "It is a very moving moment when you realize 'she stood right here'."

The pilgrim passing through Abbey Street can also visit the site of the school and shop in Abbey Street to connect with the place where Catherine taught and worked with young women in need and gave them an opportunity to earn some money by selling their hand-work. This gives pilgrims an opportunity to reflect on the ways they have empowered young people and others in their sphere of influence. We visit Coolock House, the home in which Catherine shared life with the Callaghans for over 20 years. It is a time to touch in to the mysterious ways in which God, as Catherine tells us, forms and reforms all of us to meet God's purpose. As pilgrims dip into the rich story of Catherine's time in Coolock, they have the opportunity to sit together in the house, try their hand at a little needlework and imagine the conversations that Catherine may have had with the young servant girls as she taught them

such skills. This activity gives pilgrims the opportunity to reflect on the unplanned conversations they have along the way that inspire them and challenge them.

Another story that captures the imagination of pilgrims is one that is told at Baggot Street which relates to Catherine's young mischievous nephew, Willie McAuley. In a letter written in later years to his cousin, he remembers sitting on his Aunt's footstool, while she read in a clear voice from a religious book to the Sisters sitting at work around the table. He notes that "they failed to abash me from peering over the table to draw a smile from the beautiful and holy faces opposite."³ This is a story that can remind hearers of Catherine's love for her family and the way she was able to include her nephew in her ministry. For many staff members in Mercy Schools, a commitment to their students and the ways in which they have to balance this with their commitment to family life or community life are delicate. They can perhaps hear of their struggles as they imagine Catherine trying to manage both the House of Mercy and the needs of her nieces and nephews.

The story also speaks to those without children of their own, but who have nieces and nephews who hold a special place in their hearts. With a knowing smile, they often acknowledge that it is the prerogative of aunts, uncles and grandparents to indulge behaviors that perhaps parents might not always approve!

A comment from a participant on one program about such stories was:

Being physically present in Catherine's house was a remarkable experience, as was spending time with several of the Sisters of Mercy who serve there. They spoke of Catherine intimately, as family members of a flesh-and-blood woman, unafraid to speak of her struggles and failings...but fully and joyfully celebrating her.

**"As they return
to ordinary life
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story in their
own terms."**

This is a reminder that it is the real Catherine whom the pilgrims benefit from meeting when they come on pilgrimage to the centre-- the woman who struggled at times with all that was asked of her and whose life was filled with "joys and sorrows mingled."

It is not unusual to see pilgrims in Catherine's room in tears, so touched when they hear the experience of her last hours in that room. They imagine the Sisters and family members gathered around Catherine, and think of those who had not arrived in time, or those who had not been called. They hear of her kindness to each one present as an individual, and of the invitation to always preserve union and charity. They are invited to reflect on what that means in the ministries to which they will return after the pilgrimage. A group of young pilgrims shared that, for them, preserving union means ensuring that there is no bullying at their school--how delighted Catherine would be with that intention!

Returning Home

As they return to ordinary life the pilgrims must tell others what they saw, recasting the story in their own terms.

One of the often-overlooked dimensions of pilgrimage is the journey back to where the pilgrim lives and ministers. Like Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration who returned from the mountaintop, so must all pilgrims return home.⁴

There is a growing focus in programs offered at the Mercy International Centre, to include input on the women who surrounded Catherine. Pilgrims can learn from these stories the ways that Catherine interacted with the women who also had much responsibility for the establishment of the Mercy charism in new places, outside of Baggot Street. One participant writes:

It was at the House of Mercy that I first experienced the work of the Sisters that were Catherine's contemporaries. Until this visit I had focused solely on the life and accomplishments of Catherine. It was here where I realized that there were Sisters who each had unique gifts and talents that were not too dissimilar to the gifts of my team members.

This participant went back home and introduced the members of his team not present on the pilgrimage to Baggot Street to the stories of Sister Mary Clare Augustine Moore. It is obvious from Catherine's letters that Clare Augustine's artistic character and temperament presented challenges for Catherine. In her letters to Frances Warde, she sometimes referred to her as "the judge,"⁵ or "that one"⁶ (where the words in the original manuscript are both underlined and written in a larger print for emphasis), or "a character – not suited to my taste or my ability to govern."⁷ However, such was Catherine's demeanour to Clare Augustine that she reported that Catherine "liked to look at me drawing or working"⁸ and she experienced Catherine as treating her as a confidant.⁹

In listening to such stories, pilgrims are challenged to consider their own relationships with others and the importance of exercising compassion, care, respect and inclusive engagement, even when that is demanding.

When she returned home to Monte Sant' Angelo College in Sydney, Australia, one of the pilgrims on the Education Pilgrimage passed on to her students an understanding of the "Ripple Effect." The school newsletter describes the activity in which the students were asked to bring a bottle of water from home on their first day of high school.

Together the girls formed eight concentric circles symbolizing the Ripple Effect as it is this theme that will guide the girls through their Mercy journey-- that it is through the decisions we make and our subsequent actions that have the potential to ripple out and affect others in our world.

The water symbolized all the diverse areas within Sydney that the girls have come from.

Students poured their water onto the round in a special area of the school, connecting them as the Year 7 Monte Class of 2018. Together, they are stronger than the strength of each individual. In addition to this, water was collected from the House of Mercy in Dublin. This place, so special in the heart of Catherine McAuley, and when poured onto the ground linked the global family of Mercy to all at Monte Sant' Angelo – as they continue to be part of the ripple effect of Catherine McAuley's actions since 1827.¹⁰

One hundred and ninety-one years since the door was first opened, it is not hard to be convinced of the value of Mercy International Centre as a place of pilgrimage that has far-reaching ripples. People's lives are enriched and changed by the experience. Those whose lives they touch are in turn inspired so that they can recast the story in their own way. "Hurray for foundations!"¹¹ ♦

Endnotes

¹ Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. x.

² Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995): 143.

³ Letter from William McAuley to the Reverend Mother in Bendigo, 13 July 15, 1903 in *The Letters of William Montgomery McAuley* (Bermondsey: Institute of Our Lady of Mercy, n.d.).

⁴ Luke 9:28-36.

⁵ Mary C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004): 182.

⁶ Sullivan, *Correspondence*, p. 128.

⁷ Ibid., p. 368.

⁸ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, p. 204.

⁹ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁰ Tara Egger, *Monte Matters*. 2 February, 2018.

http://www.monte.nsw.edu.au/files/3115/1752/1074/Monte_Matters_Term_1_Week_1.pdf.

¹¹ Catherine McAuley, "Letter to Cecilia Marmion." Birr, Offlay, 4 January 1841. An activity on returning home in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, p. 4.

California State Senate Prayer of August 11, 2016

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

Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once said:

“The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”

So gracious God, today we pray:

- ~That new hope may rise from our human discouragement;
- ~That new faith may rise from our human doubt;
- ~That new love may rise from our human indifference;
- ~That new courage may rise from our human timidity;
- ~And that new joy may rise from our human sorrow.

Generous God, as we engage in this day’s tasks, let us carry your light within us, as we bring new hope to the people we serve. Amen.

(Adapted from Joy Clough, RSM, Intercessions of Mercy)

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Subscriptions and correspondence to Julia Upton, R.S.M., 600 Convent Road, Syosset, NY 11791. Email: uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Manuscript submissions to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. at 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129. Email: eloros@sbcglobal.net.

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Storming Heaven: Intercessory Prayer, An Indispensable Work of Mercy

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

In a world charged with extreme poverty, violence, racism, and hunger, people of faith work to provide what persons need to live with dignity and safety. Moved by compassion and justice, they struggle to end the cycle of hate, greed and exploitation. Such a resolution seems so far beyond reach. It is bigger than our limited human efforts, but Jesus told us it is not beyond our prayer. “I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.” (Matt 17:20) The challenge is: Do we believe it? Do we believe that the work of mercy, *To Pray for the Living and the Dead*, is a life changing action?

The prayer of intercession is not a last chance resort. It is a prayer practice rooted in Judaeo-Christian tradition finding its origin in Covenant relationship. Mitch Finley, a contemporary writer on the works of mercy, reminds us that the practice of intercessory prayer goes back to the Hebrew scriptures. God raises up intercessors for the people, intercessors such as Abraham, Moses, the prophets and priests who, “rooted in God’s covenanted fidelity, call the people back to God and intercede for them in their sin.”¹ This work of intercession sometimes led to marginalization. Referencing the work of Michael Downey, Finley identifies the intercessor with the paradigm of the Suffering Servant.²

Israel’s Belief in God’s Mercy

Israel’s confidence in God’s covenant promises finds expression in the Psalms. Among the various categories of prayers are found 20 prayers of

communal supplication, 45 individual prayers of supplication and an additional 13 prayers of confidence.³ Psalm 44 exemplifies this dynamic. First it recalls the mercies of God over time: “We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old.” The prayer continues describing the lot of the people presently: “You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us...a laughing-stock among the peoples.” After reminding God that truly they are God’s people, the cry is lifted: “Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.”⁴

In commenting on this psalm Brueggemann and Bellinger assert that the reason for Israel’s prayer is this: “Israel believes its prayer can mobilize YHWH back to fidelity. Israel has no doubt that YHWH can make a decisive, positive difference in its life if only YHWH will answer prayer...Israel in the end counts on YHWH’s fidelity and praise to the God of all fidelity to return to a proper covenantal relationship.”⁵ The last phrase of the psalm references steadfast love or *hesed* of God. It is this realization that gives boldness to their prayer and trust that God will hear their supplication. The early Christian community drew from this faith understanding and continued to count on God’s faithfulness to covenant.

God Longs to Show Mercy

The reality of God’s covenant love weds intercessory prayer to mercy. Catherine of Siena

Israel has no doubt that YHWH can make a decisive, positive difference in its life if only YHWH will answer prayer...Israel in the end counts on YHWH’s fidelity and praise to the God of all fidelity to return to a proper covenantal relationship.”

writes of God's urgent desire that we cry out for healing and mercy. She relates to us God's desire for our prayer. "Never relax your desire to ask for my help. Never lower your voice in crying out to me to be merciful to the world."⁶ Catherine tells us that our very desire to ask for mercy is rooted in God's desire that we ask for it. "Sometimes, to test your desires and your perseverance, I pretend not to hear you. But I do hear you, and I give you whatever you need, for it is I who gave you the very hunger and voice with which you call to me, and when I see your constancy I fulfill your desires insofar as they are ordered in accord with my will."⁷ Catherine's God was a God who was never indifferent to the tears of humankind. Her insight recalls the words of Psalm 56:8 which asks that God collect our tears in a bottle.

Catherine's understanding of the relationship between mercy and intercession is part of a long tradition of Catholic teaching over the centuries. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way:

Since Abraham, intercession-asking on behalf of another- has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints. In intercession, [the one] who prays looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others," even to the point of praying for those who do him harm.⁸

Intercessory prayer is an act which affirms our belief in a merciful God. When Christians offer prayers of intercessions it is because God has shown us that God's promise is faithful and true, that the Holy One will be our refuge, rock and shelter. It proclaims the belief that God will supply our need.

Prayer in and Through Christ Jesus

Our faith understanding helps us know that we

don't pray alone. Our prayer is one with the prayer of Christ, the prayer of the whole communion of saints.

Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of all [people], especially sinners. He is "able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." The Holy Spirit "... intercedes for us . . . and intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."⁹

For Christians, intercessory prayer is not a solitary or individual act. It is a participation in the prayer of Christ Jesus. It is a prayer that echoes the prayer of Jesus throughout the scriptures. In the Gospel of John, we find Jesus saying:

**When Christians offer
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promise is faithful and
true, that the Holy
One will be our refuge,
rock and shelter.**

I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father keep them in Your name, *the name* which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. (Jn. 17:9-11)

While the people of Israel might have seen Abraham or Moses as examples of intercessors before God, Christians, confident that Jesus is their intercessor, see themselves being one with the prayer of Jesus for the well-being of all peoples. The efficacy of such prayer is supported over and over again by the repeated promise of Jesus, "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn. 14:13).¹⁰

The Liturgical Expression of Intercessory Prayer

Nowhere is this belief more evident than within the Church's liturgical tradition. The liturgical prayer

pattern found in the early Cathedral Office illustrates the centrality of intercessory prayer. The pattern is described to us by a fourth century Spanish nun named Egeria. The service she describes is dated around 381 A.D.¹¹ The community of believers gathered at dawn to await the coming of the bishop who would lead them in prayer. While waiting, they sang psalms and hymns of praise and thanksgiving, psalms that cried out for protection for the community, for deliverance and release. When the bishop arrived, he led the people in intercessory prayer for the needs of the church, blessed the people and sent them forth. Gathering together the actual needs of the community and world with the prayer of the church witnessed to those present that daily life and prayer were braided together as one reality.

