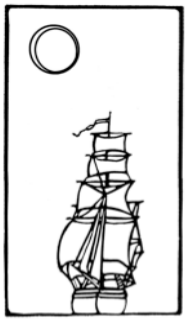


The MAST Journal

The Journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology

Vol. 28, No. 3 2022

Preparing for the 2023 Chapter

Sisters of Mercy Hermanas de la Misericordia

The Mast Journal begun in 1991, is published three times a year by
the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology
www.mastrsm.org
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Inc., West Midwest Community
535 Sacramento Street, Auburn, CA 95603.
Vol. 28, No. 3, 2022
Annual Subscription $20 US; $30 International

Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

This issue, "Preparing for the 2023 Chapter," is offered by The MAST Journal editorial board, as a help for Chapter planners, delegates and the entire community at this important time. In its 30-year history, The MAST Journal has offered theological, biblical and historical resources for each Chapter. So, our support continues here. These articles integrate a set of frames that ground the community's spirituality and mission—a series of lenses through which we understand ourselves and our vocation. They include our founder's charism, our ecclesial identity, our following of Jesus Christ, the sacred scripture we read, our theological tradition, the reinterpretation of doctrine we follow, and our efforts to be fully present to the world around us. We try to maintain focus on the most pressing needs of people, whose suffering calls for our help because they can't "do it themselves."

A survey of this issue could begin with the timeless article Mary Sullivan wrote in 1995 for the Chapter, "The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion." It's listed under the category adopted for papers and articles retrieved from decades past--"Wisdom That Endures." At the end of her article, Mary recalls that on the morning she died, Catherine tied up her worn-out shoes and gave them to a sister to burn. Mary concludes: "Her shoes, now, in a true sense, have been passed to us, that we may walk the streets she walked, with the same mercifulness, hopefulness and joyfulness, that we may find and bring the same consolation of God to those in desperate need…."

Helen Marie Burns presents a well-integrated theological reflection, "Things to Remember for the 2023 Chapter: Communal Self and Ecclesial Event." She reminds us that the 2023 Chapter is occurring at the same time as the Synod on Synodality called by Pope Francis. We have a communal self, our united community presence and power, that can influence the Church and the world. She reminds us, "Catherine believed in a God revealed within a specific community of faith, within a specific theology and tradition: Roman Catholicism." She discusses a series of authorities: Canon Law, Vatican II's call for renewal of religious life, and authors including Sandra Schneiders, Johannes Metz, and our own Doris Gottemoeller.

Sharon Euart is a canon lawyer who heads an organization for religious community leaders, the Resource Center for Religious Institutes. Some months ago, she provided an on-line educational session for Chapter delegates on the canon law of the Catholic Church, at the request of the Chapter Planning Committee. She kindly agreed that *MAST Journal* could print her virtual, power-point presentation in essay form, so that it would be available in this journal's format as "The Canonical Notion of a General Chapter." She notes that in the thinking of the Church's magisterium, the purpose of a Chapter is "to give expression to the involvement of all members for the good of the whole, the common good."

Patricia Talone is well known for her leadership in the Catholic Health Association and her national consulting on ethical issues in healthcare. She offers here an accessible, practical orientation for Chapter delegates, "The Moral Responsibility of the Chapter Delegate." She underlines the need for <u>being there</u>, maintaining active presence to all the responsibilities a delegate has for preparation and doing the homework. She urges prompt and consistent attendance at table discussions, as well as "reading, listening,

thinking, questioning, and circling back to clarify again and again." The reminders apply to both new and experienced delegates.

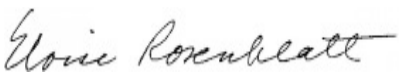
Judith Schubert, a biblical professor from Georgian Court University, surveys the Hebrew Scriptures for the many forms leadership can take in "What Makes a Leader in the Hebrew Bible?" She reminds us of the stories of Abraham who left the place he once called home; the midwives Shiprah and Puah who creatively resisted an unjust law; Moses who initially hesitated to respond to God, but received the law at Sinai and pressed forward in the desert; Joshua who consolidated an ideologically compromised community once they arrived in Canaan; the military heroines Deborah and Jael who didn't hesitate to do battle; David who united the tribes and established a stable monarchy, despite his human flaws. Then, in a time of exile, Isaiah arose-- actually a name given to a series of pastors who comforted, consoled and encouraged their beleaguered communities.

Danielle Gagnon reflects on "The Compass as a Symbol for the 2023 Chapter." She cites Luke 9:1-6, in which Jesus sends out the disciples to exorcise, teach and heal—but he says to take nothing for the journey. Instead of relying on their own material possessions, the disciples are to depend on the people who offer them hospitality, and establishment of mutually caring relations. Danielle remembers Catherine McAuley's powerlessness and vulnerability, her spirit of mutuality and hospitality. This is the Compass--the spirit delegates can adopt for finding their way as they carry out the work of the Chapter.

Mary-Paula Cancienne in "How Do We Describe the Context of These Times?" names a series of global crises which human beings are wrestling with, which threaten their survival and their flourishing. She summarizes: "What's happening in the world? Where is it all going? This is what I mean by "context."' On the list of international and borderless challenges, she includes sustainably feeding 8 billion people, environmental pollution, climate change, regional conflicts that persist after two world wars, the entrenchment of patriarchal religious and political structures that subordinate women, violence against women and children, and racism against ethnic minorities. All the while, scientific advances progress, a growing array of satellites circle the earth and knowledge systems are proliferating. Where and what are the solutions? This is the world we live in and the world of the people we serve.

These articles as a whole suggest a broad curriculum, both for Chapter delegates and Mercy readership. The inter-connections among the articles represent inspiration to guide the Institute at this important moment in congregational history.

Yours,



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

Things to Remember for the 2023 Chapter: Communal Self and Ecclesial Event

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M.

The image of journey weaves through much of the 2023 pre-Chapter materials. This same image weaves through ecclesial documents inaugurating the Synod on Synodality:

> As we begin this synodal process, let us begin by asking ourselves -- all of us, Pope, bishops, priests, religious and laity—whether we, the Christian community embody this 'style' of God, *who travels the paths of history and shares in the life of humanity. Are we prepared for the adventure of this journey...Celebrating a Synod means walking on the same road, walking together*.[1] (Italics added)
>
> In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit. The Synod has three key words: communion, participation and mission.[2]

How providential, what serendipity, can this be – a gathering of our Institute Chapter nestled within a gathering of the Church in whose name we serve? According to the Vatican website, the main subjects of this synodal experience are all the baptized, that is, each of us along with Catholics throughout the world, because all the baptized are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God. [3] As we gather to explore Mercy anew, there is comfort and challenge in the realization that our journey within this larger ecclesial journey might offer mutual enlightenment and enrichment within the larger journey of the cosmos "[waiting] eagerly for the children of God to be revealed" (Romans 8:18).

Similar to the synodal messages, our President Pat McDermott's Chapter announcement speaks of "searching for direction on how to navigate into the future." Our Chapter prayer asks that we "continue our journey to that sacred place of a deep encounter among us." The framework for Chapter action directs us to a compass-logo "[which] centers us…and points us in a particular direction as [we] move forth." Finally, John O'Donohue's poem reminds us that "when you travel you find yourself more attentive now/to the self you bring along."[4]

In the best of circumstances, Chapter delegates are representative of the congregation, not representatives of this or that group, interest, and/or worldview.

In the next few paragraphs, I would like to reflect on "the self we bring along." Not the individual self which each of us brings; but the communal, corporate self which is the essence of a Chapter event. In the best of circumstances, Chapter delegates are representative of the congregation, not representatives of this or that group, interest, and/or worldview. Empowered by the call of the congregation, they do not – and the Chapter does not – stand in isolation from the on-going life of the congregation. They stand as a moment of revelation growing out of and into that communal reality, that common life and energy.

What happens at a Chapter will not be a new thing, but a discovery of a reality shaped by the conscious and unconscious choices made in the daily living of our charism and tradition. In many ways, the Chapter is a sacramental moment for this particular community of believers when all that is real–of grace and of gracelessness – is lifted

up and reflected upon in order to discover God present and working in our midst. Chapter delegates gather precisely to understand, sometimes to discover, always to preserve the meaning of the "communal self" expressed in the congregation/the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy:

> The Institute Chapter, when in session,
> is the highest authority in the Institute.
> Through the Institute Chapter….
> we clarify and renew *our* vision,
> determine priorities
> and respond to changing needs
> in *our* mission and life. (*Constitutions*, #57)

> The responsibilities of the Institute Chapter are to preserve and promote *our* Mercy charism; elect the Institute President and Council; evaluate the spiritual and material *well-being of the Institute*; clarify *our* role in the church and in society; set directions in keeping with our charism; and amend the Institute *Constitutions and Directory*. (Italics added)

There are many facets to this communal self that has seen 195 years of life since Catherine McAuley opened the House of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland, in 1827. Its reality has been shaped by various eras, cultures, and circumstances. Some facets are particular and limited; others are general and broad. In this article, I would like to recall two foundational aspects of our communal self: an ecclesial reality, and that reality the frame for Catherine McAuley's story.

Remembering Our Ecclesial Reality

The deep root of our communal self is ecclesial. Sandra Schneider, early in her work entitled *Finding the Treasure* (2000), offers a startling and comforting observation. She recalls both the enduring and the changing nature of religious life as a life-form within the experience of human history:

> Religious life as a life form and the vocation to undertake it are a phenomena deeply rooted in our humanity…Catholic religious life is a realization of the anthropological archetype of the monastic, which is operative in all the world's great religions…because it is a life, it generates a life form that is organic and integrated….[5]

Most of us are familiar with the long, steady presence of this life-form within the specific tradition of Roman Catholicism, including the significant changes and renovations occasioned by Vatican II. One such change occurred in Paul VI's *Evangelica Testificatio* (1971), an apostolic exhortation on religious life. Paul VI spoke of the charism of religious life as "the fruit of the Holy Spirit who is always at work within the Church." In doing so, he shifted magisterial teaching on religious life from juridical to pneumatic categories, from an understanding of religious life as "a state in life" to an understanding of religious life as "a response to life." Especially for women living within congregations of active religious life, this shift in ecclesial identity was immense.

> Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.

Within a few years, Johannes Metz (1978), also reflecting on religious life as a phenomenon in the Church, observed that

> Religious orders…have something like an innovative function for the Church. They offer productive models for the Church as a whole in the business of growing accustomed to living in new social, economic, intellectual and cultural situations.[6]

Metz saw this innovative function as both a response to life and a prophetic call:

> Against the dangerous accommodations and questionable compromises that the Church (as

> institution) can always incline, [religious congregations] press for the uncompromising nature of the gospel…[7]

The communal energy of congregations, such as the Sisters of Mercy, responded with creativity and commitment to a journey which continues to this day as Pope Francis offers an observation similar to Metz' reflection in his 2013 address to the Union of Superiors General in Rome:

> Evangelical radicalness is not only for religious: it is demanded of all. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up…You should be real witnesses of a world of doing and acting differently."[8]

"The self we bring" carries within it deep, ancestral relationships to a religious tradition (Roman Catholicism) which transmits its faith to each new generation in and through a community of believers. A Chapter cannot be a private matter, then, for it shapes the communal impact of the congregation in its participation in the life and mission of the church. Sandra Schneiders expresses the nature of this impact since Vatican II (1965):

> [Members of religious congregations] by their community life, are aligning themselves with the *ecclesiology of the Church as People of God…*gratefully living among their sisters and brothers the oneness of the Body of Christ….But this Body of Christ, which we are, *exists not just for the Church itself but for the world which God so loved….*[9] (Italics added.)

What can we say of the life of the People of God in our various cultures and experiences? What can we learn from the manner in which the Church relates to the world around it? What can we offer to enrich both that life and that outward relationship? The gift of the Spirit working within each individual and within our communal story is blessing and burden. The blessing ensures we are not alone in our search for authentic expressions of mercy and justice. The burden lies in a responsibility to listen, to dialogue, to learn and to contribute. Such listening, learning, dialoguing and contributing are particularly focused and centered when a religious congregation joins together in Chapter.

Marie Cimperman in her book *Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope* quite succinctly assesses the current circumstance of many congregations:

> Some communities have ministries in places where they can influence those who have power, or they may have positions of influence themselves. The positions of influence are for the sake of the margins. This is a delicate and dangerous place to be, for it takes skill and centeredness in God's mission not to succumb to the real temptations to power, privilege, and wealth.[10]

Metz places the call to prophecy within the Church, while Pope Francis suggests the broad venue of the world.

We have a communal self that can influence and does influence the Church and the world. The challenge to utilize that position of influence for the sake of the margins opens many paths for decision-making and for direction-setting.

This challenge also returns us to those earlier reflections by Johannes Metz and Pope Francis which highlighted the prophetic nature of religious life – understanding prophecy as "pressing for the uncompromising nature of the gospel" and "waking the world up… [by being] witnesses of a world of doing and acting differently." Metz places the call to prophecy within the Church, while Pope Francis suggests the broad venue of the world. In either case, action toward the call requires communal prayer, dialogue, and discernment.

In a particular way, the Church and the world hunger for a witness that is grounded in a Gospel

response to human needs and that gives voice to oppressions occasioned by unredeemed processes and structures. Such processes and structures mute the voices of persons marginalized and disregard their concerns. Within the Church community as well as the world community, coalitions to address such processes and structures are growing. Public submissions to the Synod on Synodality attest to this hunger in the Church and to efforts to address the "uncompromising nature of the Gospel." Voice is being found for the sake of the community of believers, especially those on the margins.

