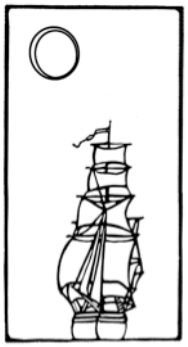

# The MAST Journal

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## Forgiveness



Sisters of Mercy Hermanas de la Misericordia

Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

At the time this issue was planned, the editorial board thought of "forgiveness" as a perennial spiritual and theological topic. I imagined forgiveness as a person-to-person issue and assumed that writers would speak from this perspective. But now I am asking whether the act of forgiveness extends beyond the offenses of single individuals against me. Does my forgiving extend to abuses done to groups of oppressed people by their governments, to periods in history, to the Church, to "patriarchy" --to forces that I never had a voice in, and can't control?

One of our writers, Fran Repka, R.S.M, a therapist, tells the story in "Forgiven: A Story from South Africa," about a mother and father's long process of extending forgiveness to the tribal murderers of their white daughter, a humanitarian worker for justice and peace in South Africa. Their forgiveness became intertwined with empathy for those victimized by decades of racism, political disenfranchisement, and economic subordination under apartheid. The parents' forgiveness of the murderers involved their growing consciousness of another continent's culture, and a particular expression of racism in South Africa, with its state-sponsored violation of human rights.

Judith Schubert, R.S.M. opens the issue with her article, "Does the Hebrew Bible Feature a God of Forgiveness?" She turns to several passages in the Hebrew Scripture to demonstrate that God's self-revelation is one of mercy and forgiveness. The cliché of "wrath versus love," supposedly distinguishing Old Testament from New Testament, is simply not accurate. God is portrayed as loving and merciful in the narrative of Exodus 34, the petitions of Psalm 32 and the short story of a prophet dis-inclined to forgive even repentant Ninevites, in the Book of Jonah.

Chorbishop William Leser has meditated for years on the Our Father and shared these reflections in his sermons and retreat conferences. The first part was printed in the previous issue of *The MAST Journal*. Here, we print the second half of that meditation, including the 5th Petition, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," which he maintains is the most difficult of the petitions to realize. One notable feature is his inclusion of citations of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Cassian, and Cyprian from patristic literature--not often cited by contemporary theologians.

Jane Russell, O.S.F, offers "Forgiveness of Sin: The Church's Mission." She teaches systematic theology at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina and starts from her own students' questions—and misunderstandings—about the sacrament of penance, or reconciliation. Where in scripture does the Catholic church ground its theology and practice, and what does the sacrament offer to those who confess their sins to a priest? It's a good review for school instructors and parish religious educators.

Marie Micheletto, R.S.M. has a collection of wise counsels in "Remember Me as Loving You." A practicing therapist, she responds compassionately to clients who wonder how to resolve their anger at being treated badly. At least a reader can imagine these counsels as her conversation with clients as she tries to relieve their pain. What's good about forgiveness? What if the person who hurt me is dead? How do I forgive someone I can't talk to? How can I find strength and help from God? How can I pray when I don't know how to get beyond my anger and hurt?

Pastor Julie Webb, a Mercy Associate, offers one of her sermons, "Forgiven at Jesus' Feet," about the sinful woman who appears at a dinner Simon is hosting for Jesus. His feet anointed by her tears, Jesus defends her. "She has loved much." Luke 7:36-50 is a dramatic re-telling (and re-ordering) of the "anointing woman" story that appears at the end of Jesus' ministry in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and

John. Luke re-positions the story early in the gospel to show that forgiveness pervades the ministry of Jesus.

We include an archival study by Janice Edwards, R.S.M. on "Catherine McAuley, Clare Moore and Our Community of Friends." Clare Moore who compiled the 500+page Bermondsey Annals, died in 1874. She originally came as governess to Baggot St. to attend to Catherine's niece. She assisted Catherine in composing and arranging the Rule. The foundress saw her administrative gifts and appointed her superior at Cork. Edwards expands on the idea of "friends" to characterize the original spirit of those who gathered around Catherine McAuley.

Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., first President of the Institute, and President of LCWR in 1993, reviews a recent book published by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, *However Long the Night*. It's an anthology of articles on the challenges of going through the Vatican's doctrinal Investigation of LCWR, from its launch in 2009 to its conclusion in 2012. The fact is that the follow-up of dialogue with bishops about procedural "reform" extended well beyond 2012.

In recent months, the sexual abuse crisis has raised the urgency of reforming clerical culture. We need to identify the ways that culture perpetuates an ideology and authority structure--where abuse of children becomes an inevitable consequence. The irony is that the more closely bound emotionally we are to particular persons, the more likely we will feel wronged by them; the more precious our faith tradition, the more likely our hurt by the Church. Jesus himself was betrayed by one of his chosen disciples and suffered death-dealing opposition at the hands of his own faith community. Thus, we are not surprised that family-inflicted hurts cut the deepest emotional wounds, and ecclesial abuses afflict faithful Catholics at a level that political disappointments do not reach.

Forgiveness can provide some measure of personal healing and strengthening-- even if reconciliation is not possible, and even if systemic injustices remain stonily impenetrable. The articles in this issue are offered with the hope that readers will find resources for healing, hope, prayer and perseverance.

Yours,

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

# Does the Hebrew Bible Feature a God of Forgiveness?

*Judith Schubert, R.S.M.*

Many readers of the Hebrew Bible do not necessarily equate the concept of forgiveness with their idea of God. For instance, adult Catholics can reflect on the concept of forgiveness in the Bible based on instruction from many years before. However, they often revert to what they learned as children either in parochial school or weekly religious education classes. Generally, they don't make a correlation between the concept of God in the **"**Old**"** Testament and divine actions of forgiveness. From previous learning, they imagine that the term, "forgiveness" belongs mainly in the narratives of the New Testament. Such a perception lies far from the truth.

Before delving into a few biblical examples of forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible, let us ponder the question, "How can the concept of forgiveness be described?" The act of forgiveness entails a decision, not necessarily a feeling. The resolution to forgive comes from the person who has been hurt. The affronted victim chooses to "let go" of the wrongdoing and resentment toward the guilty person. The offended person pardons the guilty party, perhaps even without the knowledge of the transgressor. Sometimes the term "reconciliation" is used as a synonym for "forgiveness." However, reconciliation and forgiveness have different characteristics. Reconciliation includes two parties, one who pardons and the other who seeks it, while forgiveness can be one-sided. In effect, forgiveness embodies deep love in practice. It does not require reconciliation.

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**Overview of Forgiveness in Scripture**

The Hebrew Bible contains many examples of forgiveness which appear in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Frequently the concept of forgiveness restores a covenant between two parties. Usually God does the absolving. In such instances the Deity demonstrates that the loving gesture of forgiveness functions as a common attribute of the Divine. This description of the Deity as a forgiving God appears many times (e.g., Num. 14:19-21; Mic. 7:18-20; Amos 7:2-3). Most often, the Deity displays clemency toward a nation, a community or an individual. The receivers may or may not have asked for forgiveness. Yet, this loving Deity continues to exonerate the people.

At other times in the Hebrew Bible requests for forgiveness appear in a petition to God by an individual person or by the community. Humans often pray for pardon for some inadequate decision, response or action for which they have been liable and now regret. Their prayer does not necessarily contain any explicit reason for such a request, but they rely on the forgiving nature of God, which seems to be enough in itself to pray for pardon. Is this based on in human to human encounters, in which people either seek clemency from one another, or one party decides to give it to the offender?

With all the various scenarios in mind, let us take a glance at three of the numerous biblical texts that include the concept of forgiveness by a loving God. To do this, I have chosen one example from each section of the Hebrew Bible, namely: from the Torah, Exodus 34: 6-7; from the Prophets, the Book of Jonah; from the Writings, Psalm 32. While abundant examples of forgiveness emerge in the Hebrew Bible, these

chosen texts will offer a glimpse into the God of Mercy and Forgiveness as described in these selections.

**Exodus 34:6-7**

One extraordinary example of God's paramount commitment to the covenant appears towards the end of the book of Exodus. Exodus 34 has been placed within a liturgical setting where God is presented speaking to Moses in a theophany on the mountain of Sinai (Horeb) and giving him two tablets of stone as a sign of the covenant that the LORD will be the God of the people. Yet, the people prove unfaithful by breaking their pledge of loyalty in the incident of their worship of the golden calf. Subsequently, Moses smashes the tablets of the commandments in anger. However, God instructs him to return to the mountain for a replacement. This surprising command demonstrates clearly the divine intent to forgive the people despite their grave betrayal of the LORD.

The capacity of God to absolve and reveal mercy cannot be measured.

In an act of complete divine clemency, the LORD offers a self-description of divine forgiveness to Moses and the unfaithful people. In these eloquent words, God proclaims: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . . (Exod. 34:6-7/ Num. 14:18)." The intent of this self-description cannot be missed.

Primarily, this generous act of divine forgiveness suggests four considerations. First, this powerful response expresses the importance of a lasting covenant with these particular people whom the LORD has chosen. Remember, God's ways are not our ways. Second, the response acknowledges the position of Moses as the Deity's chosen leader. Throughout the entire Book of Exodus, Moses represents God's definite choice as a savior figure. Third, the decree expresses the infinite ability of divine love and forgiveness regardless of the gravity of the error. Fourth, the proclamation of divine characteristics in the words, "Merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod. 34:6-7) serves as confessional formula throughout the Hebrew Bible and inspires many other biblical authors to employ this quote in full or in part in their writings.[1] The frequency of prayerful repetition reflects a deep belief and long tradition in the forgiveness and mercy of God.

Clearly, this powerful example from the experience of Mount Sinai, demonstrates that God chose and established these people as a divinely precious community, even after they deserted their agreement. The Deity initiates the act of forgiveness because these people have been selected by Moses' LORD to become the chosen ones. Here God's complete act of forgiveness both cleanses and purifies the transgressions of the people. Now, they can begin over in a new life with the LORD because their God abounds in mercy. Undoubtedly, forgiveness and mercy go hand in hand. This excerpt exemplifies the act of forgiveness in its highest expression.

The second example of forgiveness occurs in the book of Jonah, who has been called by God to preach a divine message to the inhabitants of Nineveh, but Jonah initially refuses.

**Book of Jonah**

The short fictional book of the prophet Jonah encompasses only four chapters. Yet, within its pages important lessons on forgiveness appear. Many find the story "a whale of a tale," and so it may be, although the text doesn't identify the species of "large fish" that swallowed Jonah. There is a valuable lesson both for the prophet, Jonah, and for us.

The opening verse, "The word of the LORD came to Jonah" presents Jonah as a prophet even without classifying him as such. The phrase exemplifies a divine call to earlier prophets (Jer. 1:4, 11; Ezek. 18:1) and is now used for Jonah. Immediately after this identification as prophet, God gives Jonah an assignment: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Unlike other prophetic predecessors, such as Moses and Jeremiah, who complained about their mission, Jonah has no verbal retort. Instead, he acts out his response. He attempts to flee from God and the assignment because he views the inhabitants of Nineveh as enemies. His actions, rather than any argument, indicates that he has no intention of delivering the divine warning to them.

Throughout these brief four chapters, God is the one in charge of creation and the one who truly cares about all people, even the enemy of Israel, the Ninevites. From the outset, the Deity displays power as well as compassion toward all creatures, even the inhabitants of Nineveh. The narrative presents God as causing a great storm, ordering a large fish to swallow Jonah and a few days later, cough him up safely on land. In Jonah 4, a plant grows up to give Jonah shade from the heat. The rising of a powerful east wind reminds the reader that the Deity rules over all creation. Along with great power, the Divine exhibits continual forgiveness.

From the outset, the Deity displays power as well as compassion toward all creatures, even the inhabitants of Nineveh.

Irene Nowell points out various types of exaggeration in the book's vocabulary, such as Nineveh being a "great city." Later, God sends a "great wind," which produces a "great storm." On the boat, the sailors "are seized with great fear." The Hebrew term, *gadol* (great) appears fourteen times in only forty-eight verses of text. Moreover, while Jonah "goes down" to Joppa (Jaffa), "goes down" to the hold of the ship, the LORD encourages him twice to "get up" and go to Nineveh.[2] As Jonah's life seems to spiral "down," the Deity attempts to lift him up.

In Chapter 3 Jonah finally proclaims the divine message to the city of Nineveh. Unexpectedly, the citizens of the city repent. When the king hears the summons, he atones along with all the inhabitants. Despite this positive response, the prophet becomes quite distraught over the change of heart by these enemies of the chosen people. Jonah is successful, but he gets angry and resentful over the divine commission he received. In the final chapter of the book (Chapter 4), his animosity culminates in complaints against God for being too merciful. Even though his adversaries have just repented, Jonah's attitude "goes down" in anger. He begrudges any divine compassion and forgiveness towards Nineveh. He wants God to punish them, not spare them.

In his prayer, Jonah confronts the LORD: "For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2).

The reader recognizes that these four phrases echo the self-description of the Deity in Exodus 34:6-7. As has been mentioned previously, this portrayal of God appears several other places in the Hebrew Bible as a foundational acknowledgement of the LORD's instinct and behavior.

The exegete Phyllis Trible makes the following points about Jonah's prominent confession formula. The opening phrase, "For I knew that. . ." points to the prophet's important disclosure. The description of the four divine attributes focus on a Deity of love and forgiveness. For example, the description of "gracious" and "merciful" (from the noun, *rehem*, which derives from noun, "womb," *raham*)

signifies abounding maternal compassion. As a loving mother cares for her child, so God nurtures all earthly creatures.

In Hebrew, the depiction "slow to anger" means "long of nostrils," which serves as a term for "friendliness and graciousness." This phrase contrasts with "the burning of the nostrils" (Jonah 3:9), a phrase used by the king of Nineveh in the previous chapter to describe the potential stern anger of the LORD.

Again, in Jonah 4:2, the third phrase that defines the Deity, "abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*, means mercy)," describes an abounding kindness and wholeheartedness towards the other.[3] This mercy embodies a deep, enduring love. The final phrase, "ready to relent (*niham*) from punishing" indicates divine patience and forgiveness of the offense as well as the offenders. To relent means to abandon the idea. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God represents the One whose mind changes much more frequently than humans do.[4]

While Jonah still burns with anger and asks that his life be taken from him, the LORD attempts to dialogue with the prophet and challenges him to rethink his unforgiving attitude. The Deity has no success. The generous act of divine forgiveness toward an enemy, the people of Nineveh, proved to be too much for Jonah to accept. The question of this commanding book remains for the reader today, namely: "Who does God call us to forgive?"

Therefore, any persistent resistance to the God who guides, will keep people from true happiness and peace in their lives.