The ensuing years of liturgical evolution led to a diminishment of the intercessory prayer element in the Liturgy of the Hours as the monastic office gradually superseded the early ecclesial format. Greater emphasis was placed upon the *Lectio Divina* of the psalms. The monastic practice of praying the 150 psalms put participation in that prayer beyond the reach of Christians who toiled in the fields or in the emerging towns. Various devotions emerged as an alternative. The fifteen mysteries of the Rosary, the praying of the Our Father at specific times daily, the Angelus and the Jesus Psalter are just a few devotions which find their origin in a desire to continue the Christian call to “pray unceasingly.” (IThess.5:19)

A second treasury of intercessory prayer practice is found in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Not only did the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council restore the Prayers of the Faithful or Universal Prayers, but it also preserved the strong intercessory element within the various Eucharistic Prayers. In the first Eucharistic prayer, the oldest of the canons, we find the Church praying in these words:

**Gathering together
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life and prayer were
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one reality.**

...we offer you firstly for your holy catholic church. Be pleased to grant her peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole world, together with your servant n. our Pope and n. our Bishop*, and all those who, holding to the truth, hand on the catholic and apostolic faith. ...remember, Lord, your servants n. and n. and all gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to you. For them, we offer you this sacrifice of praise or they offer it for themselves and all who are dear to them: for the redemption of

their souls, in hope of health and well-being, and paying their homage to you, the eternal God, living and true. ...remember also, Lord, your servants n. and n., who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace. Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace. he joins his hands. To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy apostles and martyrs.¹²

In Eucharistic Prayers 2, 3 and 4, the pattern is repeated but the intercessory needs vary. In Eucharistic Prayer #2, we ask to be brought into one, to bring the church to the fullness of charity and that those who have died, to be brought into the light of God's face. Eucharistic Prayer #3 asks for reconciliation to God's Self, to become one body and one spirit in Christ, and affirms the church's reliance on the constant intercession of all the saints. Once again, the church prays that the departed be granted entry into the kingdom where they will enjoy fullness of life. The final canon, Eucharistic Prayer #4, after recalling the saving actions of God, asks that all who partake of the One Bread and One Chalice be gathered into One, that they become a living sacrifice in Christ to the glory of God.¹³

The combined use of intercessory prayer within the Eucharistic canons as well as within the Universal Prayer of the Mass, lifts up for us the vital role that such intercessory prayer practice plays in the life of the church. The *General Instruction of the Roman*

Missal confirms this role when it reminds us : “It is fitting that such a prayer be included...so that petitions will be offered for the holy Church, for civil authorities, for those weighed down by various needs, for all men and women, and for the salvation of the whole world.”¹⁴

In 1998 when *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, was published, it was grounded in this liturgical understanding of intercessory prayer. Using the format of the early ecclesial office, the daily morning and evening prayer captured the urgency of the worlds needs in its intercessory prayer element. Intercessions found in week one of the prayer provide just a few examples:

You desire freedom for the oppressed: Shower the earth with justice for those who are imprisoned by hate and fear.

Comforter of those who suffer: Show us how to be with those in pain, especially abused women and children.

For the refugees and the immigrants of the world: May they be comforted by their sisters and brothers in Christ.

For those who are homeless and who yearn for permanent shelter, we pray: God, send us your mercy.¹⁵

Such petitions systematically raise up the needs of women and children, earth, violence in all its forms, the economically poor, and persons experiencing discrimination and marginalization as focus for intercessory prayer. The calendar of saints was used to ask the intercession of saints who gave their lives in the service of their brothers and sisters. The two elements speak to the role that intercession plays in the apostolic life of mercy.

Prayer as a Work of Mercy

Intercessory prayer is not limited to the liturgical sphere, however. While the liturgy most clearly teaches us that we are united to the prayer of Christ,

devotional prayer practice has also mirrored this practice throughout history. It was Saint Augustine who first identified “prayer for the living and the dead” as a work of mercy.¹⁶ In the mind of Augustine, the work of reconciliation called one to be “vigilant about the spiritual needs of the other.”¹⁷ These works of reconciliation were threefold: “to console the afflicted, to show the way to the lost, to assist those who hesitate.”¹⁸ To the works of reconciliation Augustine added three works of forgiveness which included bearing wrongs, correcting the sinner and forgiving sins.

In the foreword to a collection of writings by Pope Francis on the works of mercy, James Keenan, S.J., points out that intercessory prayer was connected to the work of reconciliation. Keenan says, “For Augustine, praying for the living and the dead was a prayer that extended even to one’s enemies. The prayer for the living and the dead was then the summary work of the first six spiritual practices.”¹⁹ It gathered up Augustine’s three spiritual works of being vigilant for the spiritual well-being of the other and his three works of pardon and forgiveness bringing all into unity.

Intercession Knows No Boundaries

The work of intercession is intimately linked to the early Christian community’s understanding of the communion of saints. All persons are connected. What happens to one, happens to all. “The first Christian communities lived this form of fellowship intensely. Thus, the Apostle Paul gives them a share in his ministry of preaching the Gospel but also intercedes for them. The intercession of Christians recognizes no boundaries-- “for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, for persecutors, for the salvation of those who reject the Gospel.”²⁰ Such an understanding expanded the intercession of the Christian community to enfold both living and deceased, stranger and friend, distant and near. Belief in the communion of saints gave them confidence to appeal to those who had gone before them and were one with them in that communion.

They saw that both living and deceased members were joined together in praying for the needs of the whole society.

The greater the anguish of the world, the greater the urgency for intercessory prayer. During World War II, in the face of indescribable suffering, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.²¹

Intercessory prayer not only lays claim to the mercy of God, it transforms the heart of the one who prays. Bonhoeffer understood that prayer softens the heart and helps us to see the “enemy” with the eyes of love. This happens gently. Sometimes we don’t see our request realized but something changes. Bonhoeffer didn’t live to see the fruit of his own intercessory prayer for peace and freedom. It can often be like that for all believers. The prayer is an act of unselfish love. Jesus warned us of that in his story of the persistent widow. The story tells us that the widow appeals over and over again until the unjust judge finally responds (Lk. 18:1-8). Jesus sets a similar scene in the story of the neighbor who comes in the midst of the night begging for bread (Lk. 11:5-8). In each case the one who asks must wait with hope, wait for the emergence of the good.

In Christian tradition we have stories of saints who “waited on God.” Who could forget the classic story of Monica praying for Augustine’s conversion or Clare’s reliance on God to save her city from the Saracens. Persistence in prayer is modelled in the actions of Moses, hands outstretched during battle, or

with Abraham’s negotiation with God to save Sodom for the sake of ten just men.

Catherine of Siena reminds us that our anguish and persistence touch the heart of God--

...with a restless heart bewail the death of this child, humanity, who you see reduced to such misery that your tongue could not tell it. Through this lamentation and crying out it is my will to be merciful to the world.²²

Urgent Needs of Today

Today we pray not only for persons but for earth itself. All creation becomes the fodder for our prayer and concern. Contemporary developments in the sciences have deepened our understanding of interdependence and unity. Through the exploration of space, images from the Hubble telescope, and other scientific advances, the intricacies and interdependence of creation have become etched in our awareness. The extinction of species, destruction of rainforests, pollution of rivers and oceans, extraction industries that rape the land, all cry out for prayer. It is significant that Pope Francis has added Care of Earth as one of the works of mercy for the holding sacred of earth is not merely a desire, it is a necessity and act of stewardship. It is a work that

blends together the corporal and spiritual dimensions of mercy.

One cannot talk about “Praying for the Living and the Dead” without acknowledging that prayer for the deceased is problematic for some believers. Finley points out that until the mid-sixteenth century intercessory prayer was simply taken for granted. It was an integral part of Christian spirituality. Protestant Reformers found fault with the practice. The abuse of things like indulgences caused them to question the efficacy of praying for those who were already deceased.²³ Questions arising from such discussion tend to place things on a linear time basis

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when in God there is only the Eternal Now. “Effective intercessory prayer requires us to take to heart the fact that God’s love cannot be thought of on a space/time continuum. God’s love simply *is* always and everywhere, in time and in eternity.”²⁴ Prayer for the dead causes us to move into unknowing and confront the mystery of life itself. Engaging in prayer for the deceased is a constant affirmation of our belief that physical death is the gateway to eternal life in and through Christ Jesus.

Pope Francis reminds us that prayer for the dead is also “first and foremost, a sign of appreciation for the witness they have left us and the good that they have done.”²⁵ It is an act of love and an entrustment of those who are dear to us to God’s mercy. We trust in the promises of Jesus that we will rise again and be joined with him in glory.

Intercessory Prayer: Challenge and Invitation

The rich tradition of intercessory prayer is both challenge and invitation to us. Daily family members, friends and even strangers ask us to pray for them. There are multiple prayer lists, both for persons and for global concerns. We find ourselves saying: “I will hold you in prayer.” This assurance is second-nature to us for over the ages Christians have held firmly to the belief that God hears and answers our prayer.

The testimony lifted up by time and by the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us reminds us that great things have been accomplished through the power of prayer. But what about the present? Does our current world reality ask of us the “faith to move mountains? In the now of our world’s pain our reality asks us to pray unceasingly for the healing of the world. It asks that our deeds be joined with our prayer. Only a renewed commitment to the work of

mercy, “Praying for the Living and the Dead” will let us know if our response is: “Yes, Lord, I believe. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Mitch Finley, *The Corporal & Spiritual Works of Mercy*. (Liguori Publications: Liguori, MO, 2003): 137.

² Ibid.

³ Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P.P.S. *Psalms I*. (Michael Glazier, Inc.: Wilmington, Delaware, 1983): 54.

⁴ Walter Bruggemann, Walter & William Bellinger, *Psalms* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2014): 207-209.

⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

⁶ Mary O’Driscoll, O.P. (ed.) *Catherine of Siena, Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity*. (New City Press: New Rochelle, NY, 1993): 123

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (William H. Sadlier, Inc: New York, 1994) § 2635.

⁹ Ibid., § 2634.

¹⁰ Some form of the passage is found 9 times within Gospels, predominantly in the Gospel of John.

¹¹ John Wilkinson, Egeria’s *Travels to the Holy Land*, (Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 1981):123-4.

¹² *The Roman Missal*, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 2011) pp. 635, 642.

¹³ Ibid., pp.648-49, 654-655, 660-661.

¹⁴ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Washington, D.C., 2002), §69.

¹⁵ *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, (Institute of the Sisters of Mercy: Silver Spring, MD, 1998): 549-583.

¹⁶ Pope Francis. *The Works of Mercy*, (Orbis Books: New York, 2017): xiv.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., xiv-xv.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2636

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, (Harper and Row: New York, 1954): 86.

²² O’Driscoll, op. cit., p. 123.

²³ Finley, op. cit., p.138

²⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁵ Pope Francis. p. 182.



Meditation on the Lord's Prayer-Part 1

Chorbishop William J. Leser

Our Lord and Savior Jesus came for our salvation. He was a man like us, except for sin. He was the perfect man while also the Son of God the Father, who walked upon this earth in perfect holiness, and in perfect obedience to the Father. The Lord Jesus, inspired all during that time by the same Spirit, told us he would send us the Spirit. This is why he had to leave us and ascend to the Father. He promised us that he would not leave us alone, for the Holy Spirit who inspired him would now be inspiring us on our daily walk and way of life.