The long tradition within the Church of the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* (the sense of the faith/sense of the faithful) takes on new significance in a synodal Church. As John J. Burkhard notes in his work, *The Sense of the Faith in History* (2022), the existence of this phenomenon is not new in the experience of the Church, but newly discovered:

> …the church [is] familiar with the idea that all believing Christians played a role in confessing and witnessing to the truth of Christian revelation. The time frame has stretched from a century and a half before the Council of Trent up through the apologetical writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries… [into the twenty-first century].[11]

Indeed, the concept has been embedded in the law of the Church:

> **Canon 748**. All persons are bound to seek the truth in matters concerning God and God's Church; by divine law they also are obliged and have the right to embrace and to observe that truth *which they have recognized*. (Italics added)
>
> **Canon 212 §3**. In accord with the *knowledge, competence, and preeminence* which they possess, [the Christian faithful] have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church…

A careful reading of ecclesiastical history illustrates the manner in which the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* has consistently constituted one of the sources of theology and theological thought; carefully distinguished from public opinion, uninformed dissent, and political or social expediency. Doris Gottmoeller (2021) highlights the "high bar" posited for proclamations based on *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium*. She cites a passage from *Dei Verbum* which underscores the importance of careful study and honest expression of one's experience as a faithful Christian:

> For there is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the *contemplation and study made by believers*, who treasure these things in their hearts, through the *intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience*, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession, the sure gift of truth."[12] (Italics added)

Discipline and discernment are key elements in determining the *sensus fidei* in any particular instance. Engagement and participation, informed by study and prayer, mark communities of believers who contribute steadily and constructively to the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium*.

Burkhard offers several examples in which the *sensus fidei/sensus fidelium* has operated in the history of the Church and instances in which the on-going voice of the faithful has corrected or enhanced hierarchical teaching. He also notes the contributions which contemporary writers and church leaders are making to this phenomenon within the Church, including Pope Francis in his movement toward synodality. A document entitled *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, produced by the International Theological Commission in 2014, summarizes the biblical teaching and historical development of this element within the

life of the Church and concludes with a strong affirmation of active participation on the part of the community of believers:

> By means of the *sensus fidei*, the faithful are able not only to recognize what is in accordance with the Gospel and to reject what is contrary to it, but also… to sense what Pope Francis has called 'new ways for the journey in faith of the whole pilgrim people'…The discernment of such new ways, opened up and illumined by the Holy Spirit, will be vital for the new evangelization.[13]

The deep root of our communal self is ecclesial. In a very real sense, our Chapter event is an ecclesial event. How will our conversations contribute to the recognition of what is in accordance with the Gospel and to the rejection of what is contrary to it? How will our Chapter actions contribute to the discernment of "new ways for the journey in faith of the whole pilgrim people"?

Remembering Catherine's Story

The deep root of our communal self is also greatly influenced by a story of Mercy shaped by the person of Catherine McAuley. As far as we can glean from her story and her writings, Catherine believed in a God revealed within a specific community of faith, within a specific theology and tradition: Roman Catholicism. Her words to her Sisters were unambiguous on this point: "It imports us to be well-instructed in the doctrine of the Church in order to teach the same…."[14] Catherine McAuley was a woman of the Church – the Church of her time and culture. In her letters, occasions were often marked in relation to the current feast or the coming feast: "We left Cork on the 12th [of September]– intending to stay a day in Charleville and go into Limerick on the Exaltation of the Cross…"[15] We find in Catherine's practices an awareness of and engagement with the major traditional devotions of the Church. "The Thirty Days Prayer to our Blessed Redeemer" and "The Thirty Days Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary," which Catherine was fond of initiating at each new foundation, are found in the standard prayer books available in Ireland in her day. Her letters reveal careful attention to the sacramental and spiritual life both of her colleagues and those in her care.

Catherine focused her work within the context of the Catholic Church, especially the local Church. She worked diligently with Rev. Daniel Murray, Archbishop of Dublin, and other leading clergy to occasion a Catholic renaissance which was happening as a result of the repeal of the Penal Laws decades prior to Catherine's birth. A significant piece of their diocesan plan for revitalizing the faith centered on caring for the basic needs of the many persons who were poor, and providing educational opportunities for children of families who were poor and not-so-poor.

How will our Chapter actions contribute to the discernment of "new ways for the journey in faith of the whole pilgrim people"?

Fundamentally, Catherine was a woman of the Gospel. Her personal faith and her daily choices on behalf of the congregation forming around her were rooted in her understanding of the Scriptures and her incarnational and Christological orientation to life. She sought to imitate in her life the Christ she found in Scriptures and in devotional practices. In a particular manner, the Christ of Calvary was her mentor and model. Catherine understood that an authentic living of the gospel calls us deeply into relationship with Jesus the Christ and into the realities of our time in a continual incarnation of divinity into humanity.

Her writings and actions seem based on a belief that Jesus Christ entered history, redeemed human experience, and continues to be present in the resurrected Spirit moving within all creation.

She strove in her daily life to make visible the living word of the Gospel because that living word remained for her the only word capable of redemption and revelation. For her, the present necessity –in her time and our time – became the precious locus of a full flourishing of Gospel living. Catherine strove to understand the people of Dublin as well as the people of Carlow, Booterstown, and other foundations. She counseled her Sisters that "every place has its own peculiarities and feelings which must be yielded to when possible."[16] She was attentive to the immediate, basic needs of those before her as well as to matters of the spirit. As Angela Bolster notes in speaking of Catherine's apostolic spirituality: "her apostolic spirituality may be said to have effectively translated the Gospel into the idiom of her time and to have conveyed this ideal to others" (*Positio*, 830-831).[17]

Application

The challenge before us is precisely how to effectively translate the Gospel into the idiom of our time and to convey this ideal to others.

The deep root of our communal self has consistently been responsive to human need. In much of our history that response has been direct in works of mercy that fed the hungry, instructed the ignorant, visited the sick, and counseled the doubtful. More recently, we have begun to combine works of mercy and works of justice, having learned from others in the Church and world that systems need redemption as well as persons. The 2017 Chapter Recommitment called us "to deepen our relationship with God and one another, and to intensify our work in communion with others who seek a more just and inclusive world….Our suffering world calls us to speak and act with integrity and clear intention." Work toward a more just and inclusive Church and world will not be equally appreciated and welcomed in many sectors of society and of Church, especially among peoples benefitting from the status quo of economic, social and religious systems. Since Catherine's time, however, the story of Mercy contains innumerable instances of calling into question a particular status quo. We have a communal self that can influence and does influence the Church and the world.

Catherine McAuley sought to serve the needs of her time in imitation of Christ's compassion toward suffering people. She dedicated herself as a woman of the Church to its powerful mission in the world to extend God's mercy to those in need, and take initiative to relieve injustice. For her, that meant creating new possibilities and challenging the status quo. Her ecclesial identity gave her strength and purpose. The community of women who gathered around her drew inspiration from her vision. They also claimed strength from their Catholic faith and shared sense of mission, even though at times they struggled with local Church clergy.

Their work was not easy. Nor is ours today. Catherine advised her colleagues, "Let us take one day only in hands at a time." In this one day—this time of Chapter—let us claim Catherine's vision, her ecclesial identity, and the strength of her sisters who, together, took up her mission of extending God's mercy in the world. In this time of Chapter, we dialogue with one another, strong in our sense of shared gospel purpose. We are confident that the work we have already done together, and can accomplish in the future, is greater than any of us could do alone. We trust that the Holy Spirit is sustaining us as individuals, and empowering us as a community. ◆

Endnotes

[1] Homily of Pope Francis on the occasion of the opening of the synod, October 10, 2021. Accessed on July 26, 2022 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

[2] Address of Pope Francis for the opening of the synod, October 9, 2021. Accessed on July 26, 2022 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html

[3] https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-23/who-is-the-synod-for.html

[4]All pre-Chapter materials can be found at https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Announcing-Chapter-2023---Anunciando-el-Cap-tulo-2023.html?soid=1131648304566&aid=3ox-7_OkBr0 – John O'Donohue's poem entitled "For the Traveler" can be found by clicking on the link: *Chapter framing materials.* This website was accessed on August 8, 2022.

[5]Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000): pp. 38, 39, and 40. "Part One: Locating Religious Life in its Human Context" explores the anthropological, psychological and sociological positioning of religious life across cultures and throughout history. The references here are taken from the Summary, pp. 38-40.

[6] Johannes Metz, *Followers of Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, l978): 11.

[7]Johannes Metz, pp. 11-12.

[8] Quoted from "'Wake Up the World' Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life" in Maria Cimperman's *Religious Life for Our World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020):165.

[9]Sandra Schneiders, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form" in *The National Catholic Reporter* (January, 2010)

[10] Maria Cimperman, p. 24.

[11]John J. Burkhard, *The Sense of the Faith in History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022): 22.

[12] Doris Gottmoeller, "Change in the Church: The Legacy of Yves Congar, O.P." in *The MAST Journal* (Vol. 28, No. 1, 2021): 6.

[13]*Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, Conclusion §127 (2014) accessed on August 8, 2022 at https://www.vatican.va/roman curia/ congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html

[14] *Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley* (St. Louis, MO: Vincentian Press, 1927):15.

[15] Mary Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Baltimore, MD: The Catholic University of America Press): 156.

[16] Quote of the Day for February 1 found on the Mercy International Association website: https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/quote-of-the-day/page-12/. The website was accessed on August 8, 2022.

[17] Angela Bolster, Vice-postulator for the cause of the canonization of Catherine McAuley, compiled the *Positio* and presented it for examination on December 12, 1984. The reference here comes from a personal, xeroxed copy of the document.

The Canonical Notion of a General Chapter

Sharon Euart, R.S.M.

Introduction

The Institute Chapter Planning Committee has invited me to share some observations and reflections from a canonical perspective on the nature and purposes of the general Chapter, the post-Vatican II experience of Chapter, how the Chapter differs from an assembly, and current issues or questions about general Chapters.

Structures and processes for participation are not new to religious life. They were always part of religious governance, but their significance was minimal at a time when very little change was desired or anticipated. Chapters met periodically to elect a superior general or provincial or to modify rules and constitutions, but the need for change was rare. There was no input from members at large into the Chapter agendas. The deliberations were secret, the results were promulgated and life continued.

The mandate to participate in processes of change meant that religious developed skills in communication, consultation, and dialogue.

Vatican II's mandate to re-examine religious governance was revolutionary given the experience of religious life for decades prior to the Council. Adapting the "manner of living, praying, and working to current physical and psychological conditions, to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture [and] the social and economic circumstances" of the day was a truly radical concept. In *Perfectae caritatis*, the council went on to say, "The way in which communities are governed should be re-examined in light of these same standards," and "constitutions, directories, custom books, books of prayers and ceremonies, and similar compilations [were] to be suitably revised and brought into harmony with the documents of this sacred Synod" (*Perfectae caritatis*, §3).

Since Vatican II, the Chapter, and particularly the general Chapter, has served as an instrument through which major decisions have been made regarding the renewal of religious life. In response to the *motu proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* which called for "a period of special experimentation," few aspects of religious governance have undergone more variations since Vatican II. Structurally, the "Chapter" has become a symbol of participation, consultation, and inclusion for both ordinary, ongoing governance as well as for the extraordinary, legislative occasions in the life of the institute. It was to give expression to the involvement of all members for the good of the whole, for the common good. The mandate to participate in processes of change meant that religious developed skills in communication, consultation, and dialogue. This experience raised questions about who would participate in the Chapter, a question that has engaged Chapter steering or planning committees and participants for many years.

Historical Perspective

The notion of "Chapter" dates to the fourth century with the Pachomian monks who gathered once annually for the appointment of superiors and for reports on the various houses of monks. A more formal structure of Chapter developed in the sixth century when the monks, in accord with the Rule of St. Benedict, gathered with the abbot or abbess for a reading from the Rule and to discern together. In time, the Chapter body, a means of structural reform in monastic life, was given

greater authority, including deliberative authority. In the twelfth century, as the mendicant orders developed, the monastic Chapter became impractical since many members were scattered throughout the world. As apostolic congregations evolved from the mendicant experience, the Chapter became an important way not only to conduct the business of the congregation but also to unify its members. The missioning of members to other countries and the deployment of religious to various apostolic ministries led to the development of the more elaborate representative Chapters required of all religious institutes.[1]

Post-Vatican II Experience

Following Vatican II, general Chapters, mandated as the primary means for ongoing renewal in religious life, became highly participative with the proliferation of pre-Chapter sessions and the need for Chapters to meet more frequently to enact the legislation needed to respond to the call for renewal. Later, non-participating observers were often added to Chapters or to study sessions associated with the Chapter. By the late 1970's and early 1980's Chapters were becoming less legislative in their functions (though still carrying out the required canonical functions, especially the revision of constitutions) and more direction-setting and reflective in tone and in decision-making.

The Assembly

At the same time, in the 1970's, small and mostly geographically proximate religious institutes introduced the innovation of the non-legislative participative assembly. Initially the assembly experience was the first of a two-step model which included a delegate Chapter in the second stage. This model provided the opportunity for increased participation for building support around issues and goal-setting, while leaving the deliberations and decision-making role to a smaller representative Chapter body. At times, however, the assembly took on a quasi-legislative function and became a source of confusion vis a vis its role and its relationship to the Chapter.[2]

The assembly, in the perception of some religious, has become an alternative to the representative Chapter. This view is influenced by societal trends affecting religious life over several decades. For example, the authors of a study in the 1990's that focused on organizational and structural aspects of religious life found that members of religious institutes were consistently dissatisfied with the degree of influence they had in the congregations.[3]

Also, related to the development of participative structures to affirm collaboration and inclusivity is the emphasis on creating processes for consensus-building.