The third chosen passage that demonstrates forgiveness appears in Psalm 32, a brief prayer that embodies the joy of having been forgiven by the LORD. Psalm 32 appears at Vespers in *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy* on Wednesday of Week 1 during ordinary time.

**Psalm 32**

Psalm 32 contains more than one theme like many other prayers in the Book of Psalms. Nonetheless, the primary significance of this psalm expresses joy from forgiveness of transgressions by the Divine. The wisdom-like poem opens with a set of beatitudes that begin with the phrase, "Happy are those . . ." The reasons for such gladness comes from the realization that in one case, the "transgression is forgiven (*nasa*)," and in the second instance, "the Lord imputes no iniquity." In both scenarios the happiness of these individuals who experience forgiveness sets an example for others to follow. When wrongdoing occurs, the person needs to repent so that divine forgiveness can be shown.

In verses 3-5 the psalmist acknowledges that life proved difficult for the petitioner, prior to seeking repentance from transgression. Such graphic phrases as "my body wasted away," or "my groaning all day long," describes deep discomfort in one's personal life as well as dissatisfaction with one's choices. However, once the transgressor admits that he/she "did not hide my inequity," and made the freeing decision to "confess my transgression to the LORD" (v. 5), a gracious God offers complete forgiveness to a guilty one as the psalmist announces: "You forgave the guilt of my sin."

Verses 6-7 offer additional remarks from the psalmist after the recognition of divine forgiveness. These acknowledgements support the notion that the Divine cares and protects those who are faithful. One example of divine strength appears in the exclamation, "At the time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them." The mention of "flood waters" acts as a metaphor for danger or turmoil in life. Here the psalmist assures the people that they have divine protection to survive

such moments. Additionally, phrases like "You are a hiding place . . . You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with glad cries of deliverance," illustrate the Deity's strength and continuous commitment to the chosen people and to the one who asks for forgiveness.

God responds to the repentant in verse 8 with the assurance that "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go." The Deity refuses to abandon the one who seeks forgiveness. At the same time in verse 9, the people receive a warning against a stubborn attitude with the cautionary advice: "Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle . . ." Why? The answer lies simply in the realization that continued self-deceit leads to self-destruction. Therefore, any persistent resistance to the God who guides, will keep people from true happiness and peace in their lives.

The final stanza (vv. 10-11) opens with the warning that "many are the torments of the wicked." In contrast, those who "trust in the LORD" will be filled with "steadfast love/mercy (*hesed*)." God's mercy creates a protective atmosphere surrounding the repentant faithful with limitless forgiveness. Such divine love never fails. Subsequently, the psalmist concludes with great affirmation to all the "upright in heart." He encourages them to "be glad . . . rejoice. . . and shout for joy." As Dianne Bergant suggests, this threefold directive encourages the people that their prayers have been heard and will be answered.[5]

**Conclusion**

After considering these three biblical examples, we can ask ourselves, "What, then, does the Hebrew Bible teach us about forgiveness?"
In these three texts, the main points about forgiveness are illustrated by the attitude and actions of the Divine. We learn that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses appears as the same loving and forgiving God of our lives today. The reality that our God, does not "give up" on anyone now or ever, arises as one of the most encouraging points of all. The LORD remains ready to repair any relationship that has been severed and restore the covenant that has been broken.

A correlation between true happiness and forgiveness of any kind cannot be measured. It represents "gift" in our lives. Moreover, it brings peace to our hearts and a deep sense of gratitude. Such forgiveness, which demonstrates mercy in action, represents profound freedom for anyone who has received it. Ultimately, divine forgiveness restores the relationship and transforms our lives so that we learn to forgive others. Finally, with these thoughts in mind, one question remains, "Who does God call us to forgive?"◆

**Endnotes**

[1] In addition to Exod. 34:6-7, this foundational formula appears in whole or in part in Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:31; Joel 2:13; Pss 86:5; 103:8; 145:8; Wis. 11:23; 15:1; Sir. 2:11, 18.
[2] Irene Nowell, "Jonah" in Daniel Durkin, ed., *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015): 949.
[3] Phyllis Trible, "Jonah," in Leander Keck, ed., *NIB Commentary*, Vol. VII ( Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996 ): 518.
[4] Nowell, 951.
[5] Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., "The Book of Psalms," in Daniel Durkin, ed., *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* ( Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015): 523.

# Meditation on the Lord's Prayer, Part ll

*Chorbishop William J. Leser*

**Editor's Note:** The first part of this Meditation was published in the previous issue of *The MAST Journal* Vol. 25, No. 1 (2018) on Pilgrimage, Prayer and Popular Spirituality, pp. 27-37.

**3rd Petition: Your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

As Origen wrote:

> We, who are praying are still on earth ourselves. And since we reckon that all the inhabitants of heaven fulfill the will of God in heaven, it comes naturally to us to ask that we too on earth should succeed in fulfilling the divine will. That will come about, logically, if we do nothing outside that will.
>
> When we have perfectly accomplished it, although we are still remaining on earth we shall be like the heavenly beings and will bear equally with them the image of the heavenly Being Himself (cf. I Cor. 15:49). In the end we shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. Those who come to take our place on earth will ask that they too may become like us who are then in heaven. In addition, it is recorded that our Lord after His resurrection said to the eleven Apostles: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18).[1]
>
> Jesus claimed in short to have received authority on earth equal to that which He has in heaven. The things of heaven, at the beginning, have been illuminated by the Word. And at the end of time, thanks to the authority granted to the Son of God, the things of earth will be like those in heaven which is already perfect. So then it is clear that Christ is calling His disciples to work faithfully with Him by means of their prayers. That all earthly events may come to be transformed by the authority that Christ has received both in heaven and on earth, this ought to be our prayer. [2]

So then it is clear that Christ is calling His disciples to work faithfully with Him by means of their prayers.

In this petition, we are asking our Father to so intimately unite us with His Beloved Son's Ministry, that we spend, and that we are spent, diligently working in the Vineyard of the Lord fulfilling God's plan of salvation for the life of our world.[3]

**4th Petition: Give us today our daily bread.**

As regards this petition, we must observe carefully that "give us today our daily bread" is simply a poor attempt to translate the Greek word "epiousios," which is a word that definitely does not translate "daily" in the general sense. Rather, it translates more precisely "bread for the coming day, the day after this one." So, what are we to pray for? We are solely to pray for bread for this evening (when it grows dark) and for tomorrow. Some scholars think that Jesus had in mind Exodus 16:4 regarding the command about the manna, as that command stated the Jews could only gather enough manna and quail for the coming day's ration, what would be needed for the coming day. In that understanding, this fourth petition then corresponds to Jesus' injunction: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's troubles are enough for today (Matt. 6:34].

Further, when Jesus sends His disciples forth on mission He tells us then: "Do not take gold or silver or copper or your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or a walking stick." (Matt. 10:5 / Mark 6:8-9; Luke 9:3 and 10:4-6). It appears that Jesus wants His disciples not to be bothered by unnecessary items and

concerns. His disciples must have a freedom, associated with a deep trust for help from others, to always be available for the work of ministry.

As Jesus tells His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

> Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds in the sky, they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they? Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your lifespan? Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will He not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? So, do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink? or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil" (Matt. 6:28-34).

What else could He do in the face of our generosity when we ask Him to forgive us as we have forgiven our neighbor?

As St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

> Bread represents life, and bread is easy to get. Moreover, nature herself gives something to put on it to make it more tasty. The best thing to eat with bread is the peace of a good conscience. Then, the bread is eaten with gusto, because it is being eaten in holiness of life. But, if you want to experience the taste of bread otherwise than in symbolic description, in the physical sense in fact, you have to hunger to eat it with. Therefore, first of all, don't eat too much, you would lose your appetite for a long time. And then, by dinner be preceded to sweat. "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread," is the first commandment mentioned in the Scriptures. (Gen 3:19).
>
> The Lord's Prayer spoke of "daily" bread. In saying that, let us remember that the life in which we ought to be interested is "daily" life. We can, each of us, only call the present time our own. Why should we worry ourselves by thinking about the future? Our Lord tells us to pray for today, and so He prevents us from tormenting ourselves about tomorrow. It is as if He were to say to us: "He who gives you this day will also give you what you need for this day. He it is who makes the sun to rise. He it is who scatters the darkness of night and reveals to you the rays of the sun." [4]

With this petition, we suddenly turn from bowing before God that He may be constantly and continuously praised, honored, adored and thanked, to seeking God's help for ourselves. So, in the first place, we ask God for His constant help so that we can always have the basic necessities of life: a roof over our heads, sufficient nourishment and clothing to sustain us, basic human rights and peace, health of mind and body, and friends to help and support us as we do the same for others. But, ultimately, we also are seeking the super-essential qualities for our intimate selves: our souls. Of course, the most essential quality to help us achieve this comes through our intimate union "in" and "with" and "through" Christ Jesus in the Most Precious Gift of His Paschal Mystery, especially in His Body and Blood. [5]

**5th Petition: And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.**

As St. Cassian wrote:

> The mercy of God is beyond description. While He is offering us a model prayer by His teaching us a way of life whereby we can be

pleasing in His sight. But, that is not all! In this same prayer He gives us an easy method for attracting an indulgent and merciful judgment on our lives. He gives us the possibility of ourselves mitigating the sentence hanging over us and of compelling Him to pardon us. What else could He do in the face of our generosity when we ask Him to forgive us as we have forgiven our neighbor? If we are faithful in this prayer, each of us will ask forgiveness for our own failings after we have forgiven the sins of those who have sinned against us. 1 mean those who have sinned against us, not only those who have sinned against our Master. There is, in fact, in some of us a very bad habit. We treat our sins against God, however, appalling, with gentle indulgence; but when by contrast it is a matter of sins against us, albeit very tiny ones, we exact reparation with ruthless severity.

Anyone who has forgiven from the bottom of the heart the brother or sister who has done him wrong will only obtain from this prayer his own condemnation, rather than any mercy. It will be his own action that draws a much more severe judgment on himself, seeing that in effect by these words we are asking God to behave as we have behaved ourselves.[6]

This second petition for ourselves is a major stumbling block for many of us. If this petition just contained the first part, there would be no problem for most people. But, it is that second part, that condition: "as we forgive our debtors." That's the big sticking point! Is it ever! By our humbly asking God our Father to grant His compassionate, healing pardon and mercy to us, we are honestly acknowledging to Him that we are sinners! Maybe we are not really scandalous sinners, but is not even the smallest infraction against God's will and goodness something that should never ever happen? Surely not!

St. Paul writes:

"Refrain from every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). At the very same time that we proclaim our sinfulness, we also proclaim God's infinite, unconditional, merciful, compassionate healing, which our Father shares with us through His Son and through the Sacraments.

As St. Paul further notes:

He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1: 13-14).

However, we must never ever forget, our petition for forgiveness will only be answered if we for our part have forgiven "first! "[7] For, as we read in St. Matthew immediately adjoined to Jesus teaching us the Our Father: If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions. (Matt.6:14-15)

Healing compassionate mercy can penetrate our hearts only if we ourselves learn how to forgive — yes! even our worst enemies.

So how is our being forgiven ever possible? How can we forgive? Healing compassionate mercy can penetrate our hearts only if we ourselves learn how to forgive — yes! even our worst enemies. Now even if it seems impossible for us to accomplish this condition of our forgiving others who have offended us, this requirement still remains, and it must be fulfilled. Our heart must, therefore, offer itself to the Holy Spirit so that the Holy Spirit can fill us with the grace and the power to forgive, as Jesus forgave us on the cross: "Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do'" (Lk. 23:24).

Only with the power of the Holy Spirit can we love fully and completely, even to love's extreme depth! With the power of the Holy Spirit enkindled within us, even the worst injury with its resulting deep anger can be turned into real

compassionate healing. With that power from the Holy Spirit, even the hardest of hearts can be transformed.[8]

St. John Chrysostom wrote:

> We cannot call God our Father in all sincerity if we harbor in ourselves a hardened heart. If this is the case, we do not live in the spirit of goodness of our celestial Father.
>
> Further, love must be the basis of our whole relationship with Our Lord and God. In fact, as the Book of Leviticus tells us: You shall not hate any of your kindred in your heart. Reprove your neighbor openly so that you do not incur sin because of that person. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself! I am the Lord! (Lev. 19:17-18).

Or, as St. John wrote:

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love, does not know God, for God is love . . .. If God so loved us, we also must love one another . . .. If anyone says: "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a lair; for whoever hates his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:7,8, 20).

If God reacted to how we think, would we really get what we truly deserve? In fact, what would you and I really get?

We must finally call to mind that God's unconditional love is shared with you and I by His gift of grace. The word "grace" means "gift." Jesus Himself tried to help us understand through the parable of the day laborers in the vineyard who were sought out and hired throughout the day. Then, at the end of the day, these workers are paid first those who were hired last. Since they were paid for a full day's labor, those hired earlier felt that the vineyard owner would pay them more than they had agreed upon at the beginning of the day. But, how surprised all were when they were paid:

> When the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them got the usual wage. On receiving it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying: "These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat." He said to one of them in reply, "My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if 1 wish to give this one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last (Matt. 20:10-16).

This parable by Jesus is a teaching, not about minimum wage or equal pay, rather, about the gift of God's unconditional love in grace. Does not the word grace mean "gift?" Remembering that Jesus told us that each one of us must love all others as He loves every one of us, must we not, therefore, be as generous and as forgiving as is Jesus Himself ? We must! How well am I accomplishing that, at least for me, gives an awful lot to ponder. I find this the hardest petition in this prayer that Jesus gave to us.

I read recently that Philip Yancey wrote in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* This passage refers to this question of grace as the "atrocious mathematics of the Gospel." He says that as this parable reverses the often-asked question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The parable instead asks, "Why do good things happen to bad people?"

In trying to understand this parable, we need to ask what category of laborer does each one of us identify with, and why? Most of us probably position ourselves towards the early end of the spectrum. We too most likely would grumble about the apparent unfairness of the wages paid. That is, most likely, until and unless we

acknowledge the truth of Romans: "All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God" (Ro. 3:23).

If God reacted to how we think, would we really get what we truly deserve? In fact, what would you and I really get?