Although Jesus was God made a true man, His doing that at the will of his Father was part of the humiliation, the suffering, the passion and the cross required in order for our eternal salvation to be achieved. During his life amongst us, he was truly God who is the object of our praise, our adoration, our laud, and our worship. As the Scriptures tell us, the Seraphim veil their faces in his presence and cry out one to another:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts!
All the earth is filled with his glory! (Isaiah 6:3)¹

The angelic hosts, in existence long before mankind was created, constantly praise and worship him as the Creator of the world, the Only-Begotten of the Father from all eternity, and the Eternal Son of Love. This the Lord Jesus himself taught us:

For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these so that you may be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he

has given all judgment to His Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father Who sent him. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father Who sent him (Jn. 5:20-23).

The Son must be honored and worshipped as the Father is honored and worshipped. While amongst us,

**He promised us
that he would not
leave us alone, for
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on our daily walk
and way of life.**

Jesus looked forward to his resurrection and glorification at the right hand of the Father after finishing the Paschal Mystery, namely, the work he came for--our eternal salvation by his sacrifice on the cross. The Son is truly worthy of our praise, worship, laud and glory.

But on earth as the God-Man, the Suffering Servant as Isaiah so well foretold, he was taking his place under God the Father, having come in obedience unto death, unto death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-8). In doing that work, as the Scriptures tell us, our Lord and Savior prayed. He praised and worshipped as he alone could accomplish that laud and adoration and thanksgiving to his Father.

The Prayer of Jesus

We know very little about the prayers offered by the Lord Jesus, when he was alone with His Father on the mountain tops and deserted places, or in the Garden of Olives, or when he spent nights in prayer. Besides prayers of intercession, surely, he must have given praise and adoration and laud and thanksgiving to him who sent him into our world to glorify his name in the mighty works of redemption.

Surely among his prayers were the Psalms, which contain such profound thoughts of love and praise and thanksgiving. Surely being the God-Man, Jesus prayed with the fullness of his humanity in all the emotions of his very body and soul, under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In the Gospels, the first record of Jesus praying that we hear about comes from Luke:

At that time Jesus said in reply: I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him (Lk. 10:21-22).

Again, we read when Jesus arrived at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus:

Jesus said: "Take away the stone." So, they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said: "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me." And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus come out!" The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So, Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go" (Jn. 11:41-44).

Again, at the Last Supper, Jesus looked up to heaven and gave thanks before blessing the bread and again after thanks before blessing the chalice of wine.

He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I shall not eat it again until there is fulfillment in the Kingdom of God."

Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves, for I tell you from this time on I shall not drink the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes." Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you. Do this in memory of me." And likewise, the

cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you" (Lk. 22:15-20).

Throughout the entire Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus is repeatedly remembered as a person of regular and constant prayer with his heavenly Father. Often St. Luke writes that the Lord got up early and retired to a secluded place to pray to his heavenly Father. Luke notes that before Jesus made an important announcement he first prayed to his Father. The Gospels tell us that before Jesus worked any miracle, he usually gave thanks to his Father and then proceeded to heal or forgive or cure or raise from the dead. It was this example given by Jesus as witnessed by his disciples that inspired them. After Jesus had just finished praying, they sought instruction on how to pray with similar benefits in their own lives and for their ministry in his vineyard.

What is Prayer—An Anecdote of Archbishop Sheen

As we consider this request and Jesus' response, we must ask just what prayer is? Prayer is much more than merely a humble stance before God! It just is not a list of petitions. Nor is prayer merely some remarks addressed by an individual to God. Rather, fundamentally, prayer is having a real interpersonal relationship with God. It's a true form of interpersonal communication. This means, of course, that prayer is very definitely not just a soliloquy. Rather, prayer must be a colloquy. It must be an in-

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depth conversation with God. And any real conversation must always involve a two-way interchange of ideas and feelings and responses, a real colloquy.

Is that not how we build-up a relationship and we keep a friendship? And the deeper, and oftener we

inter-relate, and truly communicate, the closer any relationship grows and develops, does it not?

Prayer, therefore, must be a two-way conversation. It must be a colloquy, as Archbishop John Peter Fulton Sheen told me many years ago in confession. I was making my confession during our priests' retreat with the good Archbishop. He looked at me and said, "Bill, you blah, blah, blah to God and when you finish you say 'Good bye God!' If this is true, you have never really prayed!"

I was 28 years-old and three years an ordained priest. May God have mercy on me! Then the Archbishop added, "Bill, before your day begins do as Jesus did. Get up early around 4:00 am and take time to do *lectio divina* with the Lord our God. Speak with him! Take time to stop and listen for his voice to you, which is helped to happen from your *lectio divina*. Since that moment, this has been my practice.

Like any conversation, prayer is not just speaking to one another from our heart and our very being! It must also be truly listening to the other, and then reflecting deeply upon what the other says or asks. This manner of inter-relating is the only way we humans have of maintaining our intimate relationship one with another. And, as our in-depth conversation with another grows, so does our interpersonal relationship with that person, and also does our admiration and our love for the other person develop and grow. Suddenly our relationship goes from being a casual interpersonal relationship to an extremely close, interpersonal relationship. And, that manner of behavior must be the same for every relationship that you and I are involved in. Real communication is a basic necessity in maintaining any kind of human interpersonal relationship. How many marriages falter and fail due to a real lack of communication? I think lack of communication is the major factor.

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So, it also is with our entire Christian life. Our living as a Christian must be based upon a real, daily interpersonal, close-knit relationship and partnership of life with God. This is what prayer is all about. Our prayer must give witness to our fundamental values and core beliefs that shape every moment of our daily lives. In turn, as we live these values and beliefs, we inspire others, as Jesus' prayer and relationship with his heavenly Father inspired his apostles.

While we must talk with God from the very depths of our being, we must also give time for God to talk back to us. Yes. Exactly. He needs time to talk to us. We need to take time to listen and reflect upon what he says to us. When we converse with God, as Jesus told us, as Matthew recorded it:

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray on street corners, so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. When you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying do not babble words like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Don't be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him (Matt. 6:5-8).

The best means of sharing our faith — evangelizing — is through our personal example, not through any imposition by force or coercion, whether that be morally, physically, psychologically or emotionally with another. "Who" and "what" we are is what touches others. Our actions, our words, our manner of behavior, our expressions of care, our innermost ideas and beliefs. Who we are shows in our facial expressions as we talk, and even sometimes our roaring in laughter or tears flooding down our checks. All of who and what we are speaks to those around us.

Most of us must acknowledge that we don't even think about having a close-knit interrelationship with God by doing as Jesus did, let alone attempt to spend

whole nights in prayer up on top of a mountain as Jesus did so often in his life amongst us. As the Gospels tell us, Jesus did this always before making important decisions, from choosing his apostles to preparing for his arrest and passion and death. As St. Luke notes in his Gospel repeatedly, that is what Jesus did. Remember a night that happened just before Jesus chose the twelve to be his apostles. I guess the motto here might be: big decision — big prayer (Lk. 6: 12-16). Nowhere does any disciple tell us how Jesus prayed. But we can be sure that he praised, glorified, blessed and thanked his Father! That he acknowledged his Father as the Lord and Creator.

We know, however, that except for Judas, those Jesus chose went from being so-so as human persons to being as much changed as a human can be. Those same human beings went out after his Ascension, to transform our world. In all honesty, those simple, not-too-well educated apostles set the world alight with their faith and their witness. They certainly demonstrate what prayer can accomplish with God's grace, once that grace is allowed to take hold. Grace molds those who accept its power into extremely effective instruments of Jesus' Good News — his Gospel.

While we might not pray like Jesus, our feeble attempts at prayer helps us see and understand things differently. Prayer offers us light where there would otherwise likely be darkness. Prayer allows us to receive God's wisdom and guidance, so that our own minds and thinking are not governed by our own views and prejudices. Through prayer we see people differently, as we began to see things from a new and more enlightened perspective.

Indeed, given what we know about the disciples of Jesus' choice is testimony to the power of God to change and to transform. Peter went from being weak and quick to act and respond to being a stable person, a "rock." James and John were ambitious and

fanatical, and even got their own mother involved in their scheme to advance their interests. Matthew's financial dealings as a tax collector were most likely dubious before Jesus invited him to become his follower. Thomas was a skeptic and a cynic at heart up to Easter evening. Saul was a radical Pharisee out to capture and destroy all Jews who were following the "New Way."

If Jesus' prayer for those persons could change and help them, what can His prayer do for us? We should look deeply into how Jesus answered His Apostles request to teach them to pray. And then we should do likewise!

The Instruction of Jesus on Prayer

Thus, when His disciples sought instruction on how they should pray:

"Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples" (Lk. 11:1).

In response to this heartfelt request, as St. Luke tells us, we learn that Jesus is the real Master of Prayer. In response to that plea, Jesus entrusted to his disciples and to his church for generations to

come the most fundamental prayer, "The Lord's Prayer," which is also known as the "Our Father."²

St. Matthew's Gospel contains the longest form of this prayer (Matthew 6:9-13. Most biblical scholars believe St. Luke's version may be closer to the actual words of the Lord Jesus, but they also believe that St. Matthew's version developed in order to make clear what was behind Jesus' words.

The Our Father is our first prayer, and really the foundation of all our prayer. However, as the Scriptures teach, no one can truly pray the Our Father without the Holy Spirit. God our Father sends the Holy Spirit of his Son into our hearts, so that we can cry out to God, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6). Jesus gave us the words of this prayer, so we too can pray to the God the Father as he prayed to his heavenly

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Father. He returned to the Father to send us the Holy Spirit so that these words would become for us "spirit and life" (Jn. 6:63).

The Our Father is truly a gift from Jesus to the Church, and it has been prayed since the Church's earliest days. According to the Didache, an ancient record, the early Christians would pray the Our Father three times a day. This replaced the Eighteen Benedictions, which formed part of a faithful Jew's daily prayer. Still today, the Our Father remains an essential part of Christian liturgical life and daily prayer.

Fullest Expression in the Eucharistic Liturgy

It should be remembered that Jesus himself did not say that we should say "My Father," but rather "Our Father" --offering our adoration and petitions for the whole Body of Christ, the Church! Because of this first invocation of the Lord Jesus, we can discover the truest and fullest meaning of the "Our Father" only within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist. During that Divine Liturgy, the "Our Father" is a summing-up of all of our prayers, petitions and intercessions. It is also, in a sense, a knocking on the door of the "banquet of the kingdom" as we anticipate receiving the very body and blood of Jesus! The "Our Father" expresses, further, our hoping and our longing for the return of Jesus, when he will come again in all his glory. Since Jesus' Ascension to his heavenly Father his return in glory has been imminent. We are in the last time!

Spiritual Disposition in Prayer

When we pray the "Our Father," we are confessing our faith in God's goodness and eternal love. In fact, we are professing and witnessing to our confidence that we are truly children of the Father upon whom he lavishes his unconditional love and

mercy. To know God as Father is a remarkable grace and blessing. We sometimes forget that "flesh and blood" cannot reveal God as Father. We perceive this truth not through human reason alone but through faith, through the most wonderful, and first, gift of revelation.

Praised be to God the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth, whom we are privileged to call "Abba - Father." This is the God of compassion, healing, mercy, forgiveness and of unconditional love.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as (done) in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one (Matt.6:9-13)

This prayer begins by teaching us the very place of God in our lives, namely, that he must have first place as the Father of each and every one of us. His

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presence must pervade all that each one of us and that He has called each to be. To do that, we each one of us must purify our hearts, our minds and our very beings, so that he can dwell within our hearts and souls, so that he can each one's heart can be hallowed. We acknowledge God's omnipotence and we also ask God to make his presence felt in every part of our being-- our hearts, our minds, our souls. It asks too that when we engage

him in conversation, in silent prayer, with a listening heart, we can experience the bottomless, endless, eternal Love that is God himself. And, through this selfless experience we are given a way to forgive and to love others, as God Himself loves each and every one of us.