A second, perhaps more influential trend is the recognition of values of inclusivity, equality, freedom for self-determination, as well as an awareness of the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the institutional Church. This recognition has motivated women to exercise a more enabling exercise of power. Also, related to the development of participative structures to affirm collaboration and inclusivity is the emphasis on creating processes for consensus-building.

The structure of an assembly can be an important moment in the life of an institute. It is a gathering of members who wish to participate in carrying out responsibilities assigned to it in proper law. Most often the assembly has the responsibility to make recommendations to the general Chapter. As a participative structure, at least in concept, it gave a "unified voice" to the those participating. Assemblies and other gatherings provide venues for members and, at

times others who wish to participate, to do so in accord with proper law.

In the United States, structures and practices related to its form of democratic governance have also influenced choices about how religious institutes govern themselves. The Church is not a democracy. However, democratic structures are rooted in the Catholic tradition. Notions of equality among the baptized, collegiality, the notion of the people of God, and subsidiarity are examples of democratic constructs.

Canonical Provisions

The 1983 Code of Canon Law contains a new, very brief article on Chapters with only three canons; only one of the canons concerns the general Chapter. Canon 631 describes the nature, purpose, and functions of the general Chapter. The other two canons address provincial Chapters and other structures of participation and consultation.

The first paragraph of canon 631 recognizes the general Chapter as the supreme authority of the institute according to the constitutions thus giving it the broadest notion of religious governance or the ordering of the life of the religious institute toward its purpose. No other structure of governance in religious institutes reflects so profoundly the principles of representation and cooperation of members as fully as the general Chapter.[4]

> *Canon 631§1: The general Chapter, which holds supreme authority in the institute according to the norm of the constitutions, is to be composed in such a way that, representing the entire institute, it becomes a true sign of its unity in charity. It is for the general Chapter principally: to protect the patrimony[5] of the institute mentioned in c. 578, promote suitable renewal according to that patrimony, elect the supreme moderator, treat affairs of greater importance, and issue norms which all are bound to obey.*
>
> *§2: The constitutions are to define the composition and extent of the power of a Chapter; proper law is to determine further the order to be observed in the celebration of the Chapter, especially in what pertains to elections and the manner of handling affairs.*
>
> *§3:According to the norms determined in proper law, not only provinces and local communities, but also any member can freely send wishes and suggestions to a general Chapter.*

Let's look at what a general Chapter is and its authority according to paragraph 1 of canon 631.

The general Chapter is a collegial body that represents the entire institute; it is a microcosm of the whole institute, not of a particular constituency. Members are not elected to "represent" certain ideas, ministries, geographic areas, or theological perspectives. The common good of the institute and its heritage should be the focus for each delegate and participant. The general Chapter is to be a sign of unity and charity among the members of the institute. It reflects the communion of members in a representative way. The foundational spirit of seeking God's will for the community, and not our own, is essential for the members of the Chapter in service of the common good.

The authority of the general Chapter is limited to its function – essentially it is a legislative and policy-making body which is also an electoral college for the election of the supreme moderator and councilors. When it is in session it is the supreme authority of the institute. It exercises authority on a temporary basis, namely, when it is in session. It is a unique body in its nature and its function. It combines elective

representation, consultation and deliberative action, normative authority in the selection of the person(s) who will oversee the implementation of its decisions, with the responsibility to promote and implement renewal for the life and ministry of the institute. The scope of the general Chapter's responsibilities includes election of the leadership (superior general and council); treatment of affairs of greater importance; direction-setting for the institute for the upcoming years; and suitable renewal of the institute (c. 631§1).

The second paragraph of canon 631 gives a religious institute significant leeway in determining how the constitution defines the composition or make up of the Chapter body and the extent of its authority. The process for the selection of the delegate body is determined in proper law. Delegates are most often drawn from a broad range of members considering ages, ministries, geographic regions, or countries. They can be elected at large by the entire membership or by sub-groups such as a province, local area, mission group, or age cohort. What is important is that the delegate body reflect the diversity of the institute. Likewise, proper law can also identify various ways in which all members of the institute may participate in the preparatory work of the Chapter.

The nature of a general Chapter as a representative body with canonical responsibilities is an ecclesial event in the life of the institute and the Church…

What the canons clarify is that an assembly is not the same as a general Chapter. While assemblies are important participative structures for consultation, collaboration and communication, the assembly is not a substitute for a general Chapter. The nature of a general Chapter as a representative body with canonical responsibilities is an ecclesial event in the life of the institute and the Church in which its delegates share responsibility for the governance and direction of the institute.[6]

Current Questions/Issues

In recent years, several issues related to general Chapters have arisen from leaders and members of religious institutes. These include the composition of the Chapter, self-selection of delegates, participation in the Chapter sessions, and preparation for the celebration of a general Chapter. I will offer a few observations on each topic.

Some questions about the composition of General Chapters often focus on "Chapters of the whole." A "Chapter of the whole" or an all-member Chapter as it is sometimes called, is customary in the traditions of many monastic communities. In other situations, some small institutes, usually 100 members or fewer, and whose members are physically present in one geographic area, have requested and obtained permission from Rome to hold a Chapter in which all perpetually professed members of the institute have active and passive voice. Such permission can be given for pontifical institutes by Rome, or by the diocesan bishop for diocesan institutes. Ordinarily, however, the Holy See does not give approval for a "Chapter of the whole" unless the institute meets these criteria.[7]

Given the traditions, size, and geographic spread of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, for example, and the requirement in universal law that the general Chapter be a representative body of the institute, a Chapter of the whole or an all-member Chapter in which all perpetually professed members are delegates does not seem to be a viable option for the Institute at least in the near future.

Another issue often raised regarding the composition of a general Chapter is self-selection of delegates. During the period of experimentation following Vatican II in the late 1960s and 1970s, self-selection of general Chapter delegates was

introduced to ensure greater commitment to and ownership of decisions by reflecting the values of participation and inclusion. The process of self-selection permitted any perpetually professed member who wished to attend the general Chapter as a delegate to do so. However, the practice of a self-selected delegate Chapter was not in keeping with the conciliar documents (*Perfectae caritatis* §14 and *Ecclesiae sanctae* §II3- 18) which express the fundamental principle and right of all members of the institute to have an effective role in the selection of Chapter delegates. Election of Chapter delegates is a means whereby members share responsibility for and participate in the governance of the institute.

The general Chapter holds in sacred trust the patrimony of an institute – that is, the intentions of the founders regarding the nature, purpose, spirit, character, and traditions of the institute.

While self-selection of Chapter delegates was seen during the period of renewal experimentation as a vehicle for individual initiative and responsibility, it had in many instances promoted individualism in that it precludes a call from the community, that is, an assertion that "we believe you have something to give to the Chapter and the future of the institute." [8]

In some institutes today the process for selecting delegates is two-fold: any member who wishes to serve as a delegate may volunteer or self-nominate as a delegate for the general Chapter. This step is followed by an election in which the members of the institute vote for the delegates according to the procedures determined in proper law and in keeping with the canonical requirement that a vote be free, secret, certain, absolute, and determined (c. 172§2).

Another issue related to "participation" in a general Chapter is consideration of the role of observers, member participants and associates in light of the nature and purpose of the general Chapter. It is important that an institute's guidelines define the various roles in such a way that there is no blurring of lines in the roles and responsibilities. Often pre-Chapter sessions provide opportunities for consultation from a broad cross-section of members and, when appropriate, associates of an institute. While associates are important to the spiritual life and ministries of an institute, their role is not one of governance.

Extending invitations to observers to attend the general Chapter has been part of the history of general Chapters. Observers often are members of the institute, representatives of other institutes in the same charism family, or have a close connection to the institute. They may be invited to speak on a particular topic, but they are not delegates. The same is true for members of the institute who are invited to attend the general Chapter. The guidelines should determine when "participants or observers" may speak on the floor of the Chapter. What is important is that the roles are clear. Observers and participants are not members of the general Chapter and, while they may "participate" in the Chapter sessions in accord with the guidelines, as appropriate, they do not hold a governance role.

One of the requirements for Chapter delegates is preparation for the general Chapter. This means participating in all pre-Chapter sessions, studying Chapter materials, viewing webinars, networking with other delegates, listening to the voices of members, and becoming informed about agenda items. Preparation is a serious responsibility for delegates and one that should not be taken lightly. This is particularly important for discussion of issues that may require further study by elected leadership.

As religious institutes address issues related to general Chapters, awareness and understanding

of the nature, purpose and requirements of a general Chapter can be helpful. It is important that delegates to a general Chapter, especially those delegates who have never participated in a general Chapter, know what a Chapter is and how it should function. The general Chapter holds in sacred trust the patrimony of an institute – that is, the intentions of the founders regarding the nature, purpose, spirit, character, and traditions of the institute. It is an ecclesial event, a structure of communion with the Church.

For the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the Institute general Chapter holds a significant role in the life of the Institute. Paragraph 57 of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas describes its role: "through the Institute Chapter we clarify and renew our vision, determine our priorities and respond to changing needs in our mission and life." The institute Chapter is a sacred event, a faith experience. Chapter delegates are called to represent the Institute with a focus on the common good and to deepen the bonds of union and charity that make the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas a religious institute in the Church founded by Catherine McAuley, a sacrament of the body of Christ. ◆

Endnotes

[1]Catherine M. Harmer, M.M.S., "Chapters Present and Future," *Review for Religious* (January-February, 1994): 120-121.
[2]See Catherine C. Darcy, R.S.M., "Models of Participation in Religious Community Chapters," *CLSA Proceedings* 57 (1995): 181-200.
[3] See David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).
[4] Rose McDermott, S.S.J., "Governance in Religious Institutes: Structures of Participation and Representation Canons 631-633," *The Jurist 69* (2009): 448.
[5]See canon 578 for a definition of patrimony: the institute's nature, spirit, character, and sound traditions.
[6] Eduardo Pironio, "Reflections on General Chapter: A Salvific, Ecclesial and Family Event," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Sept. 16, 1976): 9-10.
[7] See *Canon Law Digest* 10:102-105.
[8] Elizabeth Cotter, *The General Chapter in a Religious Institute: With Particular Attention to the IBVM Loreto Branch*, (JCD Doctoral Dissertation, St. Paul's University, 2008): 282.

The Moral Responsibility of the Chapter Delegate

Patricia Talone, R.S.M.

Being elected to serve as a delegate to a general Chapter is a tremendous gift for any Sister of Mercy. It means that one's sisters in community believe that the individual possesses the character and capability to make decisions that will shape and direct the congregation into a viable future. It is a sign of trust in the sister's values, commitment, and ability to communicate to others across generational and cultural divides.[1] Community members call upon their colleague to serve in the primary governing body of the congregation. A sage German philosophical axiom reminds us that "every gift is a task." [2] The call to serve as a Chapter delegate requires an active response from the honored delegate. Because the call to serve comes from within both the community and the sister, her response is to God, to the Church and to the members of the religious congregation in which she has vowed her life.

Because the call to serve comes from within both the community and the sister, her response is to God, to the Church and to the members of the religious congregation in which she has vowed her life.

Individual's Moral Responsibility

The 2023 Chapter Planning Committee recently shared rich resources provided to delegates by Sharon Euart, R.S.M., outlining the canonical notion of a Chapter and at the same time highlighting the obligations of delegates. This current article narrows that canonical focus a bit to examine a delegate's responsibility from a moral perspective. Undoubtedly, this approach can be simpler and more straightforward. Some might even say it is basically common sense. Why approach this from an individual's moral responsibility? *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, describing morality, tells us that it precedes ethics, moving beyond theory to denote concrete behavior or actions. While Ethics is the science or study of right behavior, Morality is even more fundamental. It is seen as human conduct responding to the ideal of what is good, right and fitting in each circumstance.[3] The current article arises from the author's academic life focus on moral theology (theological ethics) but even more upon the rich personal experience of engaging as a delegate in several Congregational and Institute general Chapters.

What Happens at a Chapter

Prior to the congregation's voting for delegates, the Chapter Elections committee outlined qualities indispensable for these persons. They include having the ability to participate in the deliberations and work of the Chapter; possessing familiarity with the Constitutions and the Acts of the last Chapter; engaging in the life of the Institute and participating in significant institute and community initiatives.

The function of the Chapter itself is clearly outlined in the Constitutions of the congregation.[4] These comprise the obligations to: preserve and protect the Mercy charism,[5] elect the Institute president and council, evaluate the spiritual life and well-being of the Institute, clarify the Institute's role in Church and society, set direction in keeping with the charism, and amend the Constitutions and Directory.

Because the moral responsibilities of a Chapter delegate arise from a call to serve the Congregation, they are constitutive of the gift of that call and are most often experienced not as a burden, but as a joy and privilege. Far from being onerous, the sister delegate, having agreed to

serve, embraces the obligations as part of the honor she has been accorded. Nor are the obligations complicated. First among these is simply Being There. This means showing up, being on time, ready to work, ready to listen, ready to learn, and ready to pray. It does no service to oneself, to one's congregation, or to the Church to approach the duties of a delegate half-heartedly. Since the Institute's Chapter participants are large in number (over two hundred persons including delegates, alternates, observers, and staff), it would be impossible to have deep and meaningful conversations with everyone in attendance. Hence, the coordinating committee involves each person in pre-work at a local level, in committee work and, while Chapter is in session, in assigned groups.