**6th Petition: And do not subject us to the final test.**

As St. John Cassian wrote:

> The request: "Lead us not into temptation" raises a difficult problem. If we pray God not to allow us to be tempted, what opportunity shall we have to give Him proof of our steadfastness and fidelity? For it is written: Blessed is the man who perseveres in temptation, for whom he has been proved he will receive the crown of life that He promised them (Jas. 1:12).
>
> Then what is the meaning of this phrase? It does not mean, do not allow us to come into temptation. Rather, when we come into temptation, let us not be defeated by it. Job was tempted but he did not give way to the temptation. In fact, he did not accuse divine Wisdom. He did not go down the road of blasphemy to which the Tempter wanted to attract him. Abraham was tempted, and Joseph was tempted. But neither one nor the other yielded to the temptation, because neither one of them said 'yes' to the Tempter. So, praying the Lord's Prayer is like saying: "Together with the temptation, give us also the strength to overcome it" (1 Cor. 10:13).
>
> We can reflect that no trial has come to you, but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength, but with the trial He will also provide you with a way out, so that you can bear it.
>
> In this petition, we are asking the Father to help us never to sin. It is a natural follow-up to the 5th petition. We are begging the Father to share with us the graces we need so as not to take any path that leads to sin. Implicitly, this 6th petition also begs for a real spirit of discernment, and for tremendous strength to avoid falling into sin. We are asking for grace of vigilance and final perseverance. [9] We ask our Lord God to not ever allow us to be led unto temptation, for we truly lack the power to resist the Tempter. And we add, that He save us and deliver us from every evil and its powers, snares, ambushes, and all its accomplices, agents, appearances, and Consequences. [10]

You see, brothers and sisters how amazing the Lord's Prayer is. It is truly a compendium of all the requests we could possibly make.

**7th Petition: But deliver us from the evil one.**

As St. Cyprian of Carthage wrote:

> The Lord's Prayer has an ending which neatly summarizes the different requests. We say actually at the end; "But deliver us from evil," understanding by such an expression everything that the Enemy can devise against us in this world. One certain conviction we have; that God is a powerful support since He grants His help to anyone who asks for it. Consequently, when we say: "Deliver us from evil" there is nothing else left for us to ask. Invoking the protection of God against evil means asking for everything we need. This prayer secures us against any kind of machination of the devil and of the world. Who could be afraid of the world if he has God as his protector? You see, brothers and sisters how amazing the Lord's Prayer is. It is truly a compendium of all the requests we could possibly make. Our Lord Jesus Christ who came for all people, for the wise as for the ignorant, without distinction of sex or age, reduces the precepts of salvation to the essential minimum. He wants even the simplest to be able to understand and remember them. [11]

In the seventh petition, we are crying out to our heavenly Father to help us have victory over the "ruler of this world" — victory over Satan — the fallen angel and his cohorts who are personally opposed to God and His plan of salvation. We pray that the human family be freed from Satan

and from his works. We also ask for the precious gift of peace and the grace of perseverance as we wait for the coming of Christ who will free us definitely from the Evil One.[12]

**Conclusion: For yours is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory Forever. Amen**

This Hebrew expression, "Amen," means "so be it" or "I believe." It expresses very strongly our total concurrence and approval of all that we have just said concerning those seven petitions in this prayer from the depths of our very being. [13]

For to you belongs the Kingdom, Power, and Glory in heaven and on earth, O Hope of the Church and Savior of her Children, now and forever."[14]

Or, as St. Thomas Aquinas put it, "The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers.... In it we ask, not only for all things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired."[15]

St. John Cassian wrote so eloquently:

> The "Our Father" is a short formula, a model prayer. It does not contain requests for riches, or any suggestion of honors sought. There are no demands for authority or power. There is no mention of the health of the body nor of temporal life. The Architect of eternity does not want us to ask for anything fleeting, and it would be an insult to His generosity to neglect the riches of eternal life and ask for something transitory instead. Such baseness of mind would earn the wrath rather than the favor of the Judge. The "Our Father" prayer contains all the fullness of perfection, inasmuch as the Lord Himself has given it to us, both as a model and also as a precept.
>
> Those who are familiar with this prayer are raised by it to a very lofty condition, namely, that "prayer of fire" which very few knew by direct experience and which it is impossible to describe. The "prayer of fire" transcends all human feeling. There are no longer sounds of the voice nor movement of the tongue nor articulated words. The soul is completely imbued with divine light. Human language, always inadequate, is no use any more. But in the soul, it is a spring bubbling over, and prayer gushing out from it leaps up to God. The soul expresses in a single instant many things which could only be described or remembered with difficulty when it has returned to its normal condition. Our Lord has traced an outline of this mystical state in this formula, the "Our Father," that contains various supplications, and also in the hours He spent alone on the mountainside, and in the silent prayer of His agony in the moment when He even sweated His Blood through the unique intensity of His unity with the Father.[16]

The "Our Father" prayer contains all the fullness of perfection, inasmuch as the Lord Himself has given it to us, both as a model and also as a precept.

This unique prayer as we have seen was recommended to us by God Himself. It is a short prayer hat does not needlessly multiply words. Nor does it try to bargain with God, namely, promising to do something if God does something that we ask of Him. True prayer is never a negotiation that if God does something, I will do something. Authentic prayer is rather fundamentally about our relationship with God. To say it differently, real Christian prayer is about the reciprocal presence of God in our daily lives. Namely, the one praying should not be presumed to be preoccupied with petition. What friend would only ask for things? And, if that person did, how long would that person be considered a friend? Besides, doesn't God know what we need, before we even say it? But saying our need serves as a reminder of our dependence on God and on each other.

The "Our Father" has been called the perfect prayer because it contains all the elements that should mark our prayer: a close-knit interpersonal relationship and partnership of life and love, community, reverential awe, respect for the

unfolding Kingdom of God in mankind's history, obedience, dependence, contrition, and the wholehearted recognition of the power of the Evil One and the evil he and his cohorts place in our daily path of life but is ever subordinate to the Almighty Power of God. Is that not what Jesus showed us by His temptations which happened after His baptism by John the Baptist?

And, of course, this wonderful prayer was intended by its composer to be prayer in community as the Living Body of Christ in our world, but it also was intended by each individual disciple. In addition, this wonderful prayer has the possibility of each of us taking just one petition at a time to humbly meditate upon and pray well, as so well packed is each and every petition. Finally, we must acknowledge that when we pray from the depth of our being the Lord's Prayer, properly acknowledging God's beautiful omnipotence and asking God to make Himself felt in our hearts, and minds, and souls, and when we engage in the silent prayer of our heart and soul, with listening, reflective hearts, that we can truly experience the bottomless, endless eternal Lord that is God Himself. And through this selfless experience, we are given a way to forgive and love others and be the person Jesus has called each of to be: which is another Christ. ◆

**Endnotes**

[1] All Scripture quotations arc taken from the *New American Bible* Revised Edition issued by the American Catholic Bishops in 2011.
[2] Origen, *On Prayer*, 26, (GP 11, 5000).
[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* par. 2860.
[4] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Lord's Prayer*, 4 (PG 44,1173).
[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 286.
[6] St. Cassian, Conferences, 9, 22 (SC 54,59 ff)
[7] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 594.
[8] Ibid, par. 595.
[9] Ibid., par. 2863.
[10] Maronite Anaphora of Peter III, Sharar.
[11] St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord's Prayer*, (PL 4,538).
[12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pars. 2864 and 5971.
[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2763.
[14] Maronite Anaphora of St. Peter (Sharar).
[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 2763.
[16] St. Cassian, *Conferences*, 9, 24ff. (SC 54.61ff).

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# Forgiveness of Sin: The Church's Mission

*Jane Russell, O.S.F.*

In my Introduction to Theology classes over the years—one of the two required theology courses for every student at Belmont Abbey College—I invite students at several points in the semester to write down their questions on the topic we are about to address. "What would you like to know about God or creation?" "What have you always wondered about Jesus and salvation?" "What are your questions about Church or sacraments, that you've never had a chance to ask?"

A perennial favorite in the sacramental realm is, "Why do Catholics have to confess their sins to a priest and not directly to God?" The question is posed mainly by Protestant students, coming out of their Reformation heritage, but Catholic students often raise the same challenge. It arises naturally from our human reluctance to expose our shabby selfishness to the scrutiny of another (and who has not felt this reluctance?). In my students, it also signals an underlying skepticism about the Church's possible role in that long journey of discovery we call the spiritual life. No teaching can fully dissolve the first problem, though the testimony of grateful penitents can allay it somewhat. I try to address the second problem with the resources of Scripture and the theological tradition.

I first hasten to clarify that Catholics are of course encouraged to turn to God in repentance as soon as they recognize—or are willing to admit—that they have sinned. We have all kinds of models in the Psalms of penitents addressing God directly, and we hear of the Prodigal Son turning his footsteps toward home. Still, the Church does encourage and sometimes requires its members to bring all serious sins to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If I ask other students how they would answer questions about the practice, usually at least one knows the proof text from scripture we Catholics learned concerning confession: The risen Christ bestowed the Holy Spirit upon his gathered disciples and assured them, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:23). The well-versed student may also lay out the traditional argument that the possibility of retaining sins implies that the Lord's minister (in sacramental confession, the priest) needs to hear the sins and their circumstances so he will know whether to forgive or retain the sins, in the name of Jesus and his Church.

Most importantly, how can we understand sin and forgiveness in a way that makes sense of the Church's involvement in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation from sin?

For all the scriptural correctness of this reply, a satisfying answer must go deeper. How do we know that Jesus himself really had the power to forgive sins, or that he could pass on such power to his disciples? Which disciples received this power—was it only the Twelve (rarely named as a group in John), or was it disciples in the wider sense of all Jesus' followers? Most importantly, how can we understand sin and forgiveness in a way that makes sense of the Church's involvement in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation from sin?

**Sin and Forgiveness in the New Testament**

Scripture gives us a number of clues beyond that well-known Johannine text. When we reflect on Jesus' ministry, we realize how central a role was played by forgiveness of sins and the

reconciliation of known sinners. One of Jesus' earliest miracles in Mark (2:1-12) occurred when four friends let down a paralyzed man on a mat through a hole in the roof, to get Jesus' attention in a crowded room. Jesus looked at the man, and the first thing he said was, to everyone's surprise, "Son, your sins are forgiven." To quiet the scribes' grumble that only God had the power to forgive sins, Jesus went ahead and cured the man physically as a sign that all might "know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" (Mk. 2:10). Jesus showed us on this occasion that spiritual and physical well-being are connected, and that he has power/ authority to heal both.

In other stories Jesus does not overtly pronounce forgiveness of sinners so much as show it in action. He invites Levi the tax collector to follow him—though he represents a class of presumed sinners collaborating with the Romans, economically gouging their own people--and attends Levi's farewell dinner with the other "tax collectors and sinners" (Mk. 2:13-17). He invites himself to the house of the much-despised chief tax collector Zacchaeus in Jericho, incites Zacchaeus' promise to repay fourfold any extortions, and declares, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk. 19:1-10). A woman caught "in the very act of adultery" is not condemned, but Jesus invites her to "go and sin no more" (Jn. 8:1-11).

Of course, Christians believe that Christ's fullest victory over sin came through his death "for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3) and his resurrection into the glory of God. St. Paul sees this double event as God "reconciling us to himself through Christ," and giving to Christ's apostles "the ministry of reconciliation," the message about forgiveness of trespasses which will reconcile us to God, if we respond to God's appeal through his "ambassadors" (2 Cor. 5:18-21). As Paul says to the Romans, Christ "died to sin once and for all" so that in resurrection "he lives for God"; and he brings us through baptism into a comparable state of "[being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:10-11). In Luke the risen Christ interprets the whole Old Testament as predicting "that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:46-47).

Galatians 6:1 instructs that "even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted."

Students readily accept Jesus' authority to forgive sins through faith in him; what they have more trouble understanding is the Church's involvement in the process, beyond the initial proclamation of the message. But this too is widely affirmed in the New Testament. Jesus gives the power of binding and loosing both to Peter and to "the disciples" or "the church" in Matthew (in 16:19 and 18:15-18 respectively.) The meaning in the latter text is clearly that of excommunicating a stubborn sinner ("binding"), with the possibility of later readmission ("loosing"). St. Paul calls for just such an excommunication in a case of scandalous behavior in 1 Cor. 5:1-13. In 2 Cor. 2:5-8 Paul urges, on the other hand, forgiveness of someone who "has caused pain" to Paul and to the community, but who, in Paul's judgment, has now been sufficiently "punished by the majority" of the community.

1 John 5:16 urges prayer for a brother or sister seen sinning. Galatians 6:1 instructs that "even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle

spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted." Perhaps the second-most-famous text on church members' assistance in seeking forgiveness for each other comes from James 5:13-16. The passage encourages prayer and anointing for a sick member, concluding with a call to "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful" (5:16).

Overall, then, it is the clear message of the New Testament that (a) Jesus had "the authority on earth to forgive sins," and that (b) he passed this authority on to his Church in some form. In the early centuries, the prime means for the forgiveness of sins was evangelization and baptism (e.g., Acts 2:38). Serious post-baptismal sin was dealt with (as we saw in Matthew and 1 Corinthians) by means of excommunications by local church leaders with the possibility of re-admission after penance, for the most serious sins.

Human beings are embodied spirits who normally learn things and express themselves through the senses and bodily experiences.

**Forgiveness of Post-Baptismal Sin**

By the late second or early third century, this system had developed a standard format in the "Order of Penitents" ("OoP," as one student rather playfully abbreviated it). As Fr. Lawrence Mick summarizes, the OoP could only be gone through once in a lifetime after baptism. [1] A penitent would confess to a bishop, usually in private. Then he or she would carry out the penances, often long and severe, "intended to foster the deep conversion of heart and behavior." [2] When the penitents had completed their time of penance and were deemed sufficiently converted, they were reconciled in a public rite and "welcomed back into the order of the faithful." [3]

This form of penance worked for those who had committed and repented of grave sins like apostasy, adultery, or murder; but because of its rigor and its unrepeatability, it began to be put off and used less and less often. Fr. Mick reports that "by about the sixth century it was obvious to many that this form of penance was not adequate to deal with the need for forgiveness of many of the faithful." [4]

About this time a new form of repeatable private penance arose in Irish monasteries, and gradually made its way across Europe, despite the initial resistance of many bishops. As Monika Hellwig summarizes the development that led to the modern understanding of the sacrament, "the public reconciliation of spectacular sinners and the private repentance of all Christians in their continuing struggle with habits…of sin came to be fused into a single pattern of sacramental celebration." The Church came to see that it could not really "divide Christians into sinners and saints…, for all are in some measure sinners and all in some measure scandalous."[5] Most people can recognize the truth of this principle from their own lives.

**Support for Sacramental Confession and Reconciliation**

Of course, these Scriptural roots and broad historical strokes do not fully convince everyone of the value of sacramental confession and reconciliation. We need to add some theological reflections and end with appeals to experience.