That meaning flows very clearly from a translation of the original Aramaic.³

O Breathing Life,' [Abba] Your Name shines everywhere!
 Release a space to plant Your Presence here.
 Imagine Your possibilities now.
 Embody Your desire in every light and form.
 Grow through us this moment's bread and wisdom.

Untie the knots of failure binding us,
 as we release the strands we hold of others' faults.
 Help us not forget our Source,
 Yet free us from not being in the Present.
 From You arises every Vision, Power and Song from
 gathering to gathering. Amen.
 May our future actions grow from here.

St. Luke, in his Gospel, gives a much-shortened form of this prayer.

Father, hallowed be your name,
 Your Kingdom come.
 Give us each day our daily bread
 And forgive us our sins
 For we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us,
 And do not subject us to the final test (Lk. 11:2-4).

The Lukan form of the prayer most likely is the way this prayer first was remembered and was carried by preaching missionaries.

Over the years spiritual, biblical and theological writers have written much on this prayer. First and foremost, the Our Father is not a prayer for everyone. Rather, it is a prayer for Jesus' disciples. The Our Father is their prayer, as it distills the whole of what moves them as disciples of Jesus. In this prayer, the disciple accepts and prays that he/she might always respond to Jesus' call, "Come, follow me," without reserve, in wholehearted service to the reign of God, without the encumbrance of material possessions--also a sign of his/her discipleship. Disciples are meant to proclaim the reign of God and do exactly as Jesus did. Namely,

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they are to share his fate, his duties, his joys, his tears, his fears.

There appears to be a difference in the Gospels between being a "disciple" and a "follower." It appears that "disciples" are called explicitly by Jesus with such words as. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people"(Mark 1:17). "Followers" are those who upon hearing Jesus' good news, join him in proclaiming that good news and that manner of living their daily life.

It is true that many point to the fourth petition in particular, "Give us today our daily bread," as showing that this prayer is suitable for anyone, as everyone needs their daily sustenance. However, the fourth petition is much more concrete than a first reading might suggest, as it prays for only what is necessary for strict discipleship as we shall see under that heading.

Further, another note about this prayer is that many have pointed out that St. Matthew has seven petitions in his prayer. As we know, numbers were very important to our Jewish ancestors in faith. The number seven (7) symbolized perfection. Seven days form one week. Hebrew had no numbers. Rather, the alphabet stood for numbers. David's name was the numbers "3" and "4," which added up to seven (7). Multiplied, three and four become twelve (12), which are other numbers that held important symbolic meanings for our Jewish ancestors.⁴

Overview of the Our Father: Becoming a Disciple

Almost every one of us becomes so used to rattling off the Our Father, that we fail to consider what we are really saying. We say these words so routinely that we do not stop to think about what we are really saying to God. We fail to grasp, or to meditate, on those seven petitions that we are asking from our Heavenly Father. Where is our heart in it all? Where, is our mind and our very self in what we are doing? Yet, prayer is not just

rattling off words. Rather, prayer is the lifting up of our hearts, our minds, and our very being unto the Lord.

First and foremost, we remember that this prayer was taught by Jesus in response to his disciples request to teach them to pray. This prayer is, therefore above all, the prayer of Jesus' disciples, and so it must be prayed having that in mind. This prayer distills the whole of what it means to be Jesus' disciple.

What are we really saying to Our Father in heaven, when we recite this prayer? The first three petitions are requests related to adoration and worship of God the Father. We pray that his name be honored and highly respected by everyone, but especially by those saying this prayer! That his will be accomplished by all creatures in heaven and on earth, but most especially by us making this prayer! That his Kingdom grow and become truly a part of every creature's (angel and human) life, so that he might truly be glorified as all that He desires, is being fulfilled!

It should be noted that the Kaddish is a very ancient Jewish prayer that originally concluded the reading of the scripture in the synagogue. Today this prayer begins:

May his great name be exalted and sanctified in the world which he created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom and may his salvation blossom and his anointed be near during your lifetime and during your days and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel, speedily and very soon!

Jesus may have known this prayer very well. This prayer was well-known before the time of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. The Kaddish has a real kinship to the Our Father. Both prayers ask first that the divine name be sanctified, then both prayers ask that the reign of God come. Since a version of this prayer existed in Jesus'

time, it was well-known to faithful Jews. Jesus began the Our Father conscious that his disciples and followers also were aware of the Kaddish prayer. Jesus began by re-iterating the petition that the name of God be highly respected and exalted.

The second set of four petitions are requests for ourselves. We ask that all people on earth might have what is basically needed-- food, shelter, sufficient means to live a basic comfortable life, human rights and justice for all, and also freedom, especially the right to know and love and worship and serve God! That all people might have the help and grace to seek forgiveness and so be truly forgiven by themselves working earnestly to avoid sin! We ask all people to remember that their forgiveness is conditioned on their own willingness to forgive anyone who has sinned against them. We pray that all people also be given the grace to avoid being led astray by the world, the flesh and the devil. In all that we are, and in all we do, we give glory and praise to our God always and everywhere.

What must be kept in mind as we offer this prayer? What we meditate on is that this prayer has

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very strong eschatological overtones. The entire prayer is asking Our Father to speed up the coming of his kingdom. We pray that everything might be fully accomplished so that his kingdom might fully and completely be established giving him the fullness of glory. We pray that all people might truly see his love for us and give Him the praise and thanksgiving that he deserves.

This prayer is called the perfect prayer because it contains everything that should be part of our prayer: our

relationship with God, recognizing the origin of our life, respect for the title of "Father" as the name of God, desire for God's sovereign action in our world, our total dependence on God, forgiveness as we must forgive, and the need for God's grace in order to be saved from the final test.

First Petition: Our Father

As St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

Anyone with a bit of good news would not make so bold as to call God by the name of Father until he had come to be like Him. It is impossible for God who is goodness in His very being to be Father to someone of evil will. It is impossible for the Holy One to be father of a depraved person. It is impossible for the Giver of Life to have as a child one whose sin has subjected him to death. "So, if one of us, in examining himself, discovers that his conscience is covered in mud and needs to be cleansed, he cannot allow himself such familiarity with God, First, he must be purified. Then why, in this prayer of His, does the Lord Jesus teach us to call God by the name of Father? I suppose that, in suggesting this word, He is putting before our eyes the holiest life as the criterion of our behavior.⁵

In the first place, the Aramaic "Abba," which translates "Daddy," is the word that Jesus used. "Abouna" is the usual Aramaic word for "Father." However, it should be noted that the word "Abba" is the highest form of respect that adult children use in speaking to or about their father, for it connotes the deepest possible love and respect for someone who "has been," and "still is" the best of fathers. It is in this form that Jesus deliberately used the word "Abba" every time he spoke about God the Father.

Thus, this prayer begins with a most unique familiarity! It would be like the head of any nation or an employer telling us to call him/her by their most intimate name, one that might be used by their spouse or most intimate friend. And, it is the Lord Jesus himself who asks this of us! Jesus teaches us to address God the Father with a liberty and familiarity which comes from the pure, holy, Lord God himself. In one of the eastern rites, a Maronite liturgical

invocation says that in giving us this prayer, Jesus is giving to us a most holy, most pure prayer taught to His disciples saying to them:

Each time you gather together in My Name and you celebrate My memory and the Eucharistic Paschal Mystery, you should pray, give thanks and praise your God and Father by saying: "Our Father."

However, it should be noted that the word "Abba" is the highest form of respect that adult children use in speaking to or about their father, for it connotes the deepest possible love and respect for someone who "has been," and "still is" the best of fathers.

Thus, we begin this prayer by acknowledging that God truly is our Father, our "Daddy." God is truly Our Father with all that being "Our Daddy" means. That He is the Perfect Father! Namely, that He cares deeply for each one of us! That His love is beyond measure, even with all of our imperfections! Where he resides is the most perfect state, as it is a place without pain or sorrow of any kind and is the happiest, most joyful place ever. As St. John writes:

Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will always be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing, or pain, for the old order has passed away (Rev. 21:3-4).

Trying to comprehend what heaven really is like is beyond what we can ever imagine or conceive, no matter how we stretch our mind, as St. John writes in his First Letter.

God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in Him. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment . . . We love because he first loved us (I Jn. 4:16-19).

Heaven is perfection itself. And we are drawn in because of who Our Father really and truly is. St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that "God wants to be called Father by us." As St. Cyril puts it:

If you want to know why we call our God "Father," listen to Moses: "Is he not your Father who begot you, the one who made and established you?" (Deut. 32:6). Listen too to Isaiah: "Yet, Lord, you are Our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter: we are the work of your hand. (Is. 64:8). Under prophetic inspiration, Isaiah speaks plainly, God is our Father, not by nature, but by the grace of adoption. Paul too was a father, father of the Christians in Corinth. Not because he had begotten them according to the flesh, but because he had regenerated them according to the Spirit. Christ, when his Body was fastened to the cross, saw Mary, His Mother, according to the flesh, and John, the disciple most dear to Him, and said to John: "Behold your Mother," and to Mary, "Behold your son. Christ called Mary John's Mother, not because she had begotten him, but because she loved him (Jn. 19:26-27). Joseph too was called father of Christ, not a procreator in a physical sense, but as his guardian: Joseph was to nourish and protect him. With greater reason God calls himself Father of human beings and wants to be called Father by us. What unspeakable generosity! He dwells in the heavens; we live on the earth. He has created the ages; we live in time. He holds the world in his hands; we are but grasshoppers on the face of the earth."⁶

First Petition: Our Father in Heaven

As St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

These words I think have a very deep meaning. They remind us of the homeland we have abandoned, of the citizenship we have lost. In the parable of the young man who left his father's house, went off the rails and was reduced to living with pigs. The Word of God shows us human wretchedness. That young man did not find his one-time happiness again until he had realized his moral degradation, had looked into his own heart and had pronounced the words of confession. These words, almost agree with the Lord's Prayer, because the Prodigal Son says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against

you. (Lk. 15:21). He would not confess himself to be a sinner against heaven if he were not convinced that the homeland he had left at the time of his going astray were not in actual fact, heaven. By this confession of his, he makes himself worthy once again to stand in the presence of his father who runs towards him, embraces him, and kisses him. The conclusion is this. To return to heaven there is only one route and that is to admit one's sinfulness and seek to avoid it. To make the decision to avoid it is already to be perfecting one's likeness of God.⁷

First Petition: Hallowed be Your Name

As Origen wrote:

What is the meaning of the words "name" and "hallow.?" "Name" denotes the proper and exclusive nature of the being that carries it and indicates the general effect of its qualities. In human beings these qualities can change, and with them their names too. Abram came to be called Abraham, Simon became Peter, and Saul's name was changed to Paul. By contrast in the case of God who is immutable, who never changes, there is but one name, the "I am" that was given Him in Exodus (Ex. 3:14). We all endeavor to reflect on God to understand His nature, but they are few indeed that succeed in sensing His holiness. Jesus' prayer teaches us that God is holy. It helps us to discover the holiness of the Being that creates, provides, judges, chooses and abounds in generosity, welcomes and rejects, rewards and punishes equally. This is what characterizes the quality that belongs to God, the quality that the Scriptures call by the name of God. Therefore, in the Scriptures we read: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." (Ex. 20:7) and again, "May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew, as the gentle rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb, for I will proclaim the name of the Lord" (Deut.

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32:21). Anyone who prays ought therefore to ask that the name of God may be hallowed, as it is also in the Psalms: "Let us exalt His name forever" (Ps.34:3). The Psalmist hopes that we may arrive in harmony of spirit, at a true understanding of the nature of God.⁸

So, we make our first petition to God, because of who and what he is. We are invited to intimately enter into God's eternal plan. And, what we recognize and acknowledge from the beginning, is that we should always hallow God's name. That is, we acknowledge that God often manifests his glorious self by an act of power that shows us His glory and then, because of that part of God's plan, we must adore and worship and love Him by sanctifying his most holy name. Does not the name stand for the person? Surely it does. Those who have been sued in court for maligning someone's name learn that a name and reputation are precious. By remembering the person and name of God's are to be revered, we achieve our own sanctification. In fact, every individual, who does that, achieves his/her sanctification.⁹

Second Petition: Your Kingdom Come

This very beautiful, devout second line is arguably the most important part of this prayer, for it is we, the speakers, giving ourselves totally to God, asking Our Father to take all the trash and rubbish out of our hearts, so that our hearts may truly be temples containing God as St. Paul writes:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body (2 Cor. 6:19-20).