Another, at times more elusive responsibility of a Chapter delegate, is to adjust one's view or vision of the world and even of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, and of one's own place in these realities to this very current situation.

Being there for the persons closest at hand is a moral obligation for the delegate, and is integral to true communal discernment. Furthermore, "being there" at more informal times–meals, casual gatherings and breaks in the schedule–provides the delegate the rich opportunity to get to know community members more fully.

Another moral obligation is one that each of us learned as children: Do your homework. Coming together as an organization for the work of self-governance requires concerted effort from every member of the group. Especially for delegates, the responsibility involves "participating in a Chapter session, studying Chapter materials, viewing webinars, networking with other delegates, listening to the voices of members, and becoming informed about the agenda items."[6]

Whether this is your first Chapter or your tenth, Chapter work always involves reading, listening, thinking, questioning, and circling back to clarify again and again. It is, of necessity, an iterative process. The delegate is listening not just to the voices of the needy of the world, nor to the voices of other (albeit wise and holy) Sisters of Mercy, but to the voice of God. As we know from Scripture, our God speaks in a "still, small voice."[7] However, let not the term "homework" indicate to the reader that this work is primarily academic or intellectual. Each delegate is a woman possessing a particular culture, background, religious formation, as well as communal and ministerial experience. These factors, while they may be highly personal and distinctive, are brought to bear upon communal discernment. Hence, the assigned homework involves a thoughtful and prayerful integration of daily life into the fabric of Mercy. Anyone who has been a Girl Scout knows that the scout's motto is "Be Prepared." The Scout's Handbook declares that "a Girl Scout is ready to help out wherever she is needed. Willingness to serve is not enough; you must know how to do the job well…"[8] The same injunction holds true for Chapter delegates.

Another, at times more elusive responsibility of a Chapter delegate, is to adjust one's view or vision of the world and even of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, and of one's own place in these realities to this very current situation. This adjustment differs for each person. Using the image of sight or vision, it may mean fine-tuning my lens to improve either distance or close sight. It certainly means stepping back from my own world view and experience to embrace the international Mercy world.

Chapter is an Ecclesial Event

Sharon Euart's canonical text highlights two critical areas that require close attention. First, a

general Chapter is an ecclesial event "in the life of the Institute and the Church."[9] The work of a Chapter goes far beyond Mercy housekeeping, renewal, re-structuring or even election of leaders. The direction of a general Chapter of a religious congregation impacts the local and the universal Church just as it affects the life of the congregation's members. At times this means that delegates who may be unfamiliar with canonical language must adjust their lenses to "think with the mind of the Church." The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, particularly since embracing its critical concerns, has labored diligently to include others in the "Mercy world" (Associates, Companions, Boards of Trustees, colleagues, friends) in its core commitments. Far from being an "alternative Church," Mercy's core commitments exemplify the teaching, tradition and practice of the faith and institutional Church through which we serve.

Serving the Common Good

Another way of looking at this ecclesial reality, is to recognize that a delegate is called to serve the common good of the Institute. Sometimes this can be hard for those sisters raised in a United States culture and country to completely grasp. We may be tempted to see a delegate as one who is elected to represent a constituency, not unlike a representative or senator from one's local area or state.

Nothing could be further from the moral ideal presented by Chapter service. It is well to remember that the concept of the common good is not simply a hallmark of beloved Catholic Social Teaching. Dr. John Tropman, emeritus professor of Social Work at University of Michigan, wrote eloquently about this reality in his book, *The Catholic Ethic, and the Spirit of Community* from a sociological and cultural perspective.[10] Tropman observes that this spirit of community is the source of the Church's complete commitment to the poor and underserved. He sees it as a world view that places respect for the individual along with the good of the community at the center of decision-making, sharing of resources and actions.

While the term "common good" was not part of the parlance of Ireland of the 1830's, it is obviously engrained in the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy and in the actions, letters and axioms of our beloved foundress.

From a canonical perspective, Sharon Euart notes in her commentary, "The common good of the institute and its heritage should be the focus for each delegate and participant. The general Chapter is to be a sign of unity and charity among the members of the institute. It reflects the communion of members in a representative way. The foundational spirit of seeking God's will for the community, and not our own, is essential for the members of the Chapter in service of the common good."[11]

The foundational spirit of seeking God's will for the community, and not our own, is essential for the members of the Chapter in service of the common good.

Conclusion

The characteristics or virtues outlined in this brief reflection–being there, doing one's homework, an ecclesial vision, and pursuit of the common good–do not comprise all the moral commitments of the delegate, nor is that this writer's intention. They are a reminder of the serious obligations the delegate assumes in the name of the whole congregation and in response to the unique signs and events of our times. Recognizing that every gift one receives is also a task, they remind us of some of the desired moral ideals that each member of the institute assumes as we together shape our desired future. Presumably, these characteristics will help the delegate to maintain focus on the Chapter's compass, holding us all close to our center–God and the Spirit of Catherine McAuley.◆

Endnotes

[1] Chapter Coordinating Committee. August 24, 2022. Accessible on Merced. I quote from the text that accompanies Sharon Euart's slides and is noted as "transcript" on the Chapter website. 9, 10. Sharon notes that the call from community members asserts that "we believe you have something to give to the Chapter and the future of the institute."

[2] As with many other idiomatic expressions, the axiom *"jede Gabe ist eine Aufgabe"* doesn't translate precisely into English. Aufgabe can mean task, duty, mission. It recognizes that a gift calls for a response from the receiver and carries with it a moral responsibility.

[3] https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10559a.htm. New Advent/Encyclopedia/Morality.

[4] Constitutions of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. §59.

[5] Euart. P. 6. Canon law speaks of the patrimony of a congregation. In common legal or financial parlance, this is often interpreted as the financial or material resources of an organization. However, that is a strictly minimalist rendering of the notion. When speaking of a religious congregation, patrimony means more importantly the Institute's nature, spirit, character, and sound traditions. In other words, the heart of the congregation.

[6] Euart. 11.

[7] 1 Kings 19:11-13. General Chapters may be engaging, dramatic, and sometimes even contentious. Delegates can learn from Elijah the prophet to sit and wait for the quiet word of God.

[8] *Girl Scout Handbook (1947).* Explained at https://www.girlscouts.org/en/members/for-volunteers/traditions-and-ceremonies.html#traditions.

[9] Euart, 9, 11.

[10] John E. Tropman. *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Community*. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1995).

[11] Euart, 7.

The Compass as Symbol for the 2023 Chapter

Danielle Gagnon, R.S.M.

When we were kids, my brother and I loved to go on adventures. On particularly alluring summer mornings, we made extensive plans to spend the whole day exploring the "woods" at the end of our cul-de-sac, less than five acres of not-yet-developed land in Dracut, Massachusetts, a small suburb next to Lowell and thirty miles north of Boston. We woke early and discussed what we needed to bring in our backpacks: snacks, bug spray, pen and paper, always the compass my grandfather had given my brother. We argued about the need for other items like a Walkman and cassette tapes, which I contended were essential. My brother, on the other hand, insisted we bring along jars to collect specimens. I thought it better to leave nature where we found it. Our big summer-time adventures never lasted as long as we planned. They ended when the snacks were depleted.

When I think back to these pre-angst, pre-teen years, I wonder at our simplicity, our imagination, and our curiosity. The impetus for our exploration was simple but profound. Though I would not have expressed it as such then, I realize now that we wanted to come to know our own backyard more intimately and to spend the day untethered of indoor restrictions. We craved the freedom to imagine what we might see or hear, what might find us; to imagine what animal dug that hole and what bird made that noise; to imagine what it would be like to live in the woods forever. My younger self and my little-little brother teach me today that undertaking exploration to which Chapter 2023 invites us-- necessitates a predisposition to curiosity.

My younger self and my little-little brother teach me today that undertaking exploration to which Chapter 2023 invites us-- necessitates a predisposition to curiosity.

Exploring Mercy Anew

We have been called to this particular moment in time when our sacred work is to conjure up enough curiosity to explore anew that which has claimed our lives, the way we name ourselves, the meaning of Mercy. This call finds old familiarity in my childhood desire to more intimately know my own backyard. The call finds resonance for my spirit in longing for the freedom to explore without the weight of mental restrictions, preconceived notions, or outcomes to which I may be attached. How do we encounter Mercy-- that which we know so intimately-- anew?

As I prayed with this question, I was led to the gospel of Luke 9:1-6, in which Jesus sends the apostles to do works in his name.

> When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: 'Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay here until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, leave that town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.' So, they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

Jesus gives them instructions, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money - not even an extra tunic." These directives hold wisdom for us as we explore Mercy anew, as we journey into our 2023 Institute Chapter.

Luke 9:1-6 - A Feminist Interpretation

Of the many ways there are to read and interpret Jesus' instructions to the disciples in the ninth chapter of Luke, I am drawn to a feminist interpretation offered by Barbara Reid in the Wisdom Commentary Series. Reid explains that the ancient Greek text begins with the word "nothing" (Lk 9:3) and its place of prominence in the instruction is no accident.

The emphasis on "nothing" means that no value is to be placed on material goods, even the most basic items needed for survival. Reid suggests that, instead, the focus should be on the mutuality of relationship born of hospitality. "The model of mission is a two-way exchange of gifts. Hospitality extended to apostles is as important as the itinerant preaching and healing."[1] We are challenged to consider that Jesus sent the apostles to preach and heal in his name with the desire for equitable transformation: a change of heart as much for his friends as for those to whom they were sent.

Their only possession was authority from Jesus to do what they were doing, to go where they were going.

The apostles were empowered with authority from Jesus to perform works in his name; however, with instructions to carry nothing, he ensured that they would not be powerful. This must have been an experience of humility for these messengers endowed with the words of the Word but with nothing to show for it, nothing to hold in their hands, and nothing material to offer in return for food and shelter. Their only possession was authority from Jesus to do what they were doing, to go where they were going. This authority served as the compass that guided their journey and led them deep into the heart of the mission where it was necessary to accept radical hospitality for their own survival and for the success of the journey.

This interpretation of Jesus' instructions to the apostles surfaces three values that may prove useful on our journey to Chapter and during our Chapter proceedings: powerlessness, humility, and radical hospitality. How we embrace these virtues, or not, will impact the work and outcomes of Chapter; to what extent, we cannot know. We do know, however, that these are virtues attributed to Catherine and it is to her we look for our apostolic model.

Catherine's Example: Mutuality

Powerlessness is quite powerful when it is chosen. When a loss or lack of power results from oppression in any form, it must not be celebrated but confronted. There are times, though, when we are called to relinquish our power. This powerlessness—freely chosen for the sake of mission—is a compass that points us in the direction of mutuality. It leads us to see ourselves, not as a distant, hazy mirage, but clearly as we are: marvelously and perfectly human and entirely reliant upon God and one another. Reorienting ourselves to this horizon of mutuality opens our eyes and our minds to the possibility of reconstructed frameworks in which the dominant culture intentionally chooses to hand over power to others.

Catherine modeled mutuality in her approach to community governance. While it would have been understandable for Catherine to want a say in the day-to-day operations of the foundations that sprang from Baggot Street, she instead placed the ultimate power of decision-making in the hands of those to whom she delegated authority. After sharing her opinion with Sister M. Teresa White on the matter of accepting a young, poor girl, she wrote, "I leave you free to do what you think best -- and I am satisfied you will not act imprudently, and this conviction makes my mind very happy as far as you are concerned."[2] Entrusting both the operations of Limerick and the care of new members to Teresa White, Catherine

freely surrendered her power for the sake of empowerment.

As we continue our Journey of Oneness and move into our seventh Institute Chapter, I wonder what power I might be asked to put down for the sake of empowerment. This is a question I ask myself, specifically, as a white, North American member of Mercy. I ask it, also, of our Institute as we continue to grapple with operative power differentials such as race, language, geography, education, and ministry. Finally, I ask it of all elected delegates: How do we ensure a shared commitment to true mutuality that sets our vision on a future not yet seen but dreamed?

How do we ensure a shared commitment to true mutuality that sets our vision on a future not yet seen but dreamed?

Hospitality

Like the apostles, we will be invited to participate in radical hospitality as we continue on our Journey of Oneness and dare the curiosity and imagination necessary to Explore Mercy Anew. With nothing to offer in return but the words and cures of an itinerant prophet, those sent by Jesus arrived at the thresholds of the unsuspecting seeking food and shelter. The type of hospitality suggested in the feminist interpretation of Luke's gospel challenges us to open ourselves to be both the doers and receivers of radical hospitality.

Catherine knew reliance on hospitality while carrying nearly nothing of her own but the unswerving conviction of her faith. First, as a young woman, the eldest of three siblings staring down poverty and homelessness, she entered the home of Owen Conway, himself on the brink of financial devastation. She later accepted the conditional hospitality of William Armstrong who welcomed her, but not her single cherished possession: her Catholic faith. Finally, Catherine's experience at Coolock House shaped the hospitality for which she, and we her Institute, are known.[3] The years with the Callaghans, Mary C. Sullivan writes, "... became for Catherine the earthly grounds of her expanding charity and her subsequent reliance 'with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.'" [4] Reflecting on Catherine's experience of hospitality requires careful consideration of the role of mutuality in radical hospitality.