The strongest support for sacramental reconciliation, in my opinion, is the general sacramental principle. Human beings are embodied spirits who normally learn things and express themselves through the senses and bodily experiences. Jewish rituals grew out of this basic human embodiment. Jesus reflected Jewish tradition and rituals in his own actions and legacy to his followers. Thus, respecting our human nature itself, the sacramental principle says we

most often contact God through created things and people, with Christ and his Church bringing a special clarity and focus to our relationship with God.

As delegates of the Church, first the bishop and later the parish priest have become God's tangible representative, assuring us of divine mercy in words we can hear spoken out loud. (Despite the way some of my students phrase it, the Church does not call the priest "a mediator between you and God." That is the role of Jesus Christ. The priest assumes the role simply of a local representative of Christ and his Church, who has in most cases polished his own pastoral wisdom in dealing with sinners for years)

If the Church is properly considered "the Body of Christ," (1 Cor. 12:12-27, Rom. 12:1-8) it is by that very fact the locus of our salvation and also affected by our sin. I relate to Christ ordinarily through his Body, the Church, founded to be the redeemed people of God. On the negative side, my sins hurt and detract from the Holy Body of Christ; they dilute and corrupt its witness to the way of Christ. Therefore, the Church has a stake in my rehabilitation and reconciliation from habits of sin.

From these considerations, it should not be surprising that Christ, who had "authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mk. 2:10), passed on to his Church a corresponding authority over the sins of its converts and members, as Scripture bears witness.

**Effects of Receiving the Sacrament**

As I indicated at the beginning, most people's skepticism regarding the sacrament of Penance is not at root intellectual but stems from embarrassment about confessing their sins and failures to another. However, against the students' alternative, the claim that they otherwise confess "directly to God," Monika Hellwig wryly and rightly observes that "individual and specific confession of sins to a priest-confessor" is necessary to keep us honest and humble. "Few people are…as perseveringly exigent with themselves as true Christian conversion requires unless they are explicitly and specifically accountable to another person." [6] As the first step in conversion, "the acknowledgment of sin….tends to be rather ethereal and vague when it does not culminate in an oral confession specific enough to be understood by another human person." A priest-confessor can give us more insightful feedback into our actions and attitudes than we would ever give ourselves, or "hear" from God through prayer alone.

As the first step in conversion, "the acknowledgment of sin….tends to be rather ethereal and vague when it does not culminate in an oral confession specific enough to be understood by another human person."

In the end, explaining the need for such a sacrament ultimately moves from Scripture and theology into the questioner's own experience of life. Anyone who asks, "Why do Catholics have to confess their sins to a priest?" has probably never been haunted by a serious sense of guilt or felt the need to make a major change in life direction.

I have seen people in at least two kinds of circumstances experience Reconciliation as not a burden but a wonderful gift. The first situation is that of the nominal Catholic who is "awakened" from years of routine religious practice or non-practice into a burning personal conviction, perhaps through a Cursillo, a retreat like "Christ Renews His Parish," or the "Antioch Weekends" we held at the Iowa State University Catholic Student Center in the 1980s. The Saturday night Penance service of the "Antioch Weekend" saw a chapel full of thoughtful, weeping students holding heart-to-heart converse with the assembled confessors,

emerging to a joyous celebration worthy of the Prodigal Father himself.

The other circumstance affects a person who is living under a crippling burden of guilt, for whatever reason. These people may realize they have run from God or have suddenly recognized how callously they have hurt someone else or have even become aware of a cumulative "drip" of petty selfish acts to serve their ease and convenience at the expense of others. These people who have been given some revelatory awareness of their own real guilt will find it a great mercy to be set free from this burden of shame by confessing it aloud to someone who professionally embodies the compassion of Christ. To confess one's sins aloud, in however halting a discourse, to receive counsel with a token penance, and to hear the words of absolution uttered over one's head is all pure grace to one truly conscious of her sin.

"God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."[7] The bottom line is "pardon and peace," a new start. Who would not welcome that? ◆

**Endnotes**

[1] Lawrence E. Mick, *Understanding the Sacraments Today*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006): 58-59.
[2] Ibid., p. 58.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Monika Hellwig, *Understanding Catholicism*, rev. ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2002): 154.
[6] Ibid., pp. 156-57.
[7] Pope John Paul. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1449 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000).

# Remember Me As Loving You—Some Counsels On Forgiveness

*Marie Micheletto, R.S.M.*

We recall the words of the hymn by Gregory Norbert, O.S.B., "All I ask of you is forever to remember me as loving you." [1] We are loved from our inception. God loves us first, last and always, without exception. Our task in life is to be the best human being we can be at any moment in our life-span. We can understand ourselves as human beings, enfleshed spirits, who have been gifted with forgiveness by God, by others, and in gratitude we pass it on.

**How Can I Find Inspiration to Forgive?**

I am a psychotherapist. What I have discovered about myself and about my clients (they taught me this) is that it is more difficult to forgive oneself than it is to forgive God, or to forgive others. God forgives us and says to us, "All I ask of you is that you remember me as loving you."

I remember what Paul D'Arcy said, "God comes to us disguised in our everyday life." And indeed, it happens. I was in the grocery store. There was a young woman and young son, about three years old. He had done something out of line and his mom was giving him the word. I heard him say, "I'm sorry!" And then I heard it. She said to him, "We'll, you don't look it! You don't sound it! You don't feel sorry at all!" He had these big tears streaming down his face. And I mused, How sorry do I need to feel before I can forgive myself? How sorry do I need to be before I know that God forgives me?

If we look at the etymology of the word "forgiveness," we find that it means "to go beyond giving." In Latin, "dare" means "to give." To pardon (Latin "perdonare") thus means to give pardon, to give forgiveness. Forgiving is a strengthened, empowered form of giving. Some days I am hardly sorry at all. Other days I am heartily sorry. I have an ache that calls me to forgive myself, God, the other person. Why? Because I remember, "All I ask of you is to remember me as loving you." Love conquers all. And so I pray, "Compassionate God, some days I am hardly sorry! I have spoken truthfully to you. Give me the desire to desire to forgive, to heal, to be healed. Heal me! Heal and bless that other person. I try to say a daily blessing for myself and I offer this silent daily blessing for that other person.

We can understand ourselves as human beings, enfleshed spirits, who have been gifted with forgiveness by God, by others, and in gratitude we pass it on.

**What Are Some Scripture Reflections to Help Me?**

- If you feel you need more encouragement, pray over Luke 6:20-27. The Sermon on the Plains tells us that God is compassionate and loving in all situations to all of us. "Blessed are the poor…those who are hungry...those who weep…when people hate you and exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man." This is who God is and how God acts—the one who is present, who sees and consoles. The people listed in these beatitudes have been treated badly, have been hurt and have every reason to feel angry and resentful. But they are called "blessed" partly because they have so many people who need their compassion, and so many reasons to extend God's forgiveness.

- Move on to a similar message in Matthew 5:3-5, the Sermon on the Mount. This asks us to remember those who are poor, who mourn, who are meek, who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, who are merciful, who are pure of heart and peacemakers. These are called blessed. Why? Because no matter what, God walks with them. The "blessed are you" means, "Cheers, you are the lucky one, the blessed person, because God is always with you no matter what your suffering, what the effort you make, even when it seems useless. One of the greatest challenges in life is to forgive those who have wronged us, people who don't recognize our good intentions, who take advantage of us, who exploit us. So much in my life can present me with the need to extend divine forgiveness to others.
- If I feel some compassion for those who wronged me, I can repeat the words of Joseph, who recognized his brothers decades after they sold him into slavery. Years later, when he was able to help them survive famine, he could reassure them: "I am Joseph, your brother whom you sold into Egypt! And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45: 4-6).
- Sometimes shame moves in and keeps us from forgiving. If I feel shame, it is time that "God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." (Heb. 11:16). All God asks of us is that we remember God as loving us.

**Is There a Difference between Forgiveness and Reconciliation?**

Enright and Reed make an important distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. "Forgiveness is one person's moral response to another's injustice." Forgiveness does not require that the offender respond, or even know that the wounded person has extended forgiveness. On the other hand, "reconciliation is about two parties coming together in mutual respect and renewed trust." This would seem to indicate that both have individually gone through the forgiveness process. It is reassuring that forgiveness can be extended, even when reconciliation is not forthcoming, or is not possible. [2]

Doris Donnelly, in *Learning to Forgive*, writes of forgiveness as "an event of power that can reverse history. It breaks the cycle of moving from hurt to hurt, from one retaliation gesture to another." She speaks of forgiveness as a surprise because it is atypical behavior. It is not instinctive. It's hard work. Forgiveness is a decision that is not passive. "It is a power-filled, creative act" because in forgiving, one is perceiving the situation in a new way, with a long and loving look. One is giving oneself and the other the gift of loving freedom. [3]

To forgive is to remember, to notice the gift, to see the situation in a new light. It is to remember that nothing is wasted, everything counts, and it all makes a difference.

We forgive for freedom's sake. As long as we do not forgive, we are not free. We are held hostage by our emotions. We carry the offense around inside of us. It becomes the focus of our attention. We stay angry, hurt, shamed, and full of grief. To forgive is to remember, to notice the gift, to see the situation in a new light. It is to remember that nothing is wasted, everything counts, and it all makes a difference. [4]

Forgiveness is not about who is worthy and who is not worthy. Forgiveness is the gift of God

for the people of God. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. Take a long, loving look. Choose!

Henri Nouwen wrote "forgiveness is only real for the compassionate person who has discovered the weakness of his friends and the sins of his enemy in his own heart and is willing to call every human being his brother [and sister]."

**How Can I Pray?**

Compassionate God give me the desire to desire to forgive 70 x's 70 times 70 times. Give me the desire to forgive even when forgiveness is undeserved.

- when it is for my own peace of mind, heart, soul.
- when it is a choice and not a felt desire
- when I remember that I have been forgiven.
- when I really don't want to forgive.
- when I forgive those who do not forgive me.

Dear God, if it's all the same to you, I would like not to be part of this difficult situation. On the other hand, I know that your forgiveness has gifted me with greater compassion for myself and for that other person. It has opened my heart to receive your blessing. Thank you. ◆

**Endnotes**

[1.] Weston Priory, 1972, 1994, The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont.
[2.] International Forgiveness Institute , *The World of Forgiveness*, Volume 1, No.1. See Robert Enright and Gayle Reed, "Definition of Forgiving" and "A Process Model of Forgiving" at http://www.forgiveness-institute.org.
[3.] Doris Donnelly, *Learning to Forgive* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986).
[4.] *Harvard Women's Health Watch,* "Five Reasons to Forgive," Vol. 12, No. 5 (January 2005).

**Additional Sources**

Joan Chittister. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

Laura Davis. *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road from Estrangement to Reconciliation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

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# Sermon: Forgiven at Jesus' Feet (Luke 7:36-50)

*Pastor Julie Webb*

Hi. My name is Julie, and I'm a sinner.

I have hurt people I care about and people I have failed to care about. I have kicked a puppy. That sounds like a metaphor, but it isn't! I have polluted my planet home. I have failed to stand up for what is right. I know what it feels like to become conscious of my sin and to have it exposed, especially when I've just hurt someone. It feels lousy. It sucks the energy and joy right out of me. It makes me question the face I show to the world every day—and feel insecure about all the faces that look back at me. It makes me feel the awful kind of humble. But then, it also sometimes makes me feel resentful, defensive, and angry—because who enjoys feeling the bad kind of humble?

And what would it take to move you from that turned-in-on-yourself, miserable state to this woman's state of overflowing generosity and love?

Knowing how it feels to be a sinner, I look at the unnamed woman in today's scripture reading. She "was a sinner" too. Luke comes right out and says it. And Simon the Pharisee knew it, so I imagine everybody knew it. (The long-standing tradition for the men who interpret this passage is then to assume that her sin was sexual, because she was a woman. However, the text doesn't specify.) Everybody knew she was a sinner. I look at that, and I try to imagine what it would take for me to be moved from those awful, exposed- sinner-feelings to the feelings that made this woman to do what she did for Jesus.

Look at what she did and imagine yourself doing it. Having learned that Jesus was a guest at this dinner party to which she wasn't invited, she took a lovely alabaster jar of ointment with her and gently crashed the party. As Jesus (presumably) reclined at table, "she stood behind him at his feet, weeping," letting her tears fall on his dirty feet. This was dusty sandal country, remember. Then she used her long hair to smear the tears around on his feet and to dry them off. She kissed and kissed his feet and rubbed them gently with ointment to heal their dryness and cracks. And she did this in front of a roomful of people who thought very little of her. Can you imagine yourself ever doing something like this, I mean, if you had long hair?

What on earth would it take for you to want to do something like that? What would you have to feel? Grateful? Humble in a good way? Welcomed by Jesus? Loved by someone? Healed? Something would have to change you from awful-feeling-sinner to thankful-joyful- sinner. And what would it take to move you from that turned-in-on-yourself, miserable state to this woman's state of overflowing generosity and love? What does Jesus say it would take? Forgiveness.

And not just a little forgiveness. You'd have to be conscious, Jesus suggests, that you had lost a very great deal to sin, and yet had received forgiveness. You'd have to be like a person who, just a short time ago, owed someone 500 days' wages, a debt that could not be repaid—and then learned that debt had been forgiven.

By its definition, forgiveness is something we don't deserve. It's when we owe someone (or something, like the earth) a debt we cannot pay. We have wronged them. We have trespassed against them. And we are not asking them to pretend it didn't happen. Forgiveness is not pretending the wrong didn't happen. In spite of popular sayings, it's not forgetting, either. It's when the forgiver acknowledges the debt and still chooses not to hold it against us. Hurt and anger

and bitterness which were once clung to, are released in forgiveness/ And that release is generative. It's one of the only sources of true change in this world.

In this story, this woman is Jesus' example of what love looks like, what healing looks like. But she is a sinner! So, here's Jesus, confusing and engaging us again. You see, he knows that in everyday life we have these categories of Good Person and Bad Person. In fact, did you notice that, on this particular occasion, Jesus was eating with the "Good People"? He was. Basically, when you hear the word "Pharisees," you should think of "well-meaning church people" as a modern equivalent. These were sincere seekers of God who shared many of Jesus' values. Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, and Jesus went.

He is never, never saying that through our actions, we can earn the status of Good People or even fall into the status of Bad People in God's eyes.

And that's how Jesus knew what Simon was thinking when his dinner party was interrupted by the sinner woman. "But she's a Bad Person," Simon thought. So Jesus challenged him. "It's funny, Simon," he said. "You're a Good Person, presumably, but when I arrived, you didn't even offer me the normal gestures of hospitality, like a kiss of greeting, or a place to wash my feet, or oil to get the dust out of my hair. By contrast, this Bad Person hasn't stopped washing my feet and kissing and anointing me."