As Origen wrote:

"For behold, the Kingdom of God is among you." (Lk. 17:21) Therefore, anyone who prays that the kingdom of God may not delay its coming is praying that it may be consolidated, extended, and reach its fullness within him. Our Lord in fact dwells in all holy people, who recognize God as their King and obey his spiritual laws. The Father is present in the

perfect soul and Christ reigns together with the Father, according to his own actual word: "Whoever loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (Jn. 14:23).

The kingdom will not reach its fullness in each of us until wisdom and the other virtues are perfected in us. Perfection is reached at the end of the journey, so we ought to be "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13).

In other words, on the one hand, the believer is a tireless traveler and on the other hand the kingdom of God will reach its completion in us only when the words of the Apostle are fulfilled: "When He has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and subjected everything under his feet then the Son himself will also be subjected to the One who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all" (I Cor. 15:24-28).

The kingdom will not reach its fullness in each of us until wisdom and the other virtues are perfected in us. Perfection is reached at the end of the journey, so we ought to be "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." (Phil 3:13)

Let us subdue our members to produce the fruits of the Spirit. Then the Lord will walk with us as in a spiritual paradise. He alone will reign in us, together with Christ. And we shall already possess the benefits of the new birth and of the resurrection."¹⁰

This second petition reminds us that each one of us must be working daily to develop and bring about the Kingdom of God in our own lifetime here on earth, just as has always been done by the angels and saints in heaven, so that the divine purpose present now in heaven, be achieved here on earth.

It is our responsibility to work diligently at this task, as we also look forward to Christ's return when he comes to hand over his kingdom to the Father. What we are acknowledging and asking is for a speedy coming of God's eternal kingdom here on earth today.

The central text and message of the Torah is "God rules as King." This, of course, is the solemn formula of the First Commandment:

You shall not have other gods besides me (Ex.20:3).

For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God (Ex. 20:5).

And the commentary on this commandment in Deuteronomy, the "Shema Israel" states:

I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me (Deut. 5:6-7).

During the Passover Supper, the prayers over the bread begin, "Blessed are You, O King of the Universe." Zechariah notes, "The Lord will be King over the whole earth" (Zech. 14:9).

St. Mark in his Gospel makes clear that this First Commandment with the Commandment of Love have been joined into one Commandment by Jesus Himself as shown in the story of the scribe who came forward and asked Jesus: "Which is the first of the commandments?" And Jesus replied:

The first is this: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk. 12:29-30).

This suggests that Jesus reminds his disciples and followers that since God is King of the universe, we surrender ourselves totally to God's will as is manifested in Jesus, so that Jesus can reign over us until he surrenders everything at the end to the Father.

St. Paul tells us about Jesus giving all to his Father at the end: "When everything is subjected to him, then the Son Himself will also be subjected to the One who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all (I Cor. 15:28). And so, Jesus concludes His response to that scribe: "You are not far from the reign of God." (Mk. 12:34).

St. Paul, speaking of the end of time, puts it:

For, just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall be brought to life, but each one in proper order. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every

sovereignty and every authority and power (I Cor. 15:23-24).

This petition also reminds us that we must not only be rightly looking for Christ Jesus' return in glory, rather, we must be looking for that above all else, because when Jesus returns, then he will hand everything over to his Father so that the reign of God may begin, but we must also be praying not only for the growth of that Kingdom but also for it to come possibly even in our own lifetimes.¹¹ As St. Paul writes:

In Christ shall all be brought to life, but each in proper order; . . . then shall come the end, when he hands over the Kingdom to his God and Father (I Cor. 15:23-24).

It is only in sincerely making this petition to God that we can come one step closer to fulfilling the promise we make to "To forgive those who trespass against us." ♦

[Chorbishop Leser's reflection on the third through seventh petitions in the "Our Father" will be continued in a subsequent issue.]

Endnotes

¹ The Hebrew language did not have comparatives, like good, better, best. Instead you would repeat the word, twice for better, and thrice for the best ever. So God is praised in this Sabbath Day Synagogue hymn by three-fold repetition of "Holy."

² *New Catholic Catechism*, par. §2759.

³ The Aramaic version published at www.orucc.org.

⁴ St. John Paul II stated regarding the Our Father:

"Everything that can and must be said to the Father is contained in those seven requests which we all know by heart. There is such a simplicity in them that even a child can learn them, but at the same time such a depth that a whole life can be spent meditating on their meaning."

⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 2 (PG 44, 1 T41).

⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis*, 7,8ff; (PG 33, 613).

⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 2 (PG 44, 1144).

⁸ Origen, *On Prayer*, 24, (P G11,492).

⁹ *New Catholic Catechism*, par. §2858.

¹⁰ Origen, *On Prayer*, 25 (PG 11, 498 ff).

¹¹ *New Catholic Catechism*, par. §2859.

Spontaneous Mournful Rituals After Violent Events

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M.

In 2018 the 14th of February was Valentine's Day, and in the Catholic Church it was also Ash Wednesday, which marked the beginning of the Lenten Season, forty-days of deep reflection, personal and communal, about how to live lovingly, mercifully and justly. But this day held something else as well--another mass shooting in the United States. This time it happened at a school in Parkland, Florida, where seventeen people were killed. Unfortunately, these events are beginning to seem routine... but never for those involved.¹

It happened that the night before, February 13th, at Georgian Court University in New Jersey, we had a guest speaker, Frank DeAngelis. He had been principal at Columbine High in 1999 when 13 people were killed, along with the deaths of the two assailants, who each shot themselves. DeAngelis unpeeled his experience slowly and meticulously, each layer making us aware of a network of consequences that go on and on, reverberating through every crevice of a community's consciousness for years. Violence, you might say, bleeds for a long time.

However, at Columbine and at Parkland, as we have seen at so many horrible events in the U.S. and around the world, something happens among the survivors just after a violent, deadly occurrence. Typically, it's a collective ritual, a kind of "mournful liturgy of the people."

Whether the violent event is intended, an accident, a twisted political or religious act, or something complicated by the perpetrator's personal troubles, people often converge at the site where a deadly loss has taken place. The space itself becomes a kind of "sacred place," a platform for spontaneous individual and collective expressions of

disbelief, loss, sorrow, fear, outrage, reflection, prayer, despair, and even hope. The site can become a kind of sacred place where people assemble, share emotions and memories, and become mutual support for each other, if only by each other's quiet presence.

Thus, the site where the initial violence took place becomes a location for a secondary event or gathering, that is, for collective ritual. If the site is inaccessible, destroyed, or cordoned off, people will then often gather at another site, some public space nearby, or a symbolically significant space.

Seeking to Dispel and Mitigate Pain

People in various degrees of shock and disbelief make their way to these places, that day, the next day... in hope that the actual senseless place and the people gathered there will be able to dispel or mitigate the overwhelming, paralyzing bad news. They seek a counter message to cancel the inescapable, nauseating truth about what has happened. They seek to remember a pre-reality to the horrible event, then some word of consolation and assurance among the gathered, while still unable to grasp the basic contours of

what has occurred. They know well that the details are yet to be unraveled, if ever, especially, the "why" and "Why my child, friend, neighbor, or person next to me?" These gatherings are spontaneous, and/or planned and brought together swiftly by the community and a network of communities, as what happened in Parkland for an evening vigil, which spurred simultaneous vigils around the state of Florida.

Gripped by shock, people begin to form a loose group, a body of grief, a circle of shared experience, remembering those killed, while still in shock. They talk with those present, family, friends, and strangers.

**Thus, the site
where the initial
violence took place
becomes a location
for a secondary
event or gathering,
that is, for
collective ritual.**

Repeatedly they say, "It cannot be true. How did it happen? How could it happen? Why, why? What kind of person would do such a thing? If only...."

Ritual as Response to Atrocities

Quickly, words fall out of us and stories begin to form in a rudimentary narrative, with many perspectives in various pitches and tones. Tears arise from a depth of pain when survivors confront the immediacy of abrupt death.

Silence ultimately pervades a crowd, a way of hearing the voice of the dead, the past, and the call of the future. Repeatedly, as we see in photographs and news from around the world, we see people lighting candles, bringing flowers, writing and leaving notes and letters with rough poetry to the deceased...sketching them out on tattered scraps of paper and cardboard. We lean upon the ancient, beautiful and simple forms of ritual gesture, as we grasp at the frightening mystery of it all, trying to make sense of "new-normals" again and, sorrowfully, again, early into this 21st century.

We are reluctant to surrender ourselves to the belief that the world is paradigmatically vicious. We would rather embrace a romantic version of how things were constant, especially during explosive and shattering events like school shootings. We see these outbreaks of violence as evil, staring us in the face with all of their horror. We are confronted with human and technological power gone off the rails.

Violent atrocities have included school shootings, terrorists' bombings, crashing planes, boat loads of refugees allowed to drown in the sea, abuse-of-power killings, gang killings, drug war killings, religious and political massacres, genocides, catastrophes attributed to negligence, nuclear disasters and explosions, species annihilation and gross environmental degradation. During the peak of such

events we do not always recognize our collective and historical finger prints amidst the rubble of forensic evidence and tensions leading to such breakdowns.

But even those who identify themselves as avengers should not claim they have permission or the moral right to inflict pain and chaos on others, especially innocents. Is revenge ever anyone's *right*? Can wrongs ever be set right by inflicting agony on even more people?

Yet, violent atrocities cannot be ignored or allowed to be pushed away by the quick clicking of time, the cycle of news reporting, or our craving for the next distracting report of an accident or human tragedy. Suffering is not entertainment, even though it grabs our attention. Violence always leaves consequences for future generations to heal or pay, usually with compound interest and more emotional complexity.

Effect of Ritual

Human-made violent events can leave us fearful, confused, and blindly vengeful. Yet, spontaneous, reflective, collective public responses to violence, those gatherings that we are now regularly becoming

accustomed to seeing, and even participating in, serve as islands for initial emotional expression and cathartic existential questioning. These gatherings allow breathing time for communities to begin to adjust to a new reality. These gatherings offer the community a place to start the process of taking in what has happened, and time for seasoned minds and hearts, to come forth as needed guides for the collective soul.

At these gatherings we see people asserting their own power to act and to claim non-violent responses to heinous acts of viciousness. These are encouraging signs for contemporary culture because, in general, the peaceful, reflective gatherings seem to support a belief and a hope that calm will triumph over violence, and that love is more powerful than

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hate. At least this is the high ground that many seem to want to take.

These gatherings are in-between times. Like some aspects of religious liturgical events, they provide a pause from normal time, a bit of unreal time, a kind of communal place to transition from life before the event, to life after that demarcation. The community has not yet organized itself into its divisions of labor or groups where they will officially mourn and bury their dead. The prayer services and funerals, religious and secular, are not yet fully in motion. Rather, these raw initial movements are saturated with dizzying emotions where we see people repeatedly choosing to come together in peaceful mutual support, mournful protest, even tearful outrage against ignorance, hate, and violent manifestations of the most limited understandings of “power.”

Violent Events and the Movement of Ritual

Surprisingly, we see patterns across cultures in terms of initial public reactions to these contemporary violent events. More so, we view these types of gatherings instantly across mass media, such as the Boston Marathon Bombings, and the terrorist attacks in Paris.

The simple responses and rituals enacted are rooted in our anthropology, such as our need to feel safe, to relate, and make sense of our experience. Often, as part of the ritual acts, we see people using similar, simple items that are associated with life and hope and mystery, such as fresh flowers, now available even in winter, as well as bright plastic imitation flowers, and small candles or L.E.D.’s. These are unpretentious items, standing as symbols that express meaning for people of different religious and spiritual traditions and beliefs, for those who are “spiritual” but not religious, for atheists, as well as

for those who claim to have no experience or interest in religion or spirituality of any flavor or level.