When considered in light of Jesus' instruction to the apostles and Catherine's unique integration of the virtue into her own life, hospitality is radical when the mutuality of presence is its measure. The quality of presence we offer to one another is our personal expression of hospitality which becomes radical when we linger long enough to be affected. Pope Francis called us to this practice in his invitation to work for a culture of encounter, "not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them."[5] The implications of practicing radical hospitality as we Explore Mercy Anew are great and terrifying. What will we learn about Mercy when we peer deeply into our reality, both locally and globally, listen deeply to our collective joys and sorrows, and sit at table and break bread with one another at our Institute Chapter in April 2023?

Conclusion

To undertake a new exploration of Mercy, that which we know so deeply in the core of our being, asks us to lay down our preconceived notions and consider how we can integrate our singular experiences for the sake of setting our collective compass as our guide. This exploration asks of us a commitment to mutuality: to place God at the center, not ourselves, and to trust that the work God began in us will be sustained.

The apostles in Luke's gospel were sent from their homes with only the authority of Jesus to preach and heal in his name. They arrived on strangers' doorsteps entirely unsure if they would be accepted or rejected. Jesus was aware of the

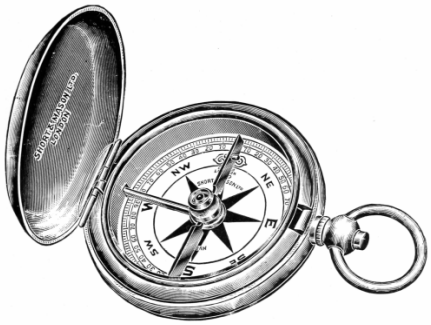
uncertain nature of this assignment, too, and added instructions in case of potential rejection: "If people do not welcome you leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them" (Lk. 9:5). With the authority of Jesus as their compass, they knew their only way home was by continuing the mission, despite setbacks. This kind of experiment engenders a freedom that allows for the possibility that the work of the Holy Spirit will outperform that which we can imagine.

The Chapter Planning Committee (CPC) chose the compass, fond and familiar to us, to serve as the guiding image for our seventh Institute Chapter. How often we have heard Catherine's words, "We should be a compass that goes 'round its circle without stirring from its center. Our center is God, from whom all our actions should spring as their source." The Chapter Planning Committee offered this rationale for choosing the image: "Compasses center us in our current reality and secure us in a particular direction as one moves forth. The movement of the compass guides, offers perspective, and gives clarity. Catherine McAuley used the image of the compass to express our relationship with God in dealing with the challenges, complexities, and ordinariness of life."

In their wisdom, the Planning Committee paired this beloved, time-honored symbol with a provocative call to Explore Mercy Anew. With total reliance on our compass, and some understanding of what is being asked of us, we can confidently undertake the exploration of Mercy anew. As we continue on our Journey of Oneness and prepare for our Institute Chapter, we are invited to walk together, carrying nothing but what we hold in our minds and hearts--the examples of Catherine's mutuality, the promise of Mercy's endurance and the Word as compass to guide us. ◆

Endnotes

[1] Barbara E. Reid and Shelley Matthews. *Luke 1-9*. Edited by Barbara E. Reid. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021): 277.
[2] Mary C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004):155.
[3] Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2012): 32.
[4] Sullivan, *Path*, Ibid.
[5] Pope Francis "For a Culture of Encounter." September 13, 2016. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html.



What Makes a Leader in the Hebrew Bible

Judith Schubert, R.S.M.

These past few years have been wrought with anxiety, isolation, and heartaches for many in our global village. With the onset of COVID, the mandated separation and isolation triggered feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Political upheavals on a national level caused people to experience a sharp divide between populations in their own country over issues like reproductive rights, border regulations, crime, gun control, upcoming mid-term elections, and disputes over what journalists call "fake news."

On the world scene, the unjustified invasion of Ukraine by Russia has triggered a sense of desperation and hopelessness by victims of these unprovoked and brutal attacks. Rising prices, inflation and economic uncertainty generate anxiety. These unwelcome changes caused some to ask, "How and when are our leaders going to bring us hope?" Many ask, "Where has reliable and strong leadership gone?"

Since the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, Catherine McAuley made substantive decisions through a biblical perspective.

For those of us living within the culture of Mercy spirituality–Sisters, Associates, ministry partners– we have the loving support of each other in facing upcoming decisions about leadership, our commitment to global concerns, and our future as an Institute.

Since the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, Catherine McAuley made substantive decisions through a biblical perspective. In preparation for our upcoming Chapter, we can recall some of the leaders and qualities of leadership in the Hebrew Bible. How and why did certain leaders receive a divine call to lead? More importantly, how did they lead? To respond to such questions, we look at leaders at various periods recorded in the Hebrew Bible.

Leadership of Abraham

In the book of Genesis Abraham emerges as one of the earliest leaders to be called by God. In Gen. 12:1-3 he has been given a command to leave his land and to travel to Canaan. If he chooses to obey the Divine call, God promises Abraham that he would generate the creation of a great nation, many descendants and divine blessings. The author informs us that Abraham does not reply verbally. Instead, he acted by setting out on his journey. "So, Abram went. . ." (Gen. 12:4). Abraham becomes the father of a new nation. Direct action in the face of the unknown represents one of the qualities of good leadership, as seen in the movement of Abraham and his family.

While Abraham acted in complete obedience to his call in Gen. 12:1-3, soon after he faltered in his exercise of leadership. To escape a famine in Canaan, he traveled to Egypt with his beautiful wife Sarah (Gen. 12:10-20). As he and Sarah entered this foreign land as aliens, he feared for his own safety, more than focusing on protection of his wife. Abraham feared that if he said he identified himself as Sarah's husband he could be seen as an enemy, a rival to men who might desire her. As a precaution, he lied to Egyptian officials and said that Sarah was his sister. Pharaoh, assuming Sarah was free to be acquired as a foreign concubine, took her into his harem. This risked God's promise to give Abraham and Sarah descendants. Abraham appears in a bad light, interrupting the divine plan. This offensive story appears two more times (Gen. 20:1-18; 26:6-11). Abraham, the great leader chosen by God, failed to protect his wife out of his fear of possible

Egyptian repercussions against him. He feared being killed.

The narrative suggests there can be complications and interruptions to God's plan when a leader makes decisions out of fear or self-interest. In these Genesis narratives, God causes Pharoah to discover the truth that Sarah is the wife of Abraham. Out of fear of divine retribution against himself, Pharoah returns Sarah to Abraham. One way to read the moral of the story is that leaders need to overcome fear with brave choices and act with moral integrity and loyalty to their primary relationships.

Leadership of Women Who Rescued Moses

Moses emerges as another widely known leader in the Hebrew Bible. His legendary life originally appears in the book of Exodus and extends into the Book of Deuteronomy. The first two chapters of Exodus reveal an amazing story about five women of tremendous courage, involved in Moses' birth story—how this infant's life was spared, despite the royal order from Pharaoh that all Hebrew male babies should to be put to death. Pharoah had taken the long view to preserve his political power—by limiting an increase of the Hebrew slave population and thus prevent an eventual uprising.

Good leaders, even if they are not famous or formally named as authorities, take initiative despite the risk to their personal interests.

These two chapters record the bravery of five women saviors, who took on leadership roles that protected all male infants, including Moses, from infanticide. Shiprah and Puah, Hebrew midwives, subverted Pharoah's order to snuff out the life of new-born boys. They gave a fictional explanation for the baby boys' survival—that the mid-wives arrived too late to intervene because pregnant Hebrew mothers, on their own, delivered their babies so quickly. Jocebed, the mother of Moses, put her baby boy in a basket on the Nile to spare his life, trusting he would be rescued by someone. Baby Moses was found and rescued by Pharoah's daughter. Miriam, sister of Moses, offered to find a wet nurse to take care of her baby brother—a wet-nurse who was Jocebed herself. Finally, the Princess of Egypt adopted Moses as her protected child and raised him in the royal palace.

Four women and one young girl disobeyed what they knew was an unjust directive of the Pharaoh. They risked harsh punishment, even death. In this account, the Princess of Egypt chose to go against her father's orders, a decision which demonstrates her strength of character and her compassion. In this story women who were potential enemies (the enslaved Hebrew women and the Egyptian princess) unite to save a helpless baby boy. Their expression of bravery, clever undermining of an unjust public policy, and their willingness to risk punishment for the sake of voiceless children–make them examples of qualities a good leader needs: deep courage, a sense of justice and care for those in need. Good leaders, even if they are not famous or formally named as authorities, take initiative despite the risk to their personal interests.

Adult Moses as Leader

After the adult Moses killed one of the Egyptian guards to protect a Hebrew slave from being beaten, he fled Egypt and escaped to the land of Midian (the area near Mount Sinai on the Sinai Peninsula). He settled there, married and was safe from Egyptian retribution (Ex. 2:11-25).

According to Chapter 3 and 4 of Exodus, however, God had other plans. God called Moses to reclaim his own ethnic identity, return to Egypt, and initiate the work to free his enslaved people. The dialogue between God and Moses dramatizes Moses' reluctance. Moses debates with God and resists the divine call. How will he carry out the

mission to rescue his Hebrew people? After argumentative and humorous negotiation, Moses concedes. In the process God reveals the divine Name, promises that Moses will be given a prophet-helper to speak for him, and that he will eventually succeed.

After accepting his mission, Moses functions as a resilient leader of the enslaved Hebrews. He returns to Egypt bravely. He argues with the Pharaoh persistently and confidently. He organizes the departure of the Hebrews, and he leads them out of Egypt fearlessly. As Moses journeys with his people towards the Promised Land of Canaan, he becomes their spiritual leader. At his summons, the people unite as a community of faith. They pledge their fidelity to God at Mount Sinai in a covenant mediated by Moses.

In essence, after his initial resistance to the divine call, Moses exercises various leadership skills: His masterful confrontation with the Pharaoh, his many years of faithful leadership with the people through the desert and his strong protest against their infidelity to God after Mount Sinai. As a true leader, Moses reveals remarkable negotiation skills both with the enemy (Pharaoh) and with his own people in the desert. No matter the cost, Moses protected and led his people to freedom. True leaders respond bravely to threatening situations, continually negotiate with others, as well as confront their own bad choices.

True leaders respond bravely to threatening situations, continually negotiate with others, as well as confront their own bad choices.

Joshua, Successor to Moses

Following the death of Moses, Joshua finished the task of leading his people from decades of wandering into the Promised Land of Canaan. After a battle against the inhabitants of Ai (Joshua 8:30-34), Joshua built an altar to the Lord and wrote a copy of the Law of Moses to remind the Israelites about their covenant with the Lord. Not every step into this new land required battles. Some peaceful movement occurred as the twelve tribes settled throughout Canaan and the Israelites mingled with the Canaanites. At various periods, some Israelites fell into syncretism, a merging of different religious practices.

Eventually, Joshua recognized the need for the tribes to re-claim their theological and spiritual roots, and re-commit themselves solely to the Lord. In Joshua 24, he gathered all the tribes together at Shechem for a covenant renewal ceremony. After he reviewed the community's story, and highlighted God's fidelity and protection of their forefathers, he called them to choose their ultimate allegiance. He laid out their options: Dedicate themselves to God, to other ancestral gods or to the gods of Canaan. He demanded they take a stand: "Choose this day whom you will serve," and added "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (14:15). In this important moment of their covenant, Joshua asserts his spiritual leadership. Not only does he give instruction as a leader, but more importantly, he exemplifies fidelity to the Covenant through the choices he and his family make.

Deborah the Charismatic Military Leader

Daily living among strangers in the new Promised Land brought many challenges. At times disputes arose both within a particular tribe, with another tribe or with hostile residents in neighboring cities and villages. At this period there was no monarchy or king to lead the Israelites. Spontaneous leadership associated with charismatic individuals, Judges, arose, sometime to settle disputes, and other times to lead the Israelites in battle or defend them against warmongers.

Deborah serves as one of the most prominent figures among the Judges. She stands out among other leaders. In addition to being a Judge, Deborah assumed the role of prophet. She interpreted God's will and acted as a theological authority. Judges 4 and 5 relate the events of Deborah's prophetic leadership when she exercised authority in a time of military crisis. With the help of the soldier Barak, her strategy resulted in a successful military campaign against the enemy Sisera and his army. She led the Israelites to military victory with wisdom, courage and confidence. In effect, the confident Deborah functioned as the "Mother of Israel." She didn't hesitate to summon her people to wage war. Praising God, she led a public celebration of their victory. The Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31) is a poem attributed to Deborah but is actually an ancient poetic song of praise in memory of her great accomplishments as a woman. Later editors tried to modify the poem so it seems to be a song of praise uttered by both Deborah and Barak. The modification is one of many examples of male editors in the biblical record trying to "take the edge off" women's singular accomplishments.

The enemy can be characterized as a personal, spiritual, or political force that threatens the peace of the community.

Jael the Assassin

Jael the Kenite, represents another woman in Judges 4:17-22, who emerges as a leader, in the sense of taking initiative, at a critical moment. Deborah ruled publicly over the Israelites for a long period of time, in a visible way as prophet, judge, and military leader. Jael rose up to be a leader, in the sense of seizing the moment. She was a woman living at the margins, in a neutral tribal area, far from the center of the Israelite battle near Mount Tabor. Sisera's chariots and warriors were defeated by Barak's army. Sisera was running on foot for his life. Jael, who seemed a neutral inhabitant of the land, and non-combatant, lured him into her tent, feigning friendship and a willingness to protect him. He fell asleep from weariness, making himself vulnerable. She took a tent peg, and with a mallet, drove it through his temple, killing him. This brutal, daring action in a time of crisis was courageous. She ended King Jabin's twenty-year reign of terror against the Israelites. Despite its gruesomeness, her assassination of the enemy general Sisera is celebrated as a heroic accomplishment. Jael has been entitled "most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24), a phrase that Luke cited in his gospel to refer to Mary (Luke 1:42). It is a phrase recited for centuries in the prayer, "Hail Mary." Deborah and Jael stand for a woman's strength that can defeat the enemy. The enemy can be characterized as a personal, spiritual, or political force that threatens the peace of the community.