What does this do to Simon's categories of good and bad, righteous and sinner? To which category does the woman belong? Jesus says she belongs in the Forgiven category. I think he might agree with my mom, who has a policy of never calling a child good or bad. A child can be naughty, she says, but that doesn't make the child bad. A child is just loved.

Notice what Jesus does and what he says, and how it's misunderstood by the other guests. Jesus does not forgive the woman. He does not forgive her, but instead he declares that it's obvious that she's *already* been forgiven. If she hadn't already been forgiven, she wouldn't be so full of love. Overflowing love is evidence of forgiveness. "Therefore," he says, "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; that is why she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." The guests at table misunderstand this, and fuss to one another, saying, "Who is this guy, that he even forgives sins?" But Jesus ignores them, and affirms to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This story is so important, as we proceed through Luke's Gospel, and hear Jesus teach time and again about how actions reveal the state of the heart. Or how the way a seed grows reveals the kind of soil that's nurturing it. Or how you can tell if a tree is healthy by whether it bears fruit. He is never, never saying that through our actions, we can earn the status of Good People or even fall into the status of Bad People in God's eyes. He is simply saying that our actions expose what is going on inside us.

This is how Pope Francis can say what he says about our President's lack of Christianity. The Pope's words express not judgment or condemnation so much as simple observation. If that man were trusting in forgiveness, then he would love much. Here, Jesus has eliminated the categories of Good Person and Bad Person. Those are no longer ours to use. Every child—even the one who does not love much—is a loved child.

What do you think is going on inside you—if you were to be really honest? Do you love much, or little? Do you put people in categories? How's your hospitality? And I'm not just talking about your friends. Simon loved his friends, presumably, and yet he still wasn't as generous

with Jesus as the woman. Something was constricted in Simon's heart. He had been forgiven little.

So here's another question. Is there any limit to how much you can be forgiven? If you asked me, I'd say No and Yes. No, because divine mercy is absolutely always ready to forgive us an unlimited amount. Whatever is going on inside us, the Holy One looks upon it with compassion. We may still have to face the natural consequences of our sin, but we can always receive God's love and freedom. But I'd also say Yes, there is a limit to how much we can be forgiven—if only in the sense that, while we are surrounded by God's offered forgiveness in this world, we can still choose not to absorb it into ourselves. We may choose not to be honest with ourselves and others—not to acknowledge that we are sinners—not to open our hearts. To the degree that we refuse God's grace, we limit its fruit in our lives.

Do you see what I mean? It's not that Simon didn't need more forgiveness; he did, as his thoughts at the dinner party demonstrated. And it's not that more forgiveness was not constantly available to Simon from God. It's only that he couldn't even see that he needed it. It's too bad: he could have been full of so much more love.

A disciple is someone who lets their heart and life be changed by the word of God—someone who trusts in God's forgiveness, and who is set free to love.

Luke has another category to suggest for the unnamed- sinner-woman. He presents her to us as a disciple. A disciple is someone who lets their heart and life be changed by the word of God—someone who trusts in God's forgiveness, and who is set free to love. What a great reminder for us as we approach this liturgical season and prepare to reorient our lives toward God's loving promises. What heals is God's forgiveness, taken into ourselves.

When we pastors, who are sinners, declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sin, we aren't saying that we're in charge of the forgiving. We're not even saying that we've observed good fruit in you, signifying that you have integrated God's forgiveness into your life. We're saying that Jesus, in his life and death and resurrection from the dead, showed us that divine love can meet us at our lowest points—from apathy to disaster to depravity. Love is never withheld from us. Forgiveness is always on offer. Will we take it in? ◆

# Forgiven: A Story from South Africa

*Fran Repka, R.S.M.*

*"In Jesus our wounds are risen. They inspire solidarity. They help to tear down walls…and impel us to build bridges and to encounter all those yearning for that merciful love that only Christ can give."*
*-Pope Francis, January 2018*

Shortly after Apartheid in South Africa fell in 1994, a request came to me from that country asking me to do some consulting about policies related to abuse and violence prevention for the Archdiocese of Cape Town. I had already had a glimpse of the great post-Apartheid need through our Sisters of Mercy in Johannesburg. I said Yes. When I arrived, I heard numerous narratives of horrific violence, unbelievable injustices, and unresolved anger. All the stories seemed tragic.

However, one account stood out. It had happened eight months prior to my arrival. It gripped me because of its cross-cultural nature. It was the story of a young American woman, an anti-Apartheid activist, who was beaten and murdered by the very people she was trying to help. Her story not only awakened me to thoughts about forgiveness but drew me into the depths of what forgiveness might mean in this era of globalization. I continued to follow this narrative even after I left Africa. The experience became a lesson in how forgiveness builds solidarity.

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**The Story of Amy Biehl**

Amy Biehl was an attractive, 26-year-old, blue-eyed, blonde, a graduate from Stanford University who had a compassionate heart for victims of injustice. After Stanford, she attended a University in Western Cape Town as a scholar in the Fulbright Program. In the two years she was in South Africa, Amy worked against Apartheid and its aftermath in the black townships. She worked particularly with women who had suffered at the hands of white rule. Amy loved the people and they loved her. Her parents and three siblings, who lived in California at the time, completely supported her and her work with the marginalized, even though like many Americans their knowledge of Apartheid was limited.

Having the privilege of owning a car, Amy drove several women back to their various townships after daily meetings and gatherings. One late afternoon, unbeknownst to Amy, a mob of angry young black men were looking for symbols of white rule to destroy. They had known nothing but oppression from birth. They spotted Amy's car as she drove through the township of Gugulethu. They didn't realize she had worked mightily for them from the moment of her arrival two years before. Apartheid had fed their anger for many years. The young men began to throw rocks. She stopped her car. Amy tried to run toward a service station for safety. She was caught, beaten and stabbed to death, while a black mob shouted anti-white slurs. Four young men were convicted of killing her and put in jail. In 1998, all were pardoned by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for the court decided that their actions were politically motivated.

But the story does not end here. The lessons of forgiveness and solidarity had yet to be learned.

Amy's parents and family were shocked and numbed when they heard the tragic news. Grief overwhelmed them. They were angry and

depressed. However, there was also a feeling of *puzzlement* for they knew how happy and involved Amy had been. They had also heard about the women she worked with—how they were empowered to commit their energies to justice and community-building. How do families forgive such a horrendous deed? They had never expected Amy's work to end in death.

Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored?
O that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain daughter of my people!
(Jer. 8:22-23)

The family grieved the loss of their courageous, caring daughter and sibling for a long time. As hard as they might, Amy's parents could not make sense of anything. They couldn't even get information about the details of what happened to their daughter. They prayed. They wanted clarity. They were hungry to understand. They wanted to speak with the killers. They had little knowledge of Apartheid and how it oppressed the indigenous African population. Yet they knew the goodness of their daughter and her close relationships with the people. They decided to go to Africa.

**God's Goodness Flowing Through…**

The Biehls did not deny the pain and hurt engulfing them. They did not pretend that a tragedy hadn't happened. They did not deny that what the prisoners did was wrong. By the grace of God, they wanted to believe that there was goodness in every human being, as Amy did. Their grief would not to be paralyzed by self-pity. Mr. and Mrs. Biehl taught us that forgiveness begins when we experience God's goodness flowing through us in such a way that we begin to *choose the goodness of the other over their faults* no matter what has happened. This is the first step in the process of forgiveness.

After their arrival in South Africa and after rather complicated protocol, the Biehls were allowed to visit the young men in prison. Surprised that the young men were only in their late teens at the time of the crime, they were horrified at what these young men had been through. The young men shared stories of witnessing their parents being beaten, shot to death, and their homes and land confiscated. Under Apartheid, blacks had no rights to decent housing, education, or employment. One said, "We could not enter the city where whites resided. We could not walk in any parks, but the whites could walk their dogs." As Amy's parents listened to story after story, something began to change within them. Ever so slowly they recognized that Amy was killed not out of meanness or any personal act, but because she was a symbol of white oppression.

Relationships were building and became primary. At the heart of forgiveness is relationship.

**Contemplative Seeing and Relationship**

The Biehls and the prisoners met many times. The young men seemingly needed to talk. They were afraid and remorseful. The Biehls on the other hand, needed to hear the young men's life stories and learn from them, no matter how painful. As they listened, the Biehls began to wonder why U.S. citizens were not aware of the horrors of Apartheid. Perhaps their Amy would have made a different choice. Both parties looked deeper into their respective realities, listened, and genuinely attempted to understand each other.

Relationships were building and became primary. At the heart of forgiveness is relationship. Not only were the Biehls moved by the stories of marginalization, horrific violence,

and oppression but also by the extreme poverty that they witnessed as they visited the townships. Mr. and Mrs. Biehl became free enough to take in the devastating oppression which the young men had lived since birth. They allowed themselves to feel deep compassion. Contemplative seeing. They felt anger at the violence and marginalization of Apartheid that was directed toward the non-white population. The Biehls brought their own pain and struggle into a contemplative holding place, along with others who were struggling. This is the inner spiritual place where forgiveness and transformation can occur with God's help. In turn, the young men were moved by the receptiveness, empathy, and genuine concern of the Biehls. Having someone listen to their stories was like oxygen. They were finding new life and experiencing new energy.

Both parties had a choice-- sit in suffering and despair or sit with the experience in a spirit of hope that tragedy can and will be transformed into something new. Theologian and former professor James Keenan, S.J., once taught that ministers of the Gospel must be people who are willing to enter the chaos of another, who will walk through the dark night with them, who will know how to dialogue and to descend into the dark night without getting lost themselves. The Biehls' listening, love, and deep faith freed them to forgive their daughter's killers, and to forge a new link with a culture so unlike their own. Tears now fell not only for their daughter Amy but for the many suffering sisters and brothers with whom Amy had walked in this land of pain. True discipleship.

**Prophetic Imagination and Systemic Change**

Forgiveness born out of contemplative seeing and freedom naturally leads to action. After listening, forgiving and practicing mercy, the Biehls realized that a new consciousness was rising up in them. They were waking up. They decided that they could not leave Africa without trying to work for an alternative consciousness. The oppressive political culture had to be reformed to make way for change. The young people needed to feel a force that could stand up to the horror and massiveness of the Apartheid experience.

As Christians we are called to be prophetic and keep alive the ministry of imagination. Theologian Walter Bruggemann wrote that if one cannot imagine a vision, there is little chance it will be implemented. Imagination must come before implementation. The Biehls got started. Along with some local officials, they invited young men and women from a few of the many struggling townships to the table to imagine another kind of future, one that could be implemented by the young in collaboration with those who had physical and financial resources. The goal was not only to discourage further violence but to encourage growth and enhance hope. What might this dream be? How could it be accomplished? Who stands to gain? Jesus crossed social boundaries and was noted for his open table fellowship. "He welcomed sinners and tax collectors and ate with them" (Lk: 15:2).

After listening, forgiving and practicing mercy, the Biehls realized that a new consciousness was rising up in them. They were waking up.

**Establishment of the Amy Biehl Foundation**

The Biehls and townspeople worked together to dream and build a realistic future. The focus was on projects led and implemented by young people themselves. Ideas surfaced. Through the course of many conversations the Biehls made a decision to establish the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust to provide financial grounding for the development, education, and empowerment of

youth in Gugulethu and other sprawling townships.

Over the years the Foundation has grown exponentially. Two of the young men, Easy and Ntobeko, who took part in the killing of Amy and released from jail, were invited by the Biehls to work for the Foundation. Easy and Ntobeko are now married with children and doing well. They stay in touch with the Biehl family and vice versa. When Amy's mother was asked how she could ever forgive such a devastating wrong, and become friends with the young men, she said: "I don't know how it happened. Easy and Ntobeko are fascinating young men and I really do love them. They have taught me so much and given me so much." This is certainly the effect of the grace of God!

This experience of "forgiveness building solidarity" teaches us that we need each other to truly understand failures on all sides and to grow in love. The Biehls took time to understand why the perpetrators did what they did. Their effort turned out to be both healing and empowering. They experienced their own capacity for goodness in a way that seemed to surprise them. At the same time men like Easy and Ntobeko better understood the rage that festered for so many years—a rage crying to be free. They were terrified. They had had no role models for processing their anger and fear. The mutuality between the young men and the Biehls revealed how close forgiveness and reconciliation can bring individuals and communities. The Amy Biehl Foundation continues its mission to this day. It is the work of the people.

This experience of "forgiveness building solidarity" teaches us that we need each other to truly understand failures on all sides and to grow in love.

Nelson Mandela, in his speech accepting the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal said:

"Among those we remember today is young Amy Biehl. She made our aspirations her own and lost her life in the turmoil of our transition, as the new South Africa struggled to be born in the dying moments of apartheid. Through her, our people have also shared the pain of confronting a terrible past, as we take the path towards the reconciliation and healing of our nation."

Catherine McAuley taught us that inherent in mercy is the action of forgiveness. Such forgiveness and mercy have a way of drawing us to the root causes of suffering and injustice when done in relationship. Catherine viewed contemplative seeing and prophetic imagination as a responsibility of all Sisters of Mercy.

**Forgiveness and Mercy at Home**

Forgiveness and mercy are the beating heart of the Gospel. As we can observe from the story of Amy Biehl's parents, forgiveness has the potential to inspire personal, spiritual and social transformation. Forgiveness is an antidote to broken hearts, broken societies, broken churches, broken homes, broken relationships, including our earth. It is an antidote because forgiveness and love are the opposite of hatred, greed, racist and sexist attitudes, self-righteousness, marginalization of our neighbors and oppression of any kind.

Where to begin? We can all begin where we are, where we live. Sometimes the very people we see every day in our homes, neighborhoods, places of ministry, and on the street need us most. Do we refuse to listen, refuse to respond, refuse to say "I'm sorry," refuse to smile and give another the time of day? A forgiving attitude always acknowledges the humanity and dignity of someone suffering, no matter the reason. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and Mercy were central to Catherine McAuley's daily practice of love. She saw these virtues as acts that we will never regret. This kind of daily practice is not always easy, however.

The older one gets the more one realizes that life is one forgiveness after the next. Richard Rohr writes in his daily online meditation, "Forgiveness becomes central to Jesus' teaching, because to receive reality is to 'bear it' …. to accept reality is to forgive reality for being what it is, almost day by day and sometimes even hour by hour… Such a practice creates patient and humble people."

To say that each of us needs forgiveness is to say that each of us is human. Each of us stumbles, forgets, offends, and is thoughtless. Can we look more deeply and allow ourselves to be *moved toward healing action* within our personal and communal relationships? Forgiveness inherent in Mercy has a unique role in our broader world experience as well. For example, many citizens are concerned with the political, economic, and racial divisions in our current U.S. culture, and rightly so. After a very divided 2016 national election, there exists a great need for healing of relationships---with each other, with the earth, within our country, with the world.