Unfortunately, there have been many horrifying events across the globe in recent years. Many of us may have personally participated in some form of a collective ritual for one or more of these events, as

well as witnessed these rituals through different media. Recall how people responded through ritual to the Oklahoma bombing. To 9/11 and the three crash sites-- New York, Shanksville, and the Pentagon. To the 2010 B.P. Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico. To the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook Elementary School. To terrorist attacks in Madrid, Paris, and Brussels. The list goes on.

There are different types of gatherings. For example, in response to the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean

Sea, 14,000 used refugee life jackets from Lesbos were wrapped around the columns of the Berlin concert house in Germany.²

This display came together very quickly in terms of an activist's response to the refugee crisis. It speaks to our human need to ritualize these events and to confront the moral challenges they have for us all as members of the human family. While these ritual events are usually not attached to any religious tradition there is an implied powerful “woe” to perpetrators or those complicit in these atrocities.

Spontaneous and Official Rituals

These secondary gatherings and rituals, are both different from and similar to well-honed formulaic liturgical rituals. The people come together, and they give shape to the ritual. Those present, move toward or around a shrine, a kind of altar of memory, mystery, and waiting. They use familiar, common items as symbols. Along with flowers and candles, and personal religious artifacts, you often see placed at the makeshift shrine such objects as broken cell

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phones, pieces of clothing or shoes, photos and other everyday items that tell a story about the deceased. These become the people's offerings.

Just as our ancient rituals developed over time, we see patterns developing in our own time in terms of how we ritualize experiences. In almost real time, media communicates these horrific events and then our responses to them very quickly. This "call" and "response" creates a collective pattern that we have witnessed repeatedly.

Educative Effect of Spontaneous Ritual

What do these spontaneous gatherings or memorials related to horrendous moments of violence have to teach us about our more methodical liturgical events? It is my belief that these raw human responses, amidst such pain, do have something to teach us in terms of authentic, meaningful Christian worship in a 21st century environment. The very fact that so many people across belief systems, and non-believers alike, participate in them says something of their human worth and power.

This "something" relates directly to the power of people and their agency to be acting persons who express their thoughts and emotions physically, freely and spontaneously with their community through extemporaneous ritual. People give voice to their grief and form to their confusion, if only by journeying to the site and standing with others.

Memory focuses on the lost ones, and while the community struggles for a narrative to help make sense of senselessness, there does seem to arise the desire to not let violence have the last word. While this is not always the case, many times it is, and when it does, it overflows with mystery and a kind of authenticity. This phenomenon requires more examination.

Maybe part of the powerfulness relates to how emotions are so exposed, with little buffer, yet often with a kind of reflection and pause, perhaps caused

by that existential punch in the gut of the soul. Coupled with this is the collective questioning of life and death and the universal questions of "What's it all about?" There is a heightened sense of awareness about the fragility of life, the inevitability of death and loss, and the impossibility of staying forever and always safe from all harm.

Adding to the collective dismay is the reality that there is no one clear storyline about why these things happen. There is no one clear foe, yet groups like the National Rifle Association and those who support a culture of guns are finally being called to accountability with greater voice. However, to focus on one cause would be a mistake. Instead might we

ask: What gives rise to a culture of violence? And, what gives rise to a culture of flourishing and peace for all?

Intentional violent events, and because of their ferocity and multiplicity, are confusing to a victimized community. But a narrative and its meaning must be wrested from the raging storm of emotion by communities seeking some semblance of truth. Truth is multi-faceted and involves

perspectives of many witnesses. Polyvalent "truth" is complicated by paradox, diversity of interpreters, and differing accounts of the facts. The meaning of every story is both heightened and confused by conflicting values and perspectives. In such cases, the narrative about what happened is a work in progress, but this progress requires more than opinions. It requires that our "facts" submit to the friction of investigation and analysis, and a bit of common sense. Soon, a narrative, however nascent, begins to take shape. It must, for a community to begin its slow walk beyond a tragic event with direction and purpose.

If no real questions are asked, if no sense of what happened is discovered, and no thoughtful response is put forward-- then similar events will continue and these violent events will become the norm. We will be reduced to people who simply expect the next outbreak of violence.

Yet, to focus on one cause would be a mistake. The question should be- What gives rise to a culture of violence?

These spontaneous, quickly assembled gatherings provide initial space for the emotional messiness, sorrow and disbelief to take place, along with space and time for foundational reflection where a community asks anew: “Why is this happening, who are we, what are we to be about now, and what is most important?”

Implicitly Religious Actions

Traditional religious leaders have an opportunity to observe in these spontaneous rituals how people today are reaching toward Mystery, engaging life and death poetically and sacramentally—even though they may not necessarily describe their actions as religious.

Even though the religious Christian narrative is not always explicit, those with religious eyes can discern the Paschal Mystery of life, death, and resurrected hope playing throughout these events where people gather, often subdued and silent, with hearts broken and distraught. While not a substitute for the rituals of the great religious traditions, such as Christian sacraments like Eucharist, these spontaneous processes are host to people where they are, which is increasingly not within the realm of Christian sacramental fellowship and organized ritual.

However, these spontaneous gatherings that are responses to violent situations can act as bridges to more traditional religious services. For some people, these initial responses can be stand-alone ritual experiences, leaving them with no chance for further dialogue, which may be all that some people desire. Even so, a stand-alone ritual can lack a connection with a coherent philosophical/theological framework in which to engage and wrestle with existential transcendental questions.

However, these gatherings may also offer traditional religions a challenge. That is, to an increasing proportion of the population, traditional religion can seem functionary, staged, and too

passive for attendees. By contrast, extemporaneous ritual is dynamic and participative, a creative experience of meaning-making in the moment. These extemporaneous rituals meet an emotional and spiritual need in contemporary culture. These rituals show how people are choosing to relate to each other. Such rituals are less fixed, authoritarian and doctrine-based than services in traditional religions. In a pluralistic culture, diverse perspectives and collaboration from beginning to end can often enhance the process of making meaning. Traditional religions will undoubtedly struggle with losing some “control.” The challenge will be to find a way to maintain what is truly essential, while inviting greater participation and ownership.

Conclusion

These types of initial gatherings after violent events are no substitute for ancient rituals of worship honed over the centuries. However, they can invite religious traditions to ask what we can learn from these gatherings regarding ritual, in general? 1. We need greater willingness to risk increased *spontaneity* in our religious rituals. 2. We need greater openness to collective *ownership* in forms of organizing and participating in ritual. 3. We need increased willingness to enter into *solidarity* with those who suffer, including resistance to oppression. 4. We need greater attention to the esoteric, *transformative dimensions of ritual* and practice. 5. We need to recognize that traditional forms of religion and our various theologies could become lost if we don’t renew our own liturgical and ritual life.

A common claim today is to say, “I’m spiritual, not religious.” If traditional religion cannot provide a meaningful and relevant path to people’s desire for “spirituality,” then that void will be filled by something else, either for good or for ill. The phenomenon of extemporaneous rituals after violent events might offer some insights for renewal of official ritual and liturgy in religious institutions. ♦

**We need
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rituals.**

Endnotes

¹See Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms, *New Power: How Power Works in Our Hyperconnected World-and How to Make It Work for You* (New York: Doubleday, 2018). This study compares “old power” and “new power” and how these models, along with values, create or stifle movements and collective actions in the world today. While the authors encourage a blend of both for long term effect, primary in “new power” are participation and a surrendering of some degree of control by top-down “old

power” to allow for the creativity of people to act. Using this text, I observed how groups are taking initiative in creating responses to horrible events. While the authors’ intention may not have been to examine religious ritual, I believe there is a great deal of carry over to be found in their text regarding religious ritual today.

²Anthony Faiola, “In Europe, the Refugee Crisis as Art: 14,000 Bright Orange Life Jackets,” *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2016. <http://wpo.st/1vZj1> (accessed June 25, 2016).

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 or by mail at College of St. Mary, 7000 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE, 68016.

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

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

Homily: God Answers Hannah

Pastor Julie Webb

22nd Sunday After Pentecost
October 15, 2016,
1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10

Listen to a story.

Once there was a woman who longed to have a child. Not to fill her emptiness, because her life was already full. She was a daughter, and an aunt; she had her own work to do; and she had found a mate who loved her. But she had more love to give, and her heart ached for a child of her own.

So, she prayed. With her friends and family, she behaved as she normally did; but after they went to bed at night, she stayed up and pleaded with God. “Please, God,” she said. “This is the only thing I want. Please hear me. Please give me just one child of my own to love.” As she prayed, she rocked her body and wept. And then she went to bed, exhausted by her yearning.

She waited, and she waited. She tried with all her might to trust that God would hear her heart’s desire and would grant her request. She waited upon the Lord.

And . . . she never had a child.

Or she had a miscarriage, or a stillbirth. You finish the story, because either you or someone you know has been through it. It’s a story that can end with a heart that’s broken.

And then what happens? Well, maybe the heartbroken people come to church, and, um, out we come with one of our barren-women-gets-a-child Bible stories, to rub a little salt in the wound!

So, let’s ask today: What are we supposed to learn from the Bible story of Hannah? What are we meant to learn about God, and what are we meant to learn about ourselves?

Let start with ourselves, because, hey—we’re pretty interesting.

**So, let’s ask today:
what are we
supposed to learn
from the Bible story
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and what are we
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about ourselves?**

To listen to other Christian preachers tell it, the story of Hannah is meant to teach us this: “Believe in God! Have great faith in God! If only you have enough faith, God will give you whatever you want.” And I have to say, it’s very tempting to preach that! Because, didn’t Jesus say something kind of like

that? And Hannah had a lot of faith, right? Oh!—and, she also promised to do something for God in return for the favor, by giving her son away to God. And then, God gave her what she asked for.

But beware, Lutherans! That is what we call the Prosperity Gospel. It’s very popular in the United States, especially, and it’s an empty pack of lies. It focuses the attention on us, and on our being perfect enough to extract what we want out of God—like manipulating your parent by being a good girl or boy. Everything depends upon your having the right amount of faith and the right kind of attitude. If you get those things right, then basically, you can control God. You can fulfill all your dreams and prosper. See how it’s all about you, really?

The Prosperity Gospel is something we all need to grow out of. Even Hannah herself doesn’t claim that she got a child because of her faith.

What does Hannah say? Well, she has quite a lot to say, really. Which is not nothin’, considering that, in all likelihood, her words come from and were written down by the men who compiled these Bible stories for us in ancient times. Those men put some pretty important words into the mouth of a woman of low status.

First, Hannah says to God, “Remember me.” She says, “*If only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant.*” A little like Moses in last week’s story—when he stood between God and the sinning people, pleading their case—Hannah now says, “Remember, God, who I am and who you are, and act accordingly.” In other words, Don’t forget about me; don’t forget that you love your people and that you love to be merciful. . . . Oh, and by the way, if you do that, I promise I’ll give you back the son you give me.” Maybe Hannah hasn’t quite learned that you don’t need to bribe God; or maybe, she would simply like to have the power to give something, for a change, instead of just waiting and receiving.

God remembers Hannah. In this story, we are meant to learn that God sees us. God remembers us and cares about our lives just as they are. In Hannah’s case, this means caring about a woman in a polygamous marriage whose only hope, because of the patriarchal society in which she lives, is to bear a son who will confer status upon her in the present and who will provide for her in her old age. It’s not that God swoops in and cleans up all that unjust mess; but God cares for her right where she is. Our God is a God of mercy, who cares for you and your life just as it is. You can pour your heart out to God without worrying about whether you’re saying the right thing. God hears. God cares.

Then, Hannah the theologian goes on to tell us more about ourselves and about God. Her song of praise that we read today was probably the inspiration for the Magnificat attributed to Mary in Luke’s gospel. It gives us Hannah’s interpretation of what happens in her story. And what is that? Does she say, “I got what I wanted because of all my faith?” No, she says, “This happened because our God is a God who lifts up the lowly, and humbles the proud. Our God *raises up the poor from the dust; [and] lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.*” She

says, “*the bows of the mighty are broken . . . for not by might does one prevail.*” Not by might does one prevail. Might doesn’t make right, and strength is not what it takes to win. Nor is good behavior, and nor is perfect faith. Good things happen because God is good, not because we are. Because God is God. And woe to you if you forgot that and thought you were on top of the heap, because you’re going to lose your place.