David the King, Self-Serving and Repentant

In time God's people, who settled permanently in the land, needed more stable leadership. Eventually, the era of the Monarchy arose. Saul, the first King, died with his sons in a battle on Mount Gilboa (2 Samuel 31:2). Eventually, David emerged as the new King. Uniting the twelve tribes of Israel became one of his first projects. As a brilliant strategist, he accomplished this goal by conquering the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, which had no allegiance to any one tribe. He made Jerusalem his capital and reigned there until he died. King David proved to be a strong leader of his people; he instituted a dynasty by uniting all the twelve tribes under one monarchy.

However, he felt entitled to acquire any woman he wanted; he did not respect the integrity of Bathsheba's marriage to Uriah. The scriptural

account is straightforward in recording David's corrupt use of his authority over the military to send Uriah to the front lines, where he was killed in battle. Then David could legitimate his marriage to Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12; 1 Kings 1-2). Nathan the prophet confronted him with his ingratitude to God, his violation of Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah. David repented for his misdeeds, but then suffered a tragedy. His first child with Bathsheba died. Later, Bathsheba gave birth to their son Solomon, who succeeded David as a righteous and wise ruler. David's kingship was successful, though he suffered many setbacks and disappointments in his personal life and military challenges. The biblical editors attribute the Psalms, the collection of Israel's prayers, to King David. His story suggests that leaders can sometimes act from immoral motives and engage in corrupt conduct to achieve what they want. But they can also, like David, repent, and learn humility from their mistakes. The whole story of a leader's reign can include dark episodes, amidst the larger narrative of a benevolent kingship which united the Israelite people into one nation.

Isaiah the Prophet of Hope

During the period of the monarchy, which lasted about 200 years, individual prophets appeared who both advised the king, and inspired people with messages from God. After the split into the Southern and Northern kingdoms, later in the monarchic era, Isaiah appears in the 8th century BCE. Little can be gleaned about the historical person called Isaiah. Historical-critical scholars conclude that the book called "Isaiah" has been written by many authors over various time periods. Nevertheless, we can glean from a series of biblical passages what these Prophets may have been like as leaders of their people.

Various texts offer a glimpse into the mindset of "Isaiah." His call by God in the Jerusalem Temple directs him to preach in this capital city, give a prophesy to King Ahaz of Jerusalem—and the city's inhabitants—motivating them to stand firm against military efforts by the northern kingdom to unseat Ahaz, and encouraging him against giving into the enemy because God will protect him (Is. 7:3-9). The weak King wavers, so again, Isaiah encourages him to have confidence in God, and imagine the future filled with abundance for the Israelites, and loss of power for the enemy. Isaiah, exercising prophetic leadership, urges a change of mindset for both the King and the people (Is. 7:10-25).

This voice of leadership is one of encouragement, moral stamina, and a commitment to a positive future.

Later, the Prophet demonstrates courage and strength as he envisions the qualities of a future leader of the people. This new King will have true authority by being "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. . . He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore" (Is. 9:6-7). The prophet imagines a future leader who will be anointed by God and will make justice a priority. Former unjust situations will be set aright. It sounds like the assurance of "systemic change." This voice of leadership is one of encouragement, moral stamina, and a commitment to a positive future. Isaiah here is visionary, hopeful, concerned about his community's feelings of discouragement, and its desire for order. This leader speaks about a coming kingdom assured of God's kindness and tenderness.

Isaiah the Third

The last example of leadership also comes from the Book of Isaiah. It is another unknown pastoral leader whose voice is distinguished, though his historical identity is merged with

"Isaiah." The message reflects a later time when the people from the Southern Kingdom of Judah had been captured by the Babylonians and sent into exile. Isaiah 40 opens with a tender message to these prisoners of war. Through this Prophet, God sends the people a message of tenderness with the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people" The prophet adds, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem" (Is. 40:1-2). These two assurances characterize the entire last section of the book of Isaiah, 40:1-66:34.

Leaders summon their communities to spiritual integrity and theological dedication to the one God.

An Array of Leadership Qualities

This brief overview of various characters in the Hebrew Bible offers an array of talents and skills of an effective leader. They include courage and compassion, willingness to risk, leading a community on a journey into the unknown. There is also listening and negotiation with the opposition, working to unite a scattered population, willingness to humbly admit mistakes, strength of character and fearlessness. Leaders summon their communities to spiritual integrity and theological dedication to the one God. Leaders recognize the moment to act. They use their physical energy unstintingly. They recognize the community's successes and invite the community to celebrate. They dedicate themselves to justice, to systemic change, shoring up those who are discouraged, paying attention to the neglected. They maintain a vision of hope and confidence. They speak with kindness, comfort, compassion, and confidence in God. No matter what type of leadership a person exercises, nothing emulates God unless a leader looks into the future with hope, consolation, affection and tenderness for the community of faith. ◆

"*People who are truly strong lift others up. People who are truly* powerful bring others together."

—*Michelle Obama*

How Do We Describe the Context of These Times?

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M.

When contemplating any decision, it is prudent to know the situation and context in which a decision is being made. This reflection will not offer solutions to the issues we face, nor argue what the most critical issues are. Rather, it aims to outline elements of the context in which we live. We will begin with a wide lens, describing some historical streams that shape our contemporary experiences. Next, we will name a limited number of general situations and issues that are shaping today's context. Finally, keeping in mind the first two steps, we will turn our attention to community issues pertinent to the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

We have, in response to political events, been asking recently: "What's happening in the world? Where is it all going?" This is what I mean by "context." It refers to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. To consider the context, we want to examine what makes up those circumstances? What pressures and events influence those circumstances? For example, what was the context that made Christianity spread so quickly, and Islam, too? And what was the context or the circumstances that made Hitler's rise to power possible and his political vision appealing to so many?

In this reflection, we intentionally work to keep a broad view so as to see issues and problem solving within a wide arc of how situations relate and inform each other. We can sit with the following questions before moving into the rest of this writing on context.

1) In the last few years, nearing the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, what is the overall context or condition of earth and the earth community, with its peoples as one dynamic community? We can consider our own country, our local place, and relationships. However, just as we read the Scriptures through different methods and lenses -- like anthropology, history, politics, sociology, science, theology, literature, poetry, and myth--we can consider nature and the earth community through multiple prisms, as well. In addition, we consider wellness, fairness, opportunities for flourishing, and a sense of belonging. We ask how effective have humans been at handling our responsibilities as members of the earth community?
2) In the last few years, how does society value, work toward, and express truth, or our best approximations of it? [1]
3) In the last few years, the community of Mercy holds that we are animated by the mystery we call God. We ask how we experience the animating presence of the Spirit in our lives, in our communities, and in the broader Mercy community? How are our hearts? On what do we focus our time, energy, talents, and prayers?

Reading the "signs" of the times is like studying the way the wind blows. We want to know the temperature and velocity of the winds, the direction from which they arise, and the direction toward which they blow. Just like the winds, our present context stretches backwards and has consequences going forward.

Reading the signs, like measuring the wind, is a delicate, subtle business. Can we ever expect to be absolutely correct? Together, we can be attentive to what is happening, be informed by multiple sources, ask good questions, listen closely, know our biases, share our experiences, be humble, and be grateful. We hold all in prayer, confident in the "taproot" of our devotion to God.

We do this again and again, as things change. We are aware that we are changing too.

A Wide Context

To begin, it is helpful to remember that it was not until the early 1800's that the human global population hit one billion people. In November of 2022 we are eight billion.

This escalation of human population during hardly a century is jaw- dropping. [2] The question is not can we feed everyone on this planet, but can we do it sustainably? Can we sustain this growth in a way that gives time and space for earth's natural systems to recover from the strain and damage that we have caused?

It is as if human creativity took off like a rocket in the 20th century, and we have not been able to catch up with ourselves ever since.

Science and technology have delivered advances for human society, for which we are grateful. However, the rapid rate at which the population has grown has strained every aspect of life on earth, physically and socially. It is as if human creativity took off like a rocket in the 20th century, and we have not been able to catch up with ourselves ever since. When our "rocket" took off, all our trash was left strewn around the ground for others to pick up, or for future generations to clean up. The changes include two world wars in the 20th century. The effects of our "rocket" creativity has resulted in climate change, along with pollution of the air and seas. There is fierce competition for control of natural resources.

Social upheavals affect our populations. There is a rising consciousness that patriarchal structures have disempowered half the human species. Women count for less than men. They have fewer rights, less power, less ownership of resources, and less voice than men. There is widespread violence against women and children, evidenced in sex trafficking, denial of property rights, and limited access to education. There is increasing national resistance to patriarchal patterns of thinking, but it still endures and even thrives.[3] Patriarchy dominates our religious institutions and practices. Religious institutions and traditions guarantee that patriarchy survives in the political sphere. Political structures mirror the gender-conditioning embodied in religious institutions.

As wealthy nations have expanded their international influence and financial control, indigenous people and their habitats have been exploited. Millions of people have been traded like commodities and subjected to forced labor. Indigenous languages have been extinguished and ancient cultures nearly obliterated. Colonialism has left deep, painful social scars in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Many forms of racism and oppression of ethnic minorities presently exist. These inequities challenge dominant populations to recognize how their sense of privilege and entitlement have disempowered less powerful groups.

In our present political order, we recognize a fundamental tension. Should the priority be to work for the collective common good or to recognize the dignity of the individual person? How does that tension play out when we assess political crises outside our own national boundaries? Should we consider first the good of the nation state or the rights of the individual person? An international corporation's expansion, or the right of a local community to have safe groundwater?

A trinity of oppressive international conditions needs to be addressed -- patriarchy, colonialism, and corporate capitalism. Can the resources of legal advocacy, economic reform, education and religious motivation achieve such change?

Today's Context

The sense of our place in the universe has expanded dramatically in recent decades. Consider how commercial space exploration is now available, not merely to governments, but to rich entrepreneurs. Our 4.5 billion-year-old earth is now circled by thousands of research, military and communications satellites. The James Webb telescope has recently penetrated the regions where light is visible, emitted by a 14-billion-year-old cosmos, captured by awe-inspiring infra-red images. The telescope has even detected "a galaxy that emitted its light just 300 million years after the Big Bang." [4]

As Sisters of Mercy, how do we read these times and understand our present context, as we choose new leadership, focus priorities, and set direction as a community?

Currently, we are experiencing a technological and scientific revolution. We note a shift from fossil fuels to other forms of energy. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) affect numerous fields, including healthcare, communications, transportation, banking, education, surveillance, national and local security, advertising and media. [5]

On another front, the boundaries between human settlements and the habitats of animal species are becoming less delineated. The human footprint, in the form of urban development, is treading over parts of the earth that were once pristine ocean coastlands, vast mountain ranges, virgin prairies and verdant tropical forests. There is increasing fear of diseases jumping across species such as HIV and the AIDS virus. [6]

Recently, the havoc created by the COVID pandemic afflicts the international community. Aside from the number of deaths, now approximately 6.5 million globally, economic losses to nations, and educational setbacks to communities are incalculable.[7] We still do not know the long-term effects of COVID to the health of individuals and national populations. The COVID crisis has also intensified the need for science and medicine to be given a more prominent role in setting social policy.

A style of authoritarian governance seems to be hardening in large nations. Democratic governance in the West is struggling to survive, and being compromised by far-right political forces. Concerning the inner life, what is the place of spirituality, reflection, contemplation, silence and stillness in human life? In a technologized culture, governed by algorithms, and driven by economic interests and political opportunism, how will we foster the humanizing study of Catholic tradition, ethics, history and literature, philosophy and psychology, music, art and dance? What is the role of Mercy institutions in promoting and sustaining a liberal arts curriculum in the face of pressures to adapt to a secularized, technologized, utilitarian social environment?

Mercy Community Context

As Sisters of Mercy, how do we read these times and understand our present context, as we choose new leadership, focus priorities, and set direction as a community? To begin any discernment process, we humbly listen to each other, to the world, and to our own inner movements of feelings, thoughts, and intuitions. The "murmurings of the Spirit," come to us through different means, and can include consolations, desolations, dreams, questions, insights, intuitions that come to us in nature, and readings of various kinds. A life in the rhythm of contemplation and action means we pay careful attention, we listen, we notice, and we reflect, amidst our daily work.

One of the "signs" presented to us as a Mercy community is the 2022 report on membership

demographics provided by the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. While numbers cannot capture the entirety of our present context, or the qualitative dimension, the numbers speak to a reality that needs attention. [8]

A few of the consequences of our demographics could include:

- Engaging collectively with questions about what it means to be an aging apostolic religious community, and asking what we might learn from other communities who have been here before us.
- re-evaluation and re-visioning of how we do sponsorship.
- addressing the need and desire by younger members for an experience of religious community.
- ways to reconcile individual ministry commitments with communal projects.
- recognition of ministries for elder sisters, given their location, skills and energies.
- conversations with our Mercy-sponsored institutions and organizations about the future of our collaborations.
- further relinquishing of positions traditionally held by sisters in our sponsored and supported ministries.
- filling additional community in-service roles with non-community member colleagues.