Forgiveness and mercy call us all to fresh forms of engagement, faithfulness and vitality that are currently at work in our history with God.

Needless to say, we have a great need for contemplative seeing, dialogue and prophetic imagination in these times. Our current U.S. culture seems to be competent in implementing almost anything, but to imagine almost nothing for the common good. For instance, hundreds of children and thousands of citizens have been killed by guns, yet our U.S. Congress held in the grip of the National Rifle Association (NRA) refuses to place limits on certain types of guns and enforce background checks. Our children are left to themselves to protest the killings as Congress and some adults go blind before their eyes. So many injustices loom these days. Many suffer from lack of healthcare, food, housing, a decent education-- while at the same time the U.S. military budget tops a billion dollars a day in spending. But as Christians we re-assert that we are people of hope.

Forgiveness and mercy call us all to fresh forms of engagement, faithfulness and vitality that are currently at work in our history with God. We need to pay attention, use our imagination and act for the common good. We might begin by promoting catholic social teaching regarding the God-given human dignity of everyone, including those who disagree. In a spirit of forgiveness and love let us bring together diverse people to alleviate misunderstandings around racism, DACA, gun control, the care of refugees and immigrants, and so much more. Perhaps then we can begin to break down the fear and prejudice that holds us back, and hopefully call each other to act for the common good in every situation of injustice. Yes, act on behalf of *all* our sisters and brothers. So many spiritual benefits come with the experience of walking compassionately with others and being open to their forgiveness of us.

I close with a recent quote shared on-line from Cincinnati's retired Archbishop of Cincinnati, Daniel Pilarczyk. This profound statement might just as well have been said by Mr. and Mrs. Biehl: "Forgiveness is a challenge because it involves loving other people in spite of the hurt or evil they have done to us…we acknowledge that there is more to the offender than the offense. It's that "more" that we acknowledge when we forgive. It's that more that we love in spite of the offense." May we always be on the lookout for "the more."◆

# Catherine Mc Auley, Clare Moore, and Our Community of Friends

*Janice Edwards, R.S.M.*

Drained from visiting many foundations, Catherine McAuley once wrote to Elizabeth Moore, the superior of Limerick, "When I think rest is coming—business only seems to commence. The prospect of a visit to Limerick will animate me. I need scarcely tell you that it will be a source of great happiness—for which I thank God—a pure heartfelt friendship which renews the powers of mind and Body."[1]

Our founder treasured heartfelt bonds with an incredible number of people, and Clare Moore was one of these people. In 1828, when Clare assumed the role of governess for Catherine's small niece and her godchild at Baggot Street, she became the third person to join that very small gathering of women.[2] By the time Clare died in 1874, she had become "one of the outstanding co-founders of the Sisters of Mercy and a remarkable contributor to the mission of the Catholic Church in England in the nineteenth century."[3]

Catherine, Clare, and our early sisters convey that love and the friendships it forms are central to our charism.

I became more familiar with Clare Moore as I read the 531 large pages of the fascinating and inspiring Bermondsey Annals that she wrote. At a certain point in this reading I caught an ease with which the sisters in that early community used the word friend. It was then that I realized that Catherine had first founded the Sisters of Mercy as a community of friends. As Clare entwined stories about everyday Bermondsey events, Catherine McAuley's life and spirit, and the early Baggot Street community, her contemplative consciousness wove one grand narrative of God's love animating their friendships with God, each other, and those who are poor and marginalized.

But these nineteenth century women knew nothing about evolution and the way that God's Love holds, draws, and moves everything and everyone within a communion of being. Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit mystic and scientist who died in 1955, saw God's Love as the wellspring of evolution. He said, "The most telling and profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would be to trace the evolution of love."[4]

Catherine, Clare, and our early sisters convey that love and the friendships it forms are central to our charism. Because these women are the heart of this article, I have purposely understated Teilhard's evolutionary vision of love. Still, our society and our Mercy family need his insight today. From the Big Bang to our own time, despite periods of immense chaos, profound confusion, and unspeakable suffering, Teilhard tells us that love is gradually—all too gradually—evolving everything and everyone into a Cosmic Christ or into love itself. As a society and a Mercy community, we desperately need to trust that Love is transforming our consciousness into one similar to Teilhard's.

So, with a little support from Teilhard, this article contemplates the evolutionary power of God's Love as it deepens the friendships and evolves the consciousness of Catherine McAuley, Clare Moore, the earliest community, and our Mercy family today.

**Catherine's and Clare's Writing**

Early in my relationship with Clare Moore, I ran into an obstacle. Though we possess numerous letters that Catherine wrote to some of her sisters,

we have none that she wrote to Clare.[5] Then I pondered Catherine's and Clare's writing and key comments by Clare Augustine Moore, Clare Moore's biological sister and another Sister of Mercy. This convinced me that Catherine McAuley and Clare Moore experienced a close friendship. Their writing to others indirectly compensates for our lack of personal letters.

**Catherine's Love of and Reliance on Clare at Baggot Street (1828-1837)**

In 1828 Clare joined the Baggot Street community as a resident co-worker and governess for Catherine's niece and her godchild. Then in 1830 she became a member of that gathering of women.[6] By the time Catherine had appointed Clare Moore the superior of Cork in 1837, Catherine had founded five Mercy convents throughout Ireland, each with a superior she knew well. Catherine had guided and loved these young women while they all lived at Baggot Street. Now they were superiors of new convents at a distance from her and each other. In response to this geographical separation, Catherine began a letter-writing campaign. Her warm-hearted, humorous, news-filled, and spiritual messages conveyed her profound love for these young women. From what Catherine said to other sisters about Clare, we know that these two women exchanged letters, and that Clare was one of her "beloved" protégés.

References to Catherine's love of and reliance on Clare are few, but these few expose a depth of relationship. In 1844, three years after Catherine died, Clare told her sister, Clare Augustine Moore, that the early women lived a life of "primitive Christianity: All rose at 6, but Revd Mother and myself and sometimes Mother Francis used to rise at 4 and say the whole Psalter 'by moonlight' often."[7] Clare, a teenager, chose to pray at 4 a.m. with Catherine, a woman who was thirty-six years older. By this point our founder is an amazingly gifted woman who loves God, others, and the poor greatly. Praying alone with this tenderhearted woman daily by moonlight nurtured a deep friendship. As these two women prayed with each other, Catherine's many gifts fostered Clare's growth. At the same time Catherine "had such a high idea of her capabilities, both intellectual & spiritual, that she often consulted with her privately."[8]

Catherine formed innumerable friendships, but a few of these women became close confidants; Clare Moore was one of her confidants. While reading Clare's writing carefully, we hear Catherine sharing her anxiety, self-doubt, "oppressive care," and deepest prayer with her friend. After Catherine had died, Clare wrote to her sister, Clare Augustine Moore, "If ever any affliction came to us she attributed the cause to herself. I used to grieve to hear her condemning and blaming herself so much. Tho' you know much about her, you did not know her as I knew her."[9] Catherine sometimes talked with Clare about her "great friendship" with "Revd. Messrs. Nugent and Armstrong" and the latter's words, "place all your confidence in God alone.'"[10] She often spoke with Clare about these friends when she was "oppressed with care."[11]

The role that Clare played in preparing our Rule reveals Catherine's trust in Clare's intelligence, literary skills, and wisdom.

The role that Clare played in preparing our Rule reveals Catherine's trust in Clare's intelligence, literary skills, and wisdom. Our founder told Bishop John Murphy of Cork that Clare was "the best Latin reader amongst us."[12] It seems that Clare and Catherine shared the tasks of composing and arranging the Rule.[13] Imagine the closeness that developed between them as they worked together on this central aspect of Mercy life.

**Clare's Love of and Reliance on Catherine during the Bermondsey Foundation (1839-1841)**

Clare's reliance on Catherine appears in Catherine's letters to others. As both women founded the Sisters of Mercy in Cork, Clare was overly dependent on Catherine. After appointing her as superior in 1837, imagine our founder's surprise when she witnessed her protégé's "extreme" timidity in that role. She wrote to Mary de Pazzi at Baggot Street that Clare "will not appear without me on the most trifling occasion—to visitors, etc., etc. She promises to overcome this."[14] Despite Clare's extreme shyness and her early fears of leadership, Catherine trusted her many gifts and in 1839 appointed her the temporary superior of Bermondsey, London, the first Mercy convent outside Ireland and in terribly prejudiced Protestant England. Clare was twenty-five years old.

As they departed for London, the travelling companions were delighted, and Catherine had her usual "list of songs" for the journey. When we read the letters Catherine wrote before and during the Bermondsey foundation, we are struck by the humorous, casual, and playful aspects of her relationships. A few weeks after their arrival, they organized a reception ceremony for six postulants in a church that was packed to an excess beyond 4000. While writing about this ceremony to Elizabeth Moore, she called herself "'Friend Catherine' or 'your Kitty.'" She laughed over many aspects of the English ceremony, including her eighteen hikes up and down the steps of the highest altar she had ever seen. Then she called herself "poor Kitty."[15] This letter reveals Catherine's fondness for the word friend and hints at the impact it had on those women who joined her.

When we read the letters Catherine wrote before and during the Bermondsey foundation, we are struck by the humorous, casual, and playful aspects of her relationships.

It seemed that this foundation might go well. But this work of much "importance, being the first Convent erected in London since the Protestant Reformation,"[16] cost both friends dearly. Because Rev. Peter Butler, the pastor of the parish, was too sick to complete the building of the convent, Clare tells us the sisters "suffered a great deal in the beginning of the Foundation. The Cells were not as yet made, nor the school built, and the sisters had besides many great trials."[17]

Mary Teresa White, one of our founder's travelling companions, notes that while they were in Bermondsey "Our dear mother had a miserable time of it . . . being almost constantly ailing. I always thought the Bermondsey foundation was the beginning of her death-sickness, for she was never perfectly well after."[18] For days Catherine was confined to bed in London and then in Dublin.[19] Clare Moore says nothing about Catherine's illness, but Clare Augustine Moore says that the spirit of one sister compounded Catherine's illness. While Catherine and her travelling companions were still in London, Clare Agnew, one of the English sisters "contrived to create a misunderstanding [between] our foundress and Mother M. Clare [Moore] which though of short duration was very painful to the former, who loved her younger Sister very fondly."[20]

As the only Irishwoman among Englishwomen, some of whom were converts, Clare Moore must have felt great loss after Catherine and her companions left Bermondsey. Back in Dublin, even though Catherine was busy and dealing with declining health, she never forgot her "beloved" Clare and the difficulties in Bermondsey. On October 13th, 1840 Bishop Thomas Griffiths, Vicar Apostolic of the London District, urgently requested Catherine to send two sisters from Baggot Street on a temporary basis.

Catherine sent Mary de Sales White and Mary Xavier O'Connell from Dublin to Bermondsey. She wrote to Frances Warde, "I feel quite deserted this morning—dear Sister de Sales has been my mother for some time, plaiting my coifs, etc., etc., etc."[21] Her sensitivity to the Bishop's request and her love for Clare elicited this personal sacrifice of sending her most needed sisters to Clare. This loan could not have come at a better time for Clare and the Bermondsey community. Soon after the two sisters arrived from Dublin, three novices, while visiting a family sick with typhus, caught the dreadful disease. Two of them died soon after, and one recovered slowly.

Catherine deals with her own concern for Clare by sharing some of Clare's words with Frances Warde. "My poor Sister M. Clare [is] almost exhausted. You would not know her writing. She says, 'My heart is gone.'"[22] In one letter to Mary de Sales White, Catherine says of Clare, "My poor old child says you are a comfort to her—for which God will bless you, as her place is very arduous & trying."[23] Later she tells de Sales, "Do all you can to comfort my Dear Mother M. Clare."[24]

These stories reveal the quality of Catherine and Clare's friendship while both were alive. These two women are prime examples of love's contagion. When they prayed together each morning by moonlight, our founder was already one of God's exceptional lovers. Throughout the above letters we see our founder's incredible Love transforming Clare and founding a community of loving friends.

Contemplating love, whether in formal prayer, while conversing with friends, or walking in nature intensifies and circulates the energy of love. For me contemplating love is a simple and innately human gift. God is Love (1 Jn. 4:16b) and the words contemplating love refer to an ever-deepening awareness of love's movement within everything and everyone. Watch God—or love itself—as that sentiment transforms this early community into friends of God, friends of each other, and friends to poor and marginalized people.

**Clare's Writing after Catherine's Death (1841-1872)**

We do not know how Catherine's death impacted Clare. She saw Catherine at Baggot Street five months before our founder died, so she may have known her health was failing. But Catherine's death must have wielded a powerful blow. Sometime after Catherine's death in 1841, Clare began to tell her friend's story. Perhaps her writing lessened her grief and slowly deepened her awareness of Catherine's new presence. She had personally felt Catherine's exceptional love and watched it transform young women into a community of friends. Telling everyone about these conversions became a way of life for Clare. She told stories about our founder at convent recreations,[25] in letters, in 531 pages of annals, and in more formal writings.[26] The stories she told inspired her listeners—that is how tales of great love work. Love changes people and great love changes them greatly.

Watch God—or love itself—as that sentiment transforms this early community into friends of God, friends of each other, and friends to poor and marginalized people.

Clare's story telling also reveals a friendship between Catherine McAuley and Clare Moore that endured far beyond Catherine's death in 1841. In 1862, twenty-one years after our founder's death, Clare gave her friend, Florence Nightingale, the memoir she had created about Catherine and some letters that Catherine wrote. When Florence shared her appreciation of these writings, Clare responded with, "I am so glad you are pleased with our dear Revd Mother—as I always call her, she seems to be living to me—her words and ways come so often before me."[27]

The words "she seems to be living to me" are powerful. I can only interpret them to mean that Clare and her "Reverend Mother," sometime after Catherine's death, began to converse on the deepest level available to human beings. Clare, like Catherine, had a contemplative spirit and trusted the love that they shared. When friends treasure the love they share, nothing, not even death, can hinder the depth of their communication.

After Catherine's death, their friendship gradually became a union of spirits that eclipsed the limits of time and space. Because love is timeless and boundless, we are always immersed in it, and when we remain watchful, we experience this immersion. Wherever and whenever we experience love, we glimpse "the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love" (Eph. 3:18). When Catherine died and experienced the deepest, all-inclusive love of God, some of those around her may have gradually experienced an even deeper sense of her presence; I believe Clare did.

Wherever and whenever we experience love, we glimpse "the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love."