Entrust yourself to the Holy One, Hannah seems to teach us, and, even if bad things happen, God will lift you up from them. Entrusting and surrendering yourself to God are important. Ego isn’t helpful at all. Or, as Jesus might put it, “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” (Matthew 5:5)

Not by might does one prevail, not by will, not by luck or even skill. You may get what you want, such as a child, only to have your heart broken by that child later on. You may not get a child, but find some other cause to rejoice in God’s mercy. God alone sustains us.

**You can pour
your heart out to
God without
worrying about
whether you’re
saying the right
thing. God hears.
God cares.**

Please notice: It’s a woman who is teaching us this truth. Often, the people God uses to bring wisdom to the world are the very people the world wants to diminish. And I can’t help but notice a contrast between the message of Hannah and that of one of our political candidates and his supporters. That man believes that one does prevail by might, especially over women and people of color; he is proud and arrogant. He

grabs [what he wants] and says people let him do it because he’s a star. This is a man who thinks he is God. Woe to him, and woe to any of us who fall for his lies.

And he’s just the low-hanging fruit! I choose him because he’s easy, but similar critiques could be made about our other political candidates. I am not telling you how to vote. I am giving you an example of how scripture can and must be used to make a critique of our public figures. The sign of God’s power is the lifting-up of the despised, the lowly, the

outcast, and the poor. In today's scriptural story, the sign of God's power is the birth of a child whose life will shape the future of a nation. Because, you see, the people of God in Hannah's day have completed their wilderness wandering. They have settled into the Promised Land. They have enjoyed the guidance of a series of judges provided by God. But they are growing restless, wishing they could have a king like all the other nations around them. God wants to be their ruler, but the people aren't satisfied. They won't be ruled, and they want to dominate their neighbors. So, God is going to raise up Hannah's son, Samuel, as the last righteous judge, and is going to use him to anoint the nation's first king. About that king, God has said, "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

One of the benefits of reading scripture is that it gives us the long view, the great sweep of history, the arc of God's saving action through time. With Hannah, we are part of that story—but the focus is on God. How could it not be? At every turn in the story—even, and sometimes especially, the ones where we experience sadness or pain—we encounter God's mercy, love, patience, forgiveness, healing, and abundant grace. We see the impossible become possible. We see the lowly lifted up. We hear God's call to practice justice and compassion. Sisters and brothers, let us tell this story today, when people need to hear it more than ever before. Not by might does one prevail, but by the grace of God. ♦

Homily After Charlottesville, Virginia

Angela Rausch

"Jews will not replace us."

I was aghast when I heard those words. I seriously did a double take. Do people really believe this? As most of you know, I was born and raised in the South. I credit my upbringing for my hospitality. I was taught to be welcoming and friendly. What I did not notice is how segregated my upbringing was and how we glossed over those ugly sins of racism and discrimination.

I have been to Mass four times since the disgraceful events in Charlottesville, Virginia. At only one Mass was there a meager attempt during the prayers of the faithful to pray for peace and justice and our leaders. I have been searching for a voice, a Catholic voice to guide me. Several days ago, Bishop McGrath issued a statement with his last sentence, "I ask our Catholic community – and all people of good will – to join with me in prayer and work that is rooted in justice and peace." Good stuff and a call to action.

Today in the Gospel, Jesus denies the Canaanite woman's daughter healing. He goes on to imply that you are different and inferior...I have to serve my people first... and you will get the leftovers if there are any. As I contemplate this story, I assume the role of the mother. After eighteen years of this motherhood vocation, one grace that I am using more often is courage. I have immense courage when it comes to standing up for my children. So, I boldly say to Jesus, "Really, dude, wake up! We are all made in God's image. Now help a sister out."

Maybe Jesus was unsure of his mission. Maybe he was still learning, or maybe he was staying in his comfort zone. I am not sure. I do know that Jesus, when confronted, entered into a relationship with the Canaanite woman, opened his heart and mind and changed.

My hope and prayer is that we all can enter into relationships and be open to God's grace in our lives. ♦



Homily: The *Heart*

Rose Weidenbenner, R.S.M.

Feast of the Sacred Heart

June 23, 2017

Institute Chapter, Buffalo, NY

Readings: Deut. 7:6-11, Ps. 103, I Jn. 4:7-16, Matt. 11:25-30

We have reached the halfway point for this session of Chapter, and we pause to celebrate the feast of the Sacred *Heart* --an image of how God through Jesus loves us. Let's look at the image, not of the picture many of us have or remember having in our homes. Let's look at the image with some descriptive words.

If we could have a word-gram up here about *heart*, some of the words/phrases we might see and maybe have heard these past few days would be:

 speak from the *heart*
 heavy *hearted*
 heart attacks
 heart to *heart*
 whole*hearted*
 what touched your *heart*
 choices of the *heart*
 broken *heart*
 bleeding *heart*
 corazon adolorido
 heart's desire

 single-*hearted*
 the *heart* of the matter
 from the bottom of my *heart*
 it's bad for my *heart*
 discernment of the *heart*
 heart of stone/*heart* of flesh
 heartbeat
 unsettle my *heart*
 follow your *heart*
 big *heart*
 and many more.

From today's readings, the Hebrew scripture, we hear, "God set God's *heart* on you and chose you... because of God's love and fidelity to those who have gone before.

From John's first Letter, we hear, "God is love. When we remain in love we remain in God and God in us" In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "I am meek and humble of *heart*."

We are asking ourselves all kinds of questions this week. Of course, we are using our minds. And because we are good Sisters of Mercy we are also asking questions of the *heart*.

John Shea's commentary on this Feast describes the relationship of the mind and *heart* as an old wrangling couple.

Notice the contrasting concepts/voices of that wrangling couple which are in us individually and as community.¹

The Mind – respects limits, is cautiously realistic, circles with wagons, counts seeds, makes lists, ticks off accomplishments, cautions against over-expectations, wags its finger at what it sees as excess, always protects what it has, quantifies, reconfigures well.

The heart – ignores limits, flies with the geese, is qualitative, reimagines, is a smasher of walls, a breaker of boundaries, a pusher of envelopes, loves horizons, mountains and skies fills its dreams and is always seeking. And so, we realize, along with *The Little Prince*: "It is only with the *heart* that one can

see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

James Martin suggests we take Jesus Christ's physical *heart* as the representation of God's love for all of us, for all of humanity, for all creation. For the Sacred *Heart* is nothing less than an image of the way that Jesus loves us fully, sacrificially, lavishly, radically, completely.²

This feast invites us to meditate and discern on important questions in our Mercy life: What would it mean for you to recognize your sacred *heart* – for us to recognize our sacred *hearts*? Is that not what we are about these days? This feast gives us the courage

to speak from and love from our sacred *hearts*—to fully, sacrificially, lavishly, radically and completely love a suffering world. Happy Feast Day! ♦

Endnotes

¹ John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Feasts, Funerals and Weddings* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010): 218-225.

² James Martin. “Reviving the Sacred Heart.” *America Magazine*, (June 15, 2012).
www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/reviving-sacred-heart.

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A Time of Even More Intensity

Kathleen Erickson, R.S.M.

Homily During Assembly, Sunday Vigil

April 7, 2018

Readings: Acts 4:1-12 Gospel: Jn. 20:19-3

As we come to the close of an intense week, today's readings invite us to consider a time of even more intensity. Can we imagine the stunning sense of loss and disbelief among those who loved and believed in Jesus so much, and then saw him crucified? They had no idea what to expect or what was coming next. With broken hearts they faced the challenge of trying to understand the meaning of the Resurrection.

How much time do you suppose elapsed between the resurrection and the description of the community in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles? It tells us that the community of believers was of one heart and mind and held everything in common. It declares there was no needy person among them, that those who owned property sold it and no one claimed that any of their possessions were their own. How long did it take to get to that kind of community? It is truly an ideal, similar to the ideals we hold together and that we named in our "Call to New Consciousness."

Just two days ago we heard the challenge of Elizabeth Davis, R.S.M., to face this century with new foundations that include cosmology, globalization and inclusion, to name a few. We have elected women who will help us move into the future. But we know from experience that putting ideals into reality is hard work. Not everyone in the early church could have seen things the same way, or agreed on how what Jesus' words even meant, much less how to put them into action. It couldn't have been simple for them, as Acts goes on to tell of

members who tried to declare less than they owned in the way of possessions and were caught in their lie.

The aspects of this struggle for community that might have really worked, would perhaps be like the modern experience of a guy named Frank, a postal worker in El Paso whose prayer group wanted to put their concern for others into action. They decided to take a Thanksgiving meal to a *colonia* in Juarez, Mexico that was built on the site of the former city dump, a difficult and ugly place to raise children.

Frank's heart was so touched by the poverty he saw and the struggle of the people, that he got rid of all his belongings, sold his house and moved to that Juarez *colonia* to open a kitchen which served meals

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to the people. It grew and became a center with tutoring, babysitting and family support. An El Paso service club heard of it and decided they wanted to make a contribution. They invited Frank to come to a luncheon meeting at a fine El Paso hotel to tell them about his ministry and accept their donation. Frank said later that he looked at the food in that room on the top floor of the hotel and realized that it was more than the people he worked with had in a week. He then looked out the windows at the smoke

rising from the garbage dump area where he worked, and he was so uncomfortable that he became frantic and couldn't wait to get back as quickly as possible. He was thinking, "If something happened, like an earthquake or something, how would God know whose side I'm on?" Frank had touched the wounds of the people.

Of course, it isn't that simple for us, but perhaps we can learn from that story as we end a very productive and fulfilling time together. We have a lot to be proud of--our members, ministries, real concern for the world, and wonderful women who offer leadership at so many levels. We have felt and named our hopes, held intense discussions, experienced exhaustion. Our prayer together has been profound. We have a lot to process as we travel tomorrow back to reality.

That reality, as we know, is increasingly overwhelming. We see polarization, racism, violence, desperate immigrants, and over 60 million refugees being banned from entering other countries--all this at heart-breaking intensity in the news. We see our planet suffering. We are beginning to recognize that even the structures and systems that help us minister to those in need can, in some ways, also keep us privileged and safe and we can get caught in protecting that security. The truth is that we sometime have to make ourselves let in awareness of the suffering. It's too much. We don't know what to do. We certainly can't just sell everything like Frank or the early community of believers. We have responsibilities and stewardship and we recognize the complexity of today's world. We hesitate to open all our doors to those in need, but I believe we too face grief and shock at the growing urgency.

Maybe we can relate to Thomas in the Gospel who refused to believe that the nightmare was over,

that Jesus lived. He had to touch the wounds first.

What his head couldn't accept his broken heart could. It seems to me that our question in this troubled time is whether we can come to more clarity not about whose side we're on, but how we can make that as clear as possible to ourselves and to the wider world. It's not as clear as it was to Frank, but maybe noting Thomas' experience of touching the wounds, facing the suffering we will move forward. We really don't know what to do in this time of extremes. We can ask, "What do women religious have to offer? What is the extreme of Mercy?"

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As part of the beloved community, we may be just the ones to help clarify what oneness really means, pointing to the truth of Jesus' message of inclusion, love and the oneness of all. We can help to answer the question "Who is my neighbor?" The good news is that we face these challenges with our arms linked in community, which we have experienced this week.

I will close with a quote from Jean Stokan, on the Institute Justice Team:

Advocacy and activism are critical, but I'm ever more convinced that flooding the world with compassion is far more urgently needed. Nothing less than a continental shift of our nation's souls is needed at the deep level of values, and of human consciousness around our oneness. Whether it's through poetry, music or listening to stories, putting one's finger in the wounds of this world can break the heart, but therein lies our mission. ♦



Mass of the Holy Spirit

Mary Ruth Broz, R.S.M.