To face the realities of our demographics is not to be a pessimist or a worrier. Rather, it means listening to the graced possibilities that lie before us. We embrace the challenge of how to recognize the desires of younger members and include the gifts of seasoned members as we move forward. What are the conditions we need to promote for living community as mission, at age 30 as well as at age 80?

We believe the God of Mystery holds us in wisdom and providence, as we reflect more deeply on the context of our challenging present, as well as the context of a challenging past century. ◆

Endnotes

[1.] Bernard Lonergan, "Understanding and Truth" within *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999): 347-353. First published 1971. See also, Elizabeth Williamson, *Sandy Hook: An American Tragedy and the Battle for Truth* (New York: Dutton, 2022).

[2.] Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth>. Accessed August 30, 2022.

[3.] World Health Organization, "Violence against Women" < www.who.int>. Accessed August 30, 2022.

[4.] Joel Achenbach, "The Webb Telescope is Astonishing. But the Universe Is Even More So," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/08/05/webb-telescope-universe-big-bang/>.

[5.] Kevin Roose, "An A.I. Generated Picture Won Art Prize. Artists Aren't Happy," *New York Times* (September 2, 2022). < https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html >. See also by Kevin Roose, "We Need to Talk About How Good A.I is Getting," *New York Times* (August 24, 2022). < https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/24/technology/ai-technology-progress.html>. (Deals with potential and risks.)

[6.] Katherine Unger Baillie, "Threat of Never-Ending COVID: SARS-CoV-2 Virus Is Jumping Between Humans and Wildlife," in *SciTechDaily,* (March 14, 2022). < https://scitechdaily.com/threat-of-never-ending-covid-sars-cov-2-virus-is-jumping-between-humans-and-wildlife/amp/>.

[7.] World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," as of September 9, 2022. <covid19.who.int>.

[8.] Sisters of Mercy of the Institute of the Americas, "Current Demographic Reality," as of June 14, 2022.

The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.
(First appeared in MAST Journal 5.2 (Spring 1995): 10-14)

All across the Institute we are praying to be "Shaped by the Spirit's Fire–formados por el Fuego del Espiritu."[1] Though we do not yet see all that God's fire wishes to create in us, we find ourselves, even when we are alone, singing Dolores Nieratka's suppliant refrain: "Spirit of all wisdom, Spirit of earth, Kindle the bright vision, Quicken rebirth. Spirit of all wisdom, Spirit of God, Touch our hearts with your fire."[2]

Somehow, we know, beyond all doubt, that the eager enkindler of our personal and corporate vocation as Sisters of Mercy is, even now, steadily at work among our dry bones and sinews. More than anything else in this world we wish to surrender to this enflaming. We realize that we are not the source of the ardent shape we hope to become, only the ready tinder: poor, flickering, utterly dependent on God's designing fire.

We realize that we are not the source of the ardent shape we hope to become, only the ready tinder: poor, flickering, utterly dependent on God's designing fire.

In this moment of discerning the shaping flame within us, we read–perhaps for the hundredth time– our Constitutions and Direction Statement, trying to understand what "conversion" shall really mean for us. We know, beneath all human explanation, that these documents are not simply or primarily our own creation. In these smoldering verbal commitments, crafted four years ago, the flame of God's diligent reshaping of our "lifestyle and ministries" is daily building energy and seeking our collaboration. In these human words, God's own enkindling vision is truly given to us as the bright form of our rebirth if we will but yield to it. We realize that the conversion to which we are now insistently called is not just a comfortable re-stoking of the low but familiar embers. We sense that the regenerating Spirit within us wishes to enkindle a much more critical and thorough blaze.

No one can undergo our personal and corporate conversion for us. No predecessors or supposed successors. But there's one person who unflaggingly accompanies us in our present encounter with the Spirit's fire and who ardently attends our reshaping: one who loves us and cares deeply that we be rekindled; one who is herself an enduring example of the depth of conversion born of God's Spirit. We have said, perhaps without fully understanding our own words, that we wish to be "animated" by her "passion for the poor" and by the gospel which so radically enflamed her life. She now urges us to conform our lives and ministries to the full reality of these words; and, for our encouragement, she humbly offers us the memory of her own passionate loving, hoping, and daring.

Catherine's Loving

When we talk about Catherine McAuley's passion–her passion for mercy, her passion for the poor, her passion for the life and work of the Sisters of Mercy–we are, I think, talking about the most profound belief that animated her whole being and all she did: her burning belief in the unity of the love of God and the love of our neighbor.

She had a completely whole-hearted love of God and ardent love of Jesus Christ and of all that Jesus is for us and has done for us. She had a fervent belief that Christ really is present and beckoning, with love and for love, in the faces

and lives of the poor, the sick, the homeless, the untrained and uneducated and unconsoled, the dying and the despairing. She believed that Sisters of Mercy, and those who wish to be associated with us, are called to find this great love of God, and to bring this great love and consolation of God in and to all those who suffer. All this ardor flowed vibrantly from Catherine's deep-felt, consuming belief that Jesus the Christ really is identified with all human beings, and that we can ardently love the God whom we do not see only by ardently loving the sisters and brothers whom we do see.

The gospel text on the reign of God in Matthew 25 to which she refers twice in her Rule, was not a distant, unattainable ideal, but Jesus' daily, hourly beckoning, to her and to us. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father,... for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me….Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are mine, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:34-36, 40).

. . . Catherine really took to heart Jesus' claim: "Whatever you do to the least of these who are mine you do to me."

Catherine truly believed this word of Jesus. She was, therefore, earnest, zealous, whole-hearted in her daily desire to love her neighbor. She was not measured, cautious, self-protective, gingerly, in the donation of herself in love. At the heart of her belief in her vocation as a Sister of Mercy was her desire to resemble Jesus, and she realized that, like him, she must sacrifice herself for the sake of such loving. She was, therefore, completely willing to forego her own pleasure and ease, to put aside her own needs and preferences, to give up what would have comforted her, to displace herself, to bestow herself, to let herself be radically shaped by the Spirit's fire for the sake of the love and presence of Christ in those in need. She really believed and lived the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

When one talks about love, it is all too easy to sound vague and lofty. What I am trying to say is that Catherine really took to heart Jesus' claim, "Whatever you do to the least of these who are mine you do to me." She got out of bed at 5:30 each morning, impelled by this belief. She spent every day for seven months in a cholera hospital, penetrated by this belief. She welcomed homeless women and children, seized by this belief. She knelt by the bed of her young, dying companions, overcome by this belief. She started schools for neglected girls, urged on by this belief. She took long, fatiguing journeys, consumed by this belief. She walked the streets of Dublin, Kingstown, Limerick, Galway, and Birr, in all kinds of weather, devoured by this belief. She reverently entered the dwelling places of the sick and poor, filled with this belief. When she said: "God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford"[3] she meant it, and she was often cold and hungry for their sakes.

It was Catherine's belief that our vocation as Sisters of Mercy is a call to give *everything* we are and have for the sake of God's dear poor. Therefore, she did not hold back, she did not consult her own interests, she did not ration her presence to those in need, she did not conserve money or energy for a rainy day, she did not retire from loving. She often gave up her own bed, she was the last to eat at meals, she chose the cheapest means of transportation, she often slept

on the floor in new foundations rather than delay the work of mercy until these convents were completed, and her underwear was, according to her companions, of the "meanest description"–she who had once dressed in high style and driven a handsome Swiss carriage. As one of her early companions said, "Every talent and every penny that our dear foundress possessed had been devoted to the poor" (Clare Augustine Moore, "Memoir").[4] And a woman who placed an abandoned child in the House of Mercy once said of her, "She made me feel what real charity and real religion is."

Catherine believed that to be a Sister of Mercy is a sacrifice of one's self for the sake of the reign of God–a sacrifice enkindled by Jesus' own self-donation, a sacrifice promised at one's profession of vows, but consummated only in a life-long willingness to pour one's self out, in the daily self-bestowal, the steady libation, that these vows imply and should evoke. She found this a joyous way to expend her life. On the very day she died, she said to Mary Vincent Whitty, a young, professed sister at Baggot Street, "If you give yourself entirely to God–all you have to serve him, the very power of your mind and heart–you will have a consolation you will not know where it comes from" (Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, November 12, 1841).[5]

Catherine believed that she and we often fail to sustain the completeness of the gift we once intended: we forget that we have completely handed ourselves over for the sake of God's loving purposes, we start squirreling away little nuggets of our life, we miss the "fine print" on the vows we have professed. But she also believed that the daily renewer and enflamer of this gift of ourselves is God's own faithful Spirit, and that we are never too old–to learn to be more fully what we say we are.

Clare Moore says that Catherine's desire to "resemble" Jesus in his own merciful loving was "her daily resolution, and the lesson she constantly repeated." She used to say to the first sisters: "Be always striving to make yourselves like Him-you should try to resemble him in some one thing at least, so that any person who sees you, or speaks with you, may be reminded of His blessed life on earth" (Bermondsey Annals).[6] She treasured the gospel acts and words of Jesus, and often said to her first companions, "If His blessed words ought to be reverenced by all, with what loving devotion ought the religious impress them on her memory, and try to reduce them to practice" (Bermondsey Annals).[7] She wished us to be such a transparent community of love, such a fire of ardent love for others, that people would really see each one of us as the loving Christ, even as we reach out to the loving Christ in them.

Catherine was herself the best example of what she meant. The generous zeal of her own charity, the unquenchable flame of her own loving, was indeed fervent and unwearied, even when she was–as she sometimes admitted-tired, nervous, sick, perplexed, or oppressed with care. At the dedication of the Baggot Street chapel in June 1829, when she, at fifty-one, was just beginning the work of love of her final years, her good friend, Michael Blake, preached the sermon and said of her, "I look on Miss McAuley as one... specially endowed with benediction: her heart is overflowing with the charity of the Redeemer whose all-consuming fire bums within her" (The Limerick Manuscript).[8] Catherine believed deeply in· this enabling Fire of God's love. She was willing to be impelled by it every morning, and to be consumed by it every day.

On a blank sheet in the front of her copy of *A Journal of Meditations for Every Day of the Year,* Catherine wrote this prayer, which she prayed each morning for the Baggot Street community: "Come Holy Ghost, take possession of our hearts and kindle in them the fire of thy divine love shed upon us we beseech thee the plentitude of thy divine Spirit, and give

us an entire and perfect submission to the inspiration of thy Grace...." This simple prayer, with all the generous love and self-donation it asks for and promises, is the heart of what she believed, for herself and for us. She prays it for us now–as we contemplate the Spirit's shaping Fire, and try to understand what it really means to say, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us" (Ro. 5:5).

Catherine's Hoping

Catherine conceived of her life and of the life of our community as a pilgrimage, a journey, "a going forward in hope," relying with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God" (Neumann, ed. 353).[9] Less than two months before she died, she told Mary Ann Doyle: "We have ever confided largely in Divine Providence and shall continue to do so" (Neumann, ed. 376).[10] But she was not passive in this journey. As she wrote to Frances Warde: "while we place all our confidence in God, we must act as if all depended on our exertion" (Neumann, ed. 256).[11] Thus a trusting, energetic movement forward, in the strength of God's efficacious presence, characterized her whole life.

When she lived with the Callaghans, she hoped that one day she might be able to rent a few rooms in which to shelter young girls who were endangered on the streets of Dublin. When she received the Callaghan inheritance and began to build the large house on Baggot Street, she feared the magnitude of what she had undertaken and hoped God would help her carry it through. When Edward Armstrong, her strongest supporter, died in May 1828, she hoped she would have the courage to follow his repeated advice to her, "Place all your confidence not in any human being but in God alone."

When clergy and laity harshly criticized the community on Baggot Street, and called her an upstart and a parvenu, and she feared that the works of mercy they had begun would come to an end, she hoped God would lead her through this controversy. When she and her companions decided to found a new religious congregation and three of them went to George's Hill, she hoped the community on Baggot Street would survive in her absence. When the Presentation Sisters intimated that they might not let her profess her vows if she did not remain in their order, she hoped in God's mysterious help.

When Caroline Murphy died while Catherine was at George's Hill, and then Anne O'Grady, Elizabeth Harley, and her own niece Mary Teresa died in the first two years, she hoped death would not destroy the young community. When foundations went to Tullamore, Carlow, and Cork with too little money to live on, and to Charleville with no prospect of postulants, and to Birr with no assured income, she hoped God would provide for them. When she appointed young women as the superiors of the new foundations–Mary Ann Doyle was 25, Frances Warde was 27, Clare Moore was 23, Juliana Hardman was 28–she deferred to their authority and trusted that God would direct them. When the ministry of each new foundation turned out to be different from that of the last, and different from the one on Baggot Street, she trusted in the mercifulness of these women and in God's unfailing guidance. At the very end Catherine expressed only one hope for the Sisters of Mercy: that they would live in union and charity, and rely on God's merciful help. If they did this, all the rest would follow.

Catherine expressed only one hope for the Sisters of Mercy: that they would live in union and charity, and rely on God's merciful help.

Catherine's hoping was not an easy wishing for her own personal well-being or fulfillment, nor a historical invocation of the resurrection of

Christ, but a "hoping against hope" (Romans 4:18) in the face of widespread human affliction. Hers was a tenacious, active hoping at the service of the God-desired well-being of the poor, the sick, the dying, the neglected, and the unjustly treated. It was the kind of dogged hoping that is urgently aroused by human suffering and leads to the Godly fatigue of the cross of Jesus, where all genuine prayer for God's action begins.