**Catherine, Clare, and Their Community of Friends (1841-1874)**

As I read some of the annals that Clare wrote I sensed a deep friendship that existed among those first sisters. Her close friendship with Catherine and her passion about Mercy's movement around the world gave the annals she wrote a distinctive power. Appreciate with me the masterful way in which Clare draws community deaths, Catherine's spirit, the founding community, and Mercy's expansion into a unified whole in some of her 1864 and 1866 accounts.

In the annals Clare wrote beautiful eulogies for every Bermondsey sister who died. Then in 1864 and 1866 Mary Angela Dunne, Mary Anne Doyle, and Mary Magdalen Flynn, all members of the early Baggot Street community, died in Ireland. Their deaths must have affected Clare deeply, because she and these three women were among the first to join Catherine. But I believe it was the breadth and depth of her vision that prompted her to write eulogies for the early Baggot Street Sisters. Through them she could highlight how God's Love moved through Catherine, the early and later Sisters and held all of them as one.

The warm and intimate tone of the eulogies she wrote for these three women emphasizes Catherine's and the community's esteem for the word "friend," a term Clare uses frequently in two of these eulogies. Clare's loving reflection on each woman deepens our awareness that the Sisters of Mercy were founded as a community of friends.

In 1836 Catherine had appointed Mary Angela Dunne as superior of the foundation in Charleville, Ireland. Then on November 12, 1864, Angela had died. Mary Joseph Croke, the superior in Charleville at the time, said that Angela's "spirit was of the 'first days' of the Institute. . . Like all 'good souls,' she was so sincere to friends."[28] Mary Joseph Croke told Mary de Pazzi at Baggot Street that Angela often "spoke of you to us in connection with old associates, and always with the same warm affection & esteem. She had great love for you like a dear & good kind friend."[29]

Then in 1866 Mary Anne Doyle, the "first sister whom God called to our holy Institute, died."[30] Clare told us that even after Mary Anne joined Catherine on September 24, 1827, several Presentation groups invited her to join them. They were aware of the "unsettledness and privations of her position—for in the infancy of our Institute there could be no positive religious Rule and spiritual helps were few. Mass & Communion on Sundays & holidays only, with but little time for lectures or Meditations."[31] But despite these difficulties Mary Anne stayed committed "to unite

herself with our Foundress in carrying out the plan which our Merciful Savior had inspired."[32]

Clare also wrote about Catherine's and Mary Anne's relationship. "Our Revered Foundress cherished a most tender friendship & even reverence for this venerable sister and she always united Mother Mary Anne's name with her own when speaking of the early days."[33] Whenever possible on her many foundation journeys, she would stop in Tullamore "to have the comfort of seeing her beloved first companion."[34]

Marcella Flynn, called Mary Magdalen in religion, was another member of the earliest community who died in 1864. Though Clare did not use the term friend when writing about Mary Magdalen, what she said about her was filled with affection and admiration. She also used this eulogy to tell her readers about the community's expansion during Magdalen's "more than thirty years" of ministry. During this time at Baggot Street Magdalen Flynn

> had witnessed the deaths of twenty-nine of the religious—twenty-five Houses of our Institute had been founded from Baggot Street whence branched forth more than one hundred and twenty-five filiations in England, Scotland, North & South America, Australia, New Zealand—as well as in every part of Ireland—and yet the year she died there were forty-five professed religious assembled in the little Chapel of that first convent to renew their Vows. We may think with what joy our loved & revered Foundress beheld the Institute of her children presenting their offerings to Him who had so wonderfully favored the work begun by her in lowliness & simplicity of heart.[35]

Clare's friends at Baggot Street must have informed her about the 25 houses founded from there and their 125 filiations within the twenty-three years since Catherine's death. However Clare obtained this information, she was paying close attention to the growth of the Sisters of Mercy throughout the world.

At a deeper level, more than twenty years after Catherine's death, Clare senses Catherine's joy when her "children" offer their lives to God in that Baggot Street chapel. In 1864, when Clare encourages others to "think" about Catherine, we sense her enduring friendship with our founder and her invitation to all of us to be on the lookout for "friend Kitty" and her continuing joy over the dedication of our lives.

When we "think" of Catherine beholding us as we offer our lives to God today, we also become aware of our community of friends extending far beyond Catherine's death in 1841.

When we "think" of Catherine beholding us as we offer our lives to God today, we also become aware of our community of friends extending far beyond Catherine's death in 1841. Clare may have never used the word contemplation, but when she tells us to be on the lookout for "friend Kitty" long after Catherine's death and describes Catherine's great joy over the dedication of our lives, we become aware of her contemplative insight, and we experience growth in our own contemplative consciousness. The powerful love of Catherine, Clare, and that early community still moves among us nearly two centuries later. Like Catherine and Clare, the more sensitive we become to the movement of love, of God, around and within us, the more we will experience the presence of all the women in our timeless and boundless circle of Mercy. We are always immersed in this Love and need only be aware of it seeping into and pouring out of us.

**Contemplating Mercy Friendship Then**

My insight that the Sisters of Mercy were founded as a community of friends came gradually. The awareness developed as I contemplated Clare Moore's relationships with

Catherine McAuley, Florence Nightingale, Bishop Thomas Grant, and others. The depth of these relationships surprised me at first. Soon after, as I gave Catherine's letters one more of many readings, our founder's countless "heartfelt" friendships struck me. Then when I noticed how often Clare connected the word friend—or something similar—with the early sisters, I grasped how easily Clare and the early community had internalized Catherine's deep love and the friendship that flowed from it.

All of these friendships were the powerful movements of God's love. Teilhard tells us that "love is the most universal, formidable, and mysterious of cosmic energies."[36] Thus, their contemplation of love drew me to dwell upon it many, many decades later. Contemplating love creates profound and eternal friendships. Though Catherine seldom, if ever, used the word contemplation, she possessed a refined and expansive contemplative consciousness. Contemplative consciousness can be defined in various ways, but I see it as a state of mind and a way of being. It is not something we do; it is who we become—who we are. This mindfulness is a profound, all-pervasive, and rather continuous closeness with love itself. The stronger this consciousness becomes, the more we can see, feel, and live intimately with God and all that God holds closely.

Clare tells us that Catherine reflected upon God's presence in "all passing events."[37] We hear our founder's contemplative consciousness throughout her writing. When she tells her sisters to expect to "meet their Divine Redeemer in every poor habitation,[38] and when Clare Augustine Moore writes that Catherine "had a really tender affection for us"[39], we appreciate what Mary Sullivan meant when she said that our founder experienced loving God and her neighbor "as a profound and mysterious unity."[40] By the time Catherine had founded the Sisters of Mercy, she had developed an intimacy with God and all those whom God loves. For her, contemplation had everything to do with the depth of one's Love and little to do with specialized prayer techniques.

Whether Catherine encouraged Mary Delamere, the young postulant in Tullamore, to join her "nonsensical Club"[41] while she visited there, or told Elizabeth Moore, the superior in Limerick, that she had "cried heartily"[42] over the death of a young professed sister she had befriended in Limerick, we realize that Catherine's contemplative consciousness created radically free friendships. As Clare matured, our founder's radical freedom shaped her.

The freedom of all the early women created friendships of affection, inclusion, vulnerability, and faith. We have many examples of their affectionate, inclusive, and never possessive relationships. The closings of Catherine's and the early sisters' letters reveal the warmth they all felt toward each other. Because the stability of new foundations was crucial to the success of their Mercy mission, both Catherine and Clare chose their closest friends and ablest assistants to initiate new foundations at a distance from Dublin and Bermondsey. We have already observed both women share their vulnerability and faith with each other.

> As we also embrace the unknowns of our Journey of Oneness, we can treasure Catherine's and Clare's genius for friendship and their passing it onto us.

Catherine and these early women so trusted women's innate capacity for closeness that even outsiders perceived endearment among them. In 1841, Bishop George Browne in Galway spoke of this gift of theirs. "It is impossible the order of Srs. of Mercy should fail—where there is such unity and such affectionate interest is maintained, as brings them one hundred miles to encourage and aid one another and this is their established

practice, to look after what has been commenced."[43]

Yet God—or; Love itself—was the source of Catherine's, Clare's, and the early sisters' profound friendships, of this they were convinced. Over the years, as Catherine experienced God's unlimited love, her limited love was transformed. We become whom and what we contemplate,[44] so through their friendships, she and her sisters became a little more like God or like the love that they contemplated in everyone.

An evolution of contemplative consciousness contemplating love creates friendships and evolves consciousness. Catherine's friendships reveal her participation in an evolution of consciousness. For centuries, too much of western Christian thought split loving God from loving others and taught us that the latter was a temptation that hindered intimacy with God. With Catherine and other women and men religious during her time, we see signs that loving God and one's neighbor were experienced as one and the same love. Following the Rule of the Presentation Sisters, Catherine begins her chapter "Of Union and Charity" with Christ's words, "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34) Her deep insight challenged centuries of dualism that segmented God's great love; her contemplative consciousness did not separate her loves, it unified them.

As we also embrace the unknowns of our Journey of Oneness, we can treasure Catherine's and Clare's genius for friendship and their passing it onto us.

Catherine's participation in love's evolution of consciousness summons us to join a similar unfolding in our time. Teilhard tells us that "the great event of our time is a kind of change in the face of God."[45] He saw among everyone a growing awareness "of a strong mystical current" that convinces us "that the universe, viewed in its complete workings, is ultimately lovable and loving."[46] So if God is love (1 John 4:16b), and all of the universe is "ultimately lovable and loving," then to contemplate everything and everyone is to contemplate God. So, along with the friendships that our earliest community formed with God, each other, and those who were marginalized, we are called into friendships with earth and the entire universe.

More importantly, we are called to fall ever more consciously into the "strong mystical current" of God's love in which we are all immersed. Teilhard calls love "a sacred reserve of energy—and the very bloodstream of spiritual evolution."[47] By the time we meet Catherine through her writings and those of her followers, we see her great ease with the give and take of love; she was immersed in love's "blood stream."

If we want to flow with loving God and our neighbor as one unified process, we need only pay attention to our experiences of love. Whether we are giving or receiving affection with a friend, protesting injustice's lack of love, or feeling oneness with a part of earth, we are experiencing a benevolence in which we are always immersed. Yet whatever we are doing, we need to be alert, so we can repeatedly experience God's love seeping into and resting within our depth. And because love is innately cyclical, it naturally flows out of us onto everything and everyone. We benefit greatly when we become aware of this circling in the most mundane aspects of our lives. Every time we mindfully receive or give affection, our awareness of love's oneness deepens and expands.

I close with a section from one of Catherine's letters. In 1841, she emphasizes that the entire Baggot Street community laughed and played together. These words have confused me in the past, because many of her letters expose their everyday struggles with each other and their ministries. But she may have been writing from her deeper, more contemplative consciousness. I

believe she is highlighting God's continuous flow that I focused on previously, and the deep friendships it fostered.

> All are good and happy. The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us—and oh what a blessing—it should make all things else pass into nothing. All laugh and play together, not one cold stiff soul appears. From the day they enter, all reserve of an ungracious kind leaves them. This is the Spirit of the order indeed—the true Spirit of Mercy—flowing on us. . .. Take what He will from us—He still leaves His holy peace—and this He has graciously extended to all our Convents. Thousands of thanks and praises to His Holy Name.[48]

What a gift! Catherine reminds us of a rich dimension of friendship. "All laugh and play together, not one cold stiff soul appears." Even if her sisters are unaware, she is deeply aware of their loving union.

Today, we grieve the loss of cherished institutions, beloved sisters, and former clarities about religious life. As we also embrace the unknowns of our Journey of Oneness, we can treasure Catherine's and Clare's genius for friendship and their passing it onto us. They remind us that we never need to lose our charism of friendship and its deep communion with God, each other, and those who are poor and marginalized. How our world needs our charism of love, mercy, and the friendship they foster.

Surely the "blessing of unity" that Catherine saw then and enables now still makes "all things else pass into nothing." Our relationships are limited, and we falter in them more than we would like. But when we contemplate love itself, it bonds us now as it bonded Catherine, Clare, and Christ, who call us friends (John 15:15). Slowly, all too slowly, our consciousness expands, and we become whom and what we contemplate. Contemplating love reveals God's communion of friends, and this revelation transforms us. ◆

**Endnotes**

[1] Mary Sullivan, ed. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004): 261. Hereafter cited as CCMcA.
[2] Mary Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995): 12. Hereafter cited as CMcATM.
[3] Ibid., p. 84.
[4] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1969): 33.
[5] CCMcA, 25.
[6] CMcATM, 14 & 15.
[7] Ibid., p. 85.
[8] Volume II of the *Annals of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Bermondsey, London, England*, also referred to as the *Bermondsey Annals*, 235.
[9] CMcATM, 93.
[10] Ibid., p. 92.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 272.
[13] Ibid., p. 270.
[14] CCMcA, 94-95.
[15] Ibid., pp. 224, 222, n 26. James, Catherine's brother, liked to call her Kitty. Because Catherine preferred to travel incognito, she often asked her companions to call her "Kitty" instead of Reverend Mother. The Limerick Annals explain Catherine's play on the word Kitty in this letter. Elizabeth Moore, Catherine, and their travelling companions journeyed by steamer from Dublin to Cork to found the Limerick convent. They were all seasick on the trip. In order "to dispel their seriousness, Mother M. Elizabeth said jestingly, 'O Kitty, what shall I do?'"
[16] Volume I, *Bermondsey Annals*, 8.
[17] Ibid., p. 8.
[18] Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, Volume II (New York: The Catholic Publication Society, Co., 1885)" 58.
[19] CCMcA, 247.
[20] CMcATM, 212.
[21] CCMcA, 300.
[22] Ibid., p. 316.
[23] Ibid., p. 332.
[24] Ibid., p. 365.
[25] CMcATM, 87.
[26] Ibid., p. 99. Clare wrote *A Life of Catherine McAuley* that she placed within the *Bermondsey Annals* and published a *Little Book of Practical Sayings of Mother Mary Catharine* [sic] McAuley (London: Burns, Oates, & Co., 1868).

[27] Mary Sullivan, *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 18.
[28] *Bermondsey Annals*, Vol. II, 73.
[29] Ibid., 73. Angela Dunne's superior, Sister Mary Joseph Croke, sent this letter to Mother Mary de Pazzi at Baggot Street. De Pazzi was a friend of Mary Angela Dunne (Charleville, Ireland) and Mary Clare Moore (Bermondsey, England). I assume that Mary de Pazzi sent this letter to Mary Clare Moore, knowing she was interested in writing eulogies about the early members of the Baggot street community. That may be how it became part of *Bermondsey Annals*. Some of the women from that early community remained friends even from a distance.
[30] Ibid., p. 105.
[31] Ibid., p. 106.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., p. 110.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., pp. 74 & 75.
[36] Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965): 38.
[37] CMcATM, 100.
[38] Ibid., p. 298.
[39] Ibid., p. 209.
[40] Mary Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 313.
[41] CCMcA, 76.
[42] Ibid., p. 259.
[43] Ibid., p. 384.
[44] George Aschenbrenner, "Becoming Whom We Contemplate" in *Way Supplement*, 52 (1985), 30-42. I have added the word what to the author's well-known phrase.
[45] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Two Friends 1926-1952*, (Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 1969), 114.
[46] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Appearance of Man*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 273.
[47] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Building the Earth*, 40.
[48] CCMcA, 386.