Homily for Mass of the Holy Spirit

April 5, 2018

Readings: Acts 3:11-26, Ro. 12:4-8, Matt. 3:13-17.

The Spirit is stirring, and the winds of change are blowing! This Mass of the Holy Spirit is not time to proceed with business as usual! Since we came through these doors for our opening ritual on Tuesday evening, April 3, and felt the energy of friendships being renewed and Mercy being alive and well, I think we have been aware that the Spirit is not finished with us yet!

Being here at this liturgy gives us a way to pause for a moment, to shift our minds and hearts, to let ourselves once again look around this room and be reminded of the unique gifts we all bring as Mercy continues to evolve. We collectively call upon that Spirit working within and around us to gather our wisdom and the care we have for each other as we prepare to elect the next Leadership Team for the West/Midwest Community.

I'd like to focus my comments today on the power of that spirit as well as the readings that have been chosen.

Our readings today cover the gamut...from those first days following the Resurrection back to how it all began in the River Jordan--coming out of the water to coming out of the tomb!

It is good to listen to these ancient texts together, to watch the Spirit at work in Peter and John who were looked upon as miracle workers when the crippled man who never walked before suddenly rose to his feet. These were ordinary men so grounded in courage, so quick to set the record straight as to who should be given the credit. They were so convinced that Jesus was not gone, and God was not distant.

They were so aware that there was more at work in them than others could see.

And then in the gospel--with only a few lines we are taken back to how it all began. It's a simple rite of passage that inaugurated Jesus into his public ministry. He is immersing himself into all that it means to be human. Then he is coming out of the water with the spirit descending into him and words of unconditional love setting him on a journey not all that different from our own: the intimacy of call, moments of struggle, pulls of temptation, the need for

discernment, passion for a mission the world was not yet ready to embrace! And yet, ready or not, divinity was unleashed. We are told the spirit blows where it will. We know not where it comes from or where it is going. What often looks like the end really isn't!

As I was preparing these reflections, I was reminded of a saying my mother must have repeated often enough that it left an impression on me---perhaps you have heard it as well. I doubt that she would have associated it with the Spirit at work, but looking back, I can't help but wonder! A simple example comes to mind...

When I was growing up, I would be coming home from school smelling freshly baked chocolate chip cookies as I opened the door. When I left in the morning--on a dreary Monday with laundry piled high--it just didn't seem like it was going to be the kind of day that would lead to chocolate chip cookies, so I would say to my mother, "I didn't know you were going to bake cookies today." And she

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would get a certain kind of smile on her face and say, “Oh, I guess I just got a second wind!”

Later, as an adult, when others noticed me tackling a project in the wee hours of the morning or working on a presentation late into the night, I found myself thinking, “Oh, I guess I just got a second wind!” As I was reflecting on the power of the Spirit, I couldn’t help but think that maybe catching a “second wind” is often how the spirit comes to us in life.

Maybe you caught a second wind as Elizabeth Davis, R.S.M., shared her vision with us yesterday or maybe you caught a “second wind” to work for our critical concern of non-violence as you saw all those young people “March for our Lives” a couple of weeks ago--so many young faces, so articulate, so committed, coming from all directions.

Maybe you caught a “second wind” as you recently sat at the funeral of one of our Sisters and got a glimpse first-hand of what a life well-lived really looks like, or attended a covenant ceremony welcoming new associates only to discover that a fire was unexpectedly getting rekindled inside of you.

Or as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s death this week, maybe you have found yourself catching a “second wind” for our critical concern around anti-racism. Maybe it happened as you read something and felt how unfinished his work really is...or maybe you heard his 9-year-old great grand-daughter imbued with the Spirit speaking against gun violence at the March for

our Lives and ending with inviting others to join with her in chanting the single word, “Enough!”

Maybe as you heard or stood with our Sisters who were willing to be arrested for immigration reform, the wind began to blow and somehow you knew that paying the price for what we believe in!

The list goes on. So many among us are writing, praying, marching, standing up, speaking out for women, for justice, for the earth, for the marginalized with a spirituality that is real and connects it all. So many are taking to heart in our own way those words from Timothy, “This is no cowardly spirit we have been given, but one that calls us to be strong, loving, and wise.”

And so, with confidence that we will be guided by that spirit these next few days and with the hope that we will “catch a second wind” and truly “Embrace Mercy Anew”--even in some small way these days.

I’d like to close with these few lines from “Song of a Man Who Has Come Through” by D.H. Lawrence:

...Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
By the fine, find wind that takes its course
Through the chaos of the world... ◆

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Discussion Questions

(Cancienne) *In such cases, the narrative about what happened is a work in progress, but this progress requires more than opinions. It requires that our “facts” submit to the friction of investigation and analysis, and a bit of common sense. Soon, a narrative, however nascent, begins to take shape. It must, for a community to begin its slow walk beyond a tragic event with direction and purpose.*

Do you have some examples of family or congregational traumas that you sense are still a “work in progress” --that need investigation, analysis and a narrative --if the people affected are to find direction and purpose?

(Doyle) Are you satisfied with the intercessory prayers, or Prayers of Petition, read during Sunday Eucharist at your local parish? What changes would you recommend to the liturgy committee?

(Kerrigan) To what “sacred places” have you made a pilgrimage? And what reasons inspired your pilgrimage—a personal memorial related to your family, a seasonal cycle, a religious occasion, your connection to an historical event, solidarity with a social group, a political urgency?

(King) From the accounts of three pilgrims who walked the *Camino de Santiago*, what have you learned you’d need to be ready for if you were to make the *Camino* yourself? What experiences and insight would you miss, do you imagine, if you didn’t undertake this pilgrimage? Have you had alternative pilgrimage experiences that inspired similar thoughts?

(Leser) *Prayer is very definitely not just a soliloquy. Prayer must be a colloquy, an in-depth communication with God.* If this is true of personal prayer, what about the long Catholic tradition of “recited prayers”—the Rosary, the Nicene Creed, the Act of Contrition, Litanies, devotional prayers? How are “recited” prayers part of your colloquy with God?

(Nicholls) As you read some of the “stations” of the pilgrimage to Baggot St., what are some aspects of Catherine McAuley’s story that you realize you could only experience by “being there”?

(Upton) Have you had “kairos” moments when clock-time stopped and you entered into “the timelessness of the eternal NOW”? Where and when did these “out of time” experiences happen? In nature? In a time of over-whelming emotion? In a religious setting? Do you recognize any of these “out of time” descriptions in scripture?

Contributors

Mary Ruth Broz, R.S.M. (West Midwest) holds an M.Div. from the Jesuit School of Theology in Chicago, and a D.Min. from St. Mary of the Lake University in Mundelein, Illinois. She has been a retreat facilitator and spiritual director, assisting people in uncovering the sacred in their ordinary lives. She presently does free-lance work out of Mercy Meeting Place in Chicago. She is the co-author of *Midwives of an Unnamed Future: A Spirituality for Women in Times of Change* (ACTA Publications), a book of rituals and reflections to support women's spiritual lives

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M., (Mid-Atlantic) is Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Theology and Philosophy at Georgian Court University, New Jersey. She holds a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, an M.A. in the same field from Marquette and an M.A. in Spirituality from Santa Clara University. Her background also includes an M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, CA, and an M.F.A. in Painting from Louisiana State Univ. in Baton Rouge. Her past ministries include spiritual direction and counseling. An artist, she writes icons with a 21st century sensitivity. She is an active member of the College Theology Society and Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. She serves on the editorial board of *The MAST Journal*.

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

Kathleen Erickson, R.S.M. (West Midwest) holds an M.A. in Religious Studies from Seattle Univ. in Washington, and an M.A. in Secondary School Administration from the University of Northern Colorado. Her ministry background includes high school teaching and administration. She was in elected leadership for the Omaha Province from 1982-1990. For 18 years, she's been present at the U.S-Mexico border, plus travel and Spanish study in Latin America. From 2008-2017 she was on the West-Midwest Justice Team. She is co-founder and former director of the Women's Intercultural Center in Anthony, New Mexico, a place for immigrant women. For over two years she provided spiritual counseling to undocumented women in Federal Detention in El

Paso, Texas. She is currently an advocate for immigrant rights at local and national levels and has participated in delegations to Honduras and El Salvador.

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M. (West Midwest) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Foundation, a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary, and an M.A. from Loyola University. She has been a professor of social science and religious studies as well as an administrator in college and university settings. She has been an adjunct professor at St. Xavier University and System Director of Mission and Spirituality for Provena Health and Provena Senior Services. She is currently Assistant Administrator at Mercy Convent in Chicago, involved in the construction of the retirement center for Sisters of Mercy. She serves as a personal contact person for West Midwest community members, is a frequent contributor to *The MAST Journal*, and is also on the Editorial Board.

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

Chorbishop William J. Leser is Judicial Vicar of the Maronite Eparchy of St. Jude. He received his M.Div. from St. John's Seminary in Los Angeles and was ordained in the Roman Rite by Cardinal James McIntyre in 1963. He holds an S.T.B. as well as a J.D. For several decades, he served as associate pastor and pastor in parishes throughout the Los Angeles Archdiocese, notably St. Jude Parish. He was named Monsignor in 1982. Appointed by Pope John Paul II to serve the Maronite Catholic community, he was ordained Chorbishop in the Maronite Rite in 1985. In his dual-rite, multi-lingual ministry, he administers the Maronite tribunal and does penal cases for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Now retired, he continues to serve both Roman rite and Maronite rite parishes. He resides in Northridge, California.

Anna Nicholls, R.S.M. (Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand) is the Leader for Heritage and Spirituality at Mercy International Association in Dublin, Ireland. Anna's work at Mercy International includes the coordination of the various programs and development of resources, as well as the oversight of the Heritage Collection. She holds a Bachelor of Science (physics), and Graduate Diplomas in both Teaching and Theology from the University of Auckland. She completed an M.A. in Educational Leadership from Australian Catholic University. Prior to moving to Dublin in 2017, Anna was involved in educational

leadership, as well as teaching physics, science, religious studies and technology in high schools throughout New Zealand and Samoa.

Angela Rausch holds a Pharmacy degree from Virginia Commonwealth University and is pursuing her M.A. in Pastoral Ministries from Santa Clara University in California. She was born and raised in Virginia. She has been married for 23 years and has three children in their mid and late teens. For 14 years, she's been a parishioner at Church of the Resurrection in Sunnyvale, in the Diocese of San Jose, California. She's led a Scripture study group for over five years. She started Social Action Ministry with a neighbor to raise awareness about poverty in her community. A clinic opened by a local hospital to serve anyone needing healthcare, regardless of their status or ability to pay, eventually closed. This challenged her to examine lack of proper systems to help those on the margins of society.

Julia Upton, R.S.M., (Mid-Atlantic) is Provost Emerita and Distinguished Professor of Theology at St. John's University in New York where she has taught since 1979. She holds a Ph.D. in Theology from Fordham University and is Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at St. John's University, New York. Her most recent book, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: The Life and Legacy of H. A. Reinhold*, was published by Liturgical Press in 2009. She is now working on a biography of liturgical artist and social activist Adé Bethune. She is the Subscription Manager and Treasurer for *The Mast Journal*.

The Rev. Julie Webb is an ordained Pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A lifelong West-Coaster, she received her M.A. (Humanities) from Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, and her M.Div. from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, part of the consortium of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1994, serving first as a jail and hospital chaplain, then as children's ministry director for St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Burlingame. For the past 12 years, she has served as Associate Pastor of Napa Valley Lutheran Church. She has been a Mercy Associate for five years and will renew her covenant this year.

Rose Weidenbenner, R.S.M. (South-Central) holds a B.S. in Social Work from Southeast Missouri State University, an M.A. in Social Work from St. Louis University, and an M.A. in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University in New Orleans. She has certificates in spiritual direction and from the Religious Formation Conference. Currently she ministers with ARISE – A Resource in Serving Equality, in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas (arisesotex.org). In the past, she did social services administration for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and more than fourteen years of affordable housing development in Silver Spring, Maryland and New Orleans, Louisiana. She's been involved in new membership ministry, (Detroit) and served in community leadership (St. Louis).



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