**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 27-30, 2019.** 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.

# Book Review- *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis*

*Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.*

**Annmarie Sanders, I.H.M., ed. *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis* (Silver Spring, MD: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 2018), 184 pp., ISBN 978-1-984984-44-9.**

**Review by Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M. (President of LCWR, 1993)**

In March 2009 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was notified by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) that it was undertaking a "doctrinal assessment" of LCWR, an investigation of the Conference's faithfulness to the church and its teachings. In 2012 the CDF further announced that it had concluded its investigation and, as a follow-up, was appointing a team of bishops with a Mandate to oversee the reform of LCWR. *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis,* tells the story of those years.

CDF, the doctrinal watchdog for the Catholic Church, asserted that LCWR's positions on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, health care reform, and ordination of women were ambiguous or at variance with the Church's authoritative teachings. It gave as evidence remarks of conference speakers and articles in its publications.

To the credit of LCWR, its leaders responded with exquisite patience and generosity to this crisis. Drawing on the expertise and guidance of theologians, canon lawyers, philosophers, public relations professionals, and other advisors, they navigated a very painful chapter in the Conference's history. The Mandate came to a close in 2015 with the joint publication of a final report, signed by the team of bishops and the LCWR leaders, asserting that "the extensive conversations [throughout the process] were marked by a spirit of prayer, love for the Church, mutual respect and cooperation." Further, "The commitment of LCWR leadership to its crucial role in service to the mission and membership of the Conference will continue to guide and strengthen LCWR's witness to the great vocation of Religious Life, to its sure foundation in Christ, and to ecclesial communion."

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To put it mildly, the journey of those years had its share of pain and confusion. "Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis," the subtitle of the book published by LCWR, is an apt description of the process. Ten LCWR leaders recount the conference's spiritual journey from different angles, sharing the hope that the processes employed, and insights gained will be of help to other organizations experiencing conflict, polarization, or impasse.

Rather than summarizing each of the essays, I will just mention a few of my personal take-aways from each. In a chapter titled, "Truth-Telling: On Personal and Institutional Integrity," Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA, discusses the role of conscience and the parameters of dissent. She adds a Method for Ethical Decision-Making which could be applied to many situations.

In "The Gift and Challenge of Communal Discernment," Pat Farrell, OSF, describes the processes employed by the LCWR Executive Committee, Board, and General Assembly over the course of the doctrinal assessment. We are all

familiar with these processes from our own regional and Institute assemblies and chapters but carrying it out with a group of 900 in the room took it to a new level. Pat discusses the importance of beginning with an open mind, of deep listening, and of a readiness to be transformed. In another chapter Pat enlarges on how life in our religious congregations has equipped us with skills for meeting such challenges.

Janet Mock, CSJ, discusses the importance of developing right relationships in conflictual situations. She focuses on three steps: understanding the other as a way of building trust; naming and claiming what is meant by the common good; and choosing a way forward that reflects our better long-held values and enhances the common good of all. Needless-to-say, these are easier to recite than to practice. By way of illustration, Janet describes their early perceptions of the officials at CDF and vice-versa. This was a large hurdle to overcome.

In another chapter, Marcia Allen, CSJ, and Florence Deacon, OSF, team up to present "Relationships Matter: Nonviolence and the Pressure to React." Once the investigation was announced there was a media firestorm, with pundits weighing in on all sides. Many would have liked nothing better than for LCWR officials to come out swinging, fists raised, ready to do battle. The temptation to public self-defense was an ever-present reality within the conference. Furthermore, the leadership of the conference changed each year, so newly-elected leaders had the challenge of assimilating the reality. Through it all, the members were committed to preserving the dignity and integrity of both parties: LCWR and CDF.

Carol Zinn, SSJ, picks up the emphasis on the public nature of the conflict and LCWR's effort to use it as an opportunity for responsible influence and advocacy for change on both the national and global stage. My reflection is that conference leaders would not have been able to achieve this had they not already been steeped in a love for the Church and possessed skills in communication.

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The next contributor, Sharon Holland, IHM, was no stranger to the Curia, having served on the staff of CICLSAL for over twenty years. She laments the unfortunate power of institutionalized perceptions, from either side. "If there were Vatican officials perpetuating negative perceptions about US religious, there were also religious reciting another litany: 'Bishops are authoritarian, they distrust women, they just want docility.' Individual experiences were allowed to cast a shadow on all."

Mary Hughes, OP, shares the role that humility played in the spiritual journey of each individual involved, as well as the collective group. She reflects, "If humility was to be a way through the conversations and negotiations, we would need to guard against arrogance, righteousness, or pretense. We would proceed with a commitment to truth, respect for all persons who might be in dialogue with us, and confidence in God's companionship on this difficult journey."

Annmarie Sanders, IHM, LCWR's Director of Communications since 2003, and the editor of this book, has a special vantage point. She organizes her reflections in the form of responses to four "temptations" the conference dealt with: to allow the story to be played out in the media as a story of conflict; to accept all opportunities to tell the story wherever we can and to whomever

will listen; to just let others tell the story; and to correct all erroneous statements. Needless-to-say, resisting these temptations required a discipline rooted in the inherent dignity of the conference.

There is also a chapter incorporating the reflections of lay women and men who have been associated with the national conference staff. For those interested in further study of the experience, the appendix contains the texts of the initial Mandate from CDF, the Public Statement of the LCWR in response, and the Joint Final Report.

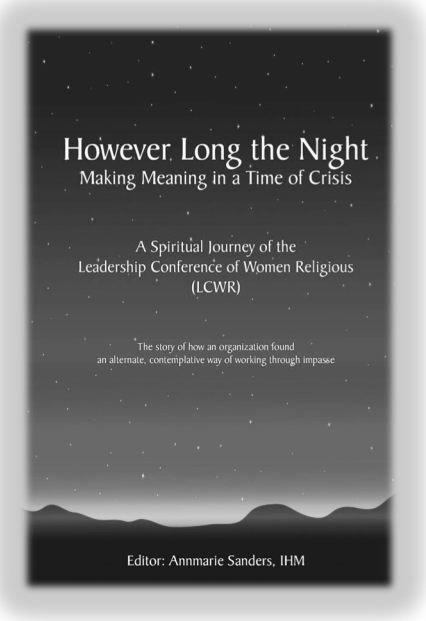
Finally, I offer a few personal observations. I noted that there are no references to any cardinal or bishop by name, whether in Rome or in the U.S. There is no attribution of personal ill-feeling or bias to any Church leader. The focus is on the issues, not on persons. Furthermore, I was impressed by the role of prayer and contemplation in the overall process. At many junctures, silence allowed time and space for the Spirit to work.

I note that this investigation of LCWR was contemporaneous with, but distinct from, the visitation of American women religious instituted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) which ran from January 2009 to the end of 2014. The visitation ended with a comprehensive report from CICLSAL dated Sept. 8, 2014 but included an announcement that individual reports would go to various Institutes which had hosted on-site visitations, as well as to Institutes whose individual reports "indicated areas of concern." Thus, the wrap-up of the Visitation extended well beyond September 2014.

I put the book down with a renewed pride in the integrity of American women religious and a deep sense of gratitude for our leaders.

The visitation had the unanticipated result of generating an outpouring of support for American sisters from many quarters, as well as a final statement of affirmation from CICLSAL.

None of these writers in the LCWR anthology are naïve. They all experienced the pain of distrust and uncertainty, but they soldiered on, bringing the investigation to a happy outcome, one of mutual trust and appreciation. I put the book down with a renewed pride in the integrity of American women religious and a deep sense of gratitude for our leaders.◆



# *Discussion Questions*

(**Edwards**) Like Clare Moore's affirmation of Catherine McAuley, what gifts does a leader of a local community—or a supervisor in the workplace—need for effective relations with co-workers? What gifts do you recognize and affirm in superiors and supervisors you have known in the past? What qualities in these women transcend "the old days" in religious life, and are still relevant in the present when leadership roles have changed?

(**Leser**) The 5th Petition is "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." What is the difference, in your reflection, on "debts owed" to God and "debts owed" to us by our fellow human beings? What is useful about the image of sin as "debt?" What about "missing the mark," "wrongs," "transgressions," "wounds," "evil," "iniquity" or "offenses" ?

(**Micheletto**) What are your own experiences of extending forgiveness without the expectation of reconciliation? Should every broken relationship be "reconciled" in the sense of people becoming friends again? What kinds of forgiven relationships should not or cannot be reconciled in a "happy ever after" scenario?

(**Repka**) Do you have your own story of someone dramatically wronged who forgave their offender? What prevents me from forgiving people who have wronged me? Where can I lessen the violence (subtle or overt) in the way I speak to others?

(**Russell)** What is your memory or understanding of the sacrament of penance as a child or convert, and your experience now? Is confession to a priest still relevant to your spiritual life? If you experience graced encounters of confession that are sacrament-like, who do you "confess" to and in what settings?

(**Schubert**) What are your favorite passages from the bible for being reassured that God is "slow to anger, and abounding in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin…."? How does Schubert argue against the cliché that "the God of the Old Testament is the God of wrath and the God of the New Testament is the God of love"?

(**Webb**) *Yes, there is a limit on how much we can be forgiven—if only in the sense that, while we are surrounded by God's offer of forgiveness in the world, we can still choose not to absorb it into ourselves…not to open our hearts*. What's your spiritual counsel to persons who feel so bad about what they did, they aren't able to feel fully forgiven?

# Contributors

**Janice Edwards, R.S.M.** (Mid-Atlantic) holds a D.Min. from the former Weston Jesuit School of Theology and the Center for Religious Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her M.Div. is from Princeton Theological Seminary. She was a member of the leadership team of the Sisters of Mercy of New Jersey just prior to the establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Janice has taught courses in spirituality and spiritual direction in colleges, universities, and spirituality centers, and has created and coordinated training programs in spiritual direction. She was part of the team that initiated and taught graduate programs in Holistic Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at Chestnut Hill College in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. A spiritual director for over forty years, she has authored several articles and published a book on spirituality, *Wild Dancing: Embraced by Untamed Love.* She is currently researching and writing about Mary Clare Moore, RSM. Much of her research includes spending six weeks each year at the Archive of the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy and the Southwark Archdiocesan Archive, both in Bermondsey, London. She has previously published in *The MAST Journa*l.

**Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M**. (South Central) was elected as the first president of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and served as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1993. Subsequently, she acted as the senior vice president for Mission Integration at Catholic Healthcare Partners, a multi-state health system. As an academic, she earned a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University, with a focus on ecclesiology in the work of Yves Congar, one of the theologians who inspired the decrees of Vatican II. She is widely published on themes of religious life and renewal. Among other projects, she has co-authored a book celebrating the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, re-organizing and uniting the former 25 regional communities of Sisters of Mercy in the U.S. and their mission congregations. *Union and Charity: The Story of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* appeared in 2017. She has spear-headed the planning for recent annual meetings of MAST in Belmont. A frequent contributor to *The MAST Journal*, she is also a member of the editorial board.

**Chorbishop William J. Leser** is Judicial Vicar of the 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. 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 1985. 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.

**Marie Micheletto, R.S.M.** (West-Midwest) holds an M.A. in counseling psychology from the University of Northern Colorado, with post- graduate work in family therapy from the Menninger Institute of Mental Health Sciences, and a certificate in gerontology from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She has been a college instructor at Creighton University and College of St. Mary in Omaha. She is credentialed by the National Board of Certified Counselors and Nebraska Counseling Association. Involved with hospice for over 40 years, she began the *No One Dies Alone* program locally and has been project director for Hospice Home Health. Her publications include co-authored works on marital preparation, marriage enrichment, and marriage commitment. Her seminars have included presentations on life-cycle transitions, stress management, assertiveness training, wellness and holistic health.

**Fran Repka, R.S.M.** (**South Central**) entered the Cincinnati community. She holds a B.S.N. from Univ. of Cincinnati and is a registered nurse. She earned an M.A. in clinical psychology from Univ. of Detroit. Her doctorate in counseling psychology is from the Univ. of Cincinnati. She worked as clinical nurse and psychiatric nursing instructor at St. Charles Hospital in Toledo, then from 1976 to 1989 as psychologist, founder and director of the Cincinnati Archdiocesan Consultation Services, for religious and clergy. She was then invited to join a group private practice with 12 others. In 1994 she became founder and director of Mercy Professional Services—to provide counseling to the poor and under-served. At this time, she also taught courses in pastoral counseling at the seminary in Cincinnati and was instructor for the inter-community formation program. She has given workshops internationally—South America, Belize, El Salvador, South Africa, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Guam and Jamaica. She has facilitated chapters for Mercy Sisters, as well as other religious congregations. She is the current facilitator for the Institute's *Women of Mercy, Women of Hope*. Her awards include "Distinguished Psychologist of the Year" from the Ohio Psychologists' Association, and Cincinnati's "Woman of the Year." She is published in *Horizon*, *Human Development*, *Sisters Today*, *MAST Journal* and *Critical Juncture*.

**Jane Russell, O.S.F**., is a School Sister of St. Francis of Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Associate Professor of Theology at Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, North Carolina where she has served on the faculty since 1999. She lives with the Sisters of Mercy in Belmont. She holds a Ph.D. in historical and systematic theology from the University of Notre Dame and an M.A. in theology from the University of San Francisco. She served 8 years as provincial councilor for the U.S. Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis. Active in many professional and pastoral settings, she has presented papers at the Catholic Theological Society of America, Call to Action, and both Franciscan and diocesan spirituality conferences. Her contributions have appeared regularly in her congregational SSSF PMN Newsletter. Her public lectures have addressed Catholic renewal, women's spirituality, ecology, inclusive language, ecclesiology and liturgical practice. She has submitted book reviews of scholarly works on ecology, cosmos, and the environment. An artist and poet, she has contributed to *Agora*, the publication of Belmont Abbey, as well as *The Cord, National Catholic Reporter*, *America* and *St. Anthony Messenger.*

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

**Pastor Julie Webb** is an ordained Pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A lifelong West-Coaster, she received her Master of Arts (Humanities) degree from Willamette University in Salem, Oregon; and her Master of Divinity from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, a member 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 has renewed her covenant.

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