No story of Catherine's life so tenderly illustrates her hoping as does her exhausting service in the make-shift cholera hospital. As Clare Augustine Moore explains:

> *The first cholera broke out in Ireland in 1832, and the people were most injuriously prepared for it by the terrible accounts of its virulence in other countries. It certainly was an awful visitation. The deaths were so many, so sudden, and so mysterious that the ignorant poor fancied the doctors poisoned the patients, and as immediate burial was necessary it was reported that many were buried alive.... It was under these circumstances that Revd. Mother offered her services to the cholera hospital, Townsend Street.... The Archbishop having approved of this step the sisters entered on their duties to the great comfort of the patients and doctors; but the fatigue they underwent was terrible. Revd. Mother described to some of us the sisters returning at past 9, loosening their cinctures on the stairs and stopping, overcome with sleep. ("Memoir")*[12]

Catherine herself remained at the hospital most of the day–nursing those whose lives could be saved, comforting the dying, preventing mistaken burials, and supervising the volunteer nurses. The image of her collapsed body on the Baggot Street spiral stairs is a vivid emblem of the extent of her self-giving, and of the kind of to-the-last-ditch hoping she and the Spirit's fire shall wish to see in us at the end of the day.

Catherine's Daring

Catherine had an extraordinarily humble opinion of herself and of her role as the founder of the Sisters of Mercy–a title she never used of herself. She was lowly in her own eyes, and she often attributed the sufferings and trials of the community to her own mistakes and failures, to such an extent that Clare Moore says of her: "I used to grieve to hear her condemning and blaming herself so much" (Letter to Clare Augustine Moore, September 1, 1844).[13] Whatever may have been the external causes of Catherine's estimate of herself–one can easily imagine some of these, and regret them–her humility was conceived and rooted elsewhere, in her earnest reflection on the life of Jesus, on his humble presence among those he served, and on the humiliations of his passion and death which are said to have moved her to tears.

> Catherine always sought bold but natural ways of reaching out and allowing the life and work of the Sisters of Mercy to be better known...

Her truthfulness before the mystery of God's unfathomable modesty in Jesus was evidently a profoundly peaceful affliction within the privacy of her own heart, but it did not render her publicly timid. On the contrary, her humility seems to have been the condition of the possibility of her God-given daring as an advocate for the poor, and of her unabashed promotion of the Sisters of Mercy *for the sake of* the poor. She had in these matters the apostolic virtue of boldness–what scripture calls *parresia*–the publicly venturesome courage to speak and to act on behalf of the bold mission of God in Christ Jesus.[14]

Catherine was passionately convinced that religious life in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy was nothing less than a gift of God given to the church and the world for the uplifting redemption of all God's beloved people, especially the most neglected and oppressed. For her the flourishing of the Institute was

precisely for the sake of the flourishing of God's ardent mission among the poor of this world. Therefore, she did not hide the community behind closed doors, as the private, personal treasure of its first few members. She boldly wished the Institute to grow, in numbers and in geographical extension, so that the reign of God's redeeming love–"the fire Christ cast on the earth," as she called it–might be more and more enhanced.

Our place and time are not Ireland and the 1830s. But, still, what Catherine did to nurture the continued growth of the Sisters of Mercy may inspire us as we seek to re-found our way of life and to invite many other women to join us in vowed commitment to the ongoing mission of God's mercy. We have said we wish to be "shaped by the Spirit's fire." A crucial aspect of our long-term shaping will be the healing of our silence and timidity about ourselves, and the rebirth of our apostolic boldness in proclaiming why we are what we are, and in encouraging others to join us–until the liberating mission of Christ among the outcast and scorned of this world has been completed.

Catherine always sought bold but natural ways of reaching out and allowing the life and work of the Sisters of Mercy to be better known-by families and priests, and especially by women who might consider joining the community. For example, the evening prayer of the early Baggot Street community was open to the people of the neighborhood, and women and girls who lived nearby joined in this prayer. Apparently only one chair was stolen! The chapel on Baggot Street was open to the public, and many people came there for Sunday eucharist (until 1834 when the parish priest closed the chapel to the public). Except for the first reception ceremony at Baggot Street in January 1832, all reception and profession ceremonies were open to the public, In the foundations outside of Dublin these nearly always took place in the parish church and were preceded by a procession to the church.

Catherine and the other sisters maintained good contact with priests and spiritual directors, and made known to them the life and work of the Sisters of Mercy so that they would be well-informed when they counseled women. She involved lay women in the ministries of Baggot Street and the new foundations and welcomed associates and volunteers. She wrote letters to prospective candidates, explaining the religious life of the community and inviting them to come and see.

She arranged an annual public Charity Sermon in which the preacher described the life and purpose ·of the Sisters of Mercy and solicited personal as well as financial participation in that life. In Dublin, after the first year, these sermons were held in the parish church. Similar sermons were held in the parish churches of the other foundations. She also arranged that within the first month of each new foundation a reception or profession ceremony was held in the town and the public invited. Whenever she could, and sometimes the respective bishops would not permit this, she accepted poor women into the community, with little or no dowry.

> The Spirit's fire ... is, even now, blazing in the ordinary, workaday kitchens of our minds and hearts where all true conversion begins.

Despite all the painful feelings engendered in the Irish by the British government during the penal era, and despite anti-nunnery attitudes, she founded two convents in England–in London and Birmingham. The house in Bermondsey was the first new Catholic convent founded in London since the Reformation. She always expected that each new foundation would be completed and carried on by new members entering from that locality, and she prayed the Thirty Days Prayer in each new

place for this gift of God. She urged that the annual renewal of vows in each community outside of Dublin be made in the parish church, and she led this renewal herself in Birr on January 1, 1841.

In countless public ways, Catherine sought to reach out to women who might become members of the community, and to encourage them to join the Sisters of Mercy. She believed that Christ was indeed casting the fire of this sort of merciful love and hope on the earth, and that it was her constant obligation to nurture it and help it kindle–by making the hopeful, loving, and joyous purpose of the community more widely known.

Catherine's Shoes

Very early in the morning on the day she died, Catherine asked Teresa Carton for some brown paper and twine; she then tied up her homemade shoes and asked that the bundle be put in the kitchen fire and the coals stirred until its contents were consumed. She who had walked and walked for the sake of those in need now surrendered her worn shoes to God, and to us. Like Moses before the burning bush, and Joshua before the messenger of God, she entered her final historical encounter with the merciful God whom she had so loved and trusted–barefoot.

Her shoes have now, in a true sense, been passed on to us–that we may walk the streets she walked, with the same mercifulness, hopefulness, and joyfulness; that we may find and bring the same consolation of God in and to all those in desperate need; and that following her footsteps we may boldly proclaim the saving mission of Christ and our own God-given attachment to the flourishing of this sacred work.

The Spirit's fire –by which we, like Catherine, yearn to be reshaped is not to be found in a remote, abstract place. It is, even now, blazing in the ordinary, workaday kitchens of our minds and hearts where all true conversion begins. ◆

Endnotes

[1]Chapter Steering Committee, Letter to Sisters and Associates of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, July 20, 1994.
[2] Dolores Nieratka, RSM, "Spirit." This gathering song was sung during each Regional Community Reflection Process, September–October 1994.
[3] Letter to Mary Teresa White, in *Letters of Catherine McAuley*, ed., by Mary Ignatia Neumann, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), p. 142; and *Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, ed., Mary C. Sullivan (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p.164.
[4] Mary Clare Augustine Moore, "Memoir." The complete texts of this Memoir and of all the archival/biographical manuscripts quoted in this article are in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, Ind,: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).The passage from Moore's "Memoir" is on p. 210.
[5] Letter of Mary Vincent Whitty to Mary Cecilia Marmion on November 12, 1841, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p.243.
[6]Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 117.
[7]Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 111.
[8]Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 163.
[9] Letter to Mary Ann Doyle, in Neumann, ed., *Letters,* p. 353; and Sullivan, ed., *Correspondence*, p. 418.
[10]Letter to Mary Ann Doyle in Neumann, ed., *Letters,* p. 376; and Sullivan, ed., *Correspondence*, p. 439.
[11] Letter to Mary Frances Warde in Neumann, ed., *Letters*, p. 256; and Sullivan, ed., *Correspondence*, p. 323.
[12] Moore, "Memoir," in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 207.
[13] Letter of Mary Clare Moore to Mary Clare Augustine Moore, September 1, 1844, in Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley*, p. 93.
[14]See Karl Rahner, "Parresia (Boldness)," in *Theological Investigations* 7 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1971), pp. 260-67.

Contributors

Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. is an educator, administrator, and facilitator. She holds a Ph.D. from the Univ. of Iowa. Currently she volunteers, serves on boards, and, occasionally, writes. Her board service includes Mercy Hospital (Iowa City, IA.), Trinity Health-St. Joseph Oakland (Pontiac, MI.), Carlow University (Pittsburgh, PA.), and University of Detroit Mercy (Detroit, MI.).

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M. presently serves the Conference for Mercy Higher Education as its Associate Director for Mission Support and Integration. She received her Ph.D. from Duquesne University. Previous to her position with CMHE she was chair of the Religious Studies, Theology, and Philosophy Department at Georgian Court University. Her areas of research and study include Mercy spirituality in today's pluralism, contemporary environmental, social, and political challenges, and theological aesthetics in dialogue with how we understand our experiences and vision the future. Along with theology, Mary-Paula has M.A.s in art, psychology, and spirituality, and is a trained spiritual director and supervisor. Her practice includes *writing* contemporary icons.

Sharon A. Euart, R.S.M. is Executive Director of the Resource Center for Religious Institutes. She holds M.L.A. and M.S. Administration degrees from Johns Hopkins University. She received her J.C.D. from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Her dissertation topic was *Church-State Implications of Canon 812*. Her past ministries include high school teaching and administration. She was Director of Research and Planning for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Associate General Secretary for the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Executive Coordinator of the Canon Law Society of America, and visiting lecturer in the School of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America. She is a former President of the Canon Law Society of America, and a recipient of the Role of Law Award. She is the author of numerous articles on canon law and religious life.

Danielle Gagnon, R.S.M. is Director of Mission and Ministry at Merion Mercy Academy in Pennsylvania. She holds a M.A. in Christian Spirituality from Fordham University in New York, and a certificate in Spiritual Guidance from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, D.C. She previously served as Director of Campus Ministry at Merion Mercy Academy and as a Spiritual Director at Cranaleith Spiritual Center in Philadelphia, PA. Prior to her studies in the areas of spirituality and spiritual guidance, she spent fourteen years in Institutional Advancement positions such as the Director of Development at Hope Partnership for Education, Director of Parent Programs at Malvern Preparatory School, and Associate Director of Development at Medicines for Humanity.

Patricia Talone, R.S.M. is a theological ethicist, consultant, lecturer and writer in the areas of mission, ethics and formation. From 2001 to 2016, she served at the Catholic Health Association

of the United States in St. Louis, Missouri as Senior Director of Ethics and as Vice President for Mission Services. She has taught at every level from grade three through graduate school. She was director of vocations and temporary professed for the Sisters of Mercy from 1972 to 1983. She holds a Ph.D. in theological ethics from Marquette University, an M.A. in Religious Studies from St. Charles Seminary, and a B.A. in Humanities from Gwynedd-Mercy College. In 1996, she spent a semester as a visiting fellow at Georgetown University's Kennedy School of Ethics. Her current board commitments include the Catholic Climate Covenant and St. Ignatius Nursing and Rehabilitation Center (Board chair). She served for many years on the Board of Directors for the National Catholic AIDS Network, Mid-America Transplant Services and Georgian Court University. Among her awards are the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching from Gwynedd-Mercy College in 1994, Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Scranton in 2005 and from Misericordia University in 2011. She has published extensively in theological and healthcare journals and periodicals.

Judith Schubert, R.S.M. holds a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham University in New York. She is an Élève Titulaire of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française, Jerusalem, Israel. Her M.A. is from Providence College, Providence, R.I., in biblical studies. Her B.A was from Georgian Court College in Lakewood, N. J. in music. From 2000 to the present, she has been Professor of Religious Studies and Theology at Georgian Court. Besides service on a range of university committees, she was Chair of the Religious Studies and Theology Department, and from 1997-2005, Director of the M.A. in Theology Program. She has taught an extensive range of undergraduate and graduate courses in scripture, both Old and New Testament. For decades, she has presented lectures on scripture at local parishes, taught in the permanent diaconate program for the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, presented workshops at biblical institutes, and conducted retreats for both laity and women religious. She was a lecturer from 2005 to the present for the annual Georgian Court Women of Wisdom Series. She is the author of *101 Questions and Answers on Women in the New Testament* (Paulist, 2014) and *The Gospel of John: Question by Question* (Paulist, 2008). She has contributed to *The Bible Today* and *The MAST Journal.*

Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M. holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in English from the Univ. of Notre Dame, and an M.Th. in systematic theology from the University of London. She is presently Emerita professor of Language and Literature at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as dean emerita of its College of Liberal Arts. She is the author of numerous articles and seminal works on the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, including *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, 1818-1841 (Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2004), *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (CUA Press, 2012) and *A Shining Lamp: The Oral Instructions of Catherine McAuley* (CUA Press of America, 2017).

Discussion Questions

(Burns)*In a particular way, the Church and the world hunger for a witness that is grounded in a Gospel response to human needs and that gives voice to oppressions occasioned by unredeemed processes and structures. Such processes and structures mute the voices of persons marginalized and disregard their concerns. Within the Church community as well as the world community, coalitions to address such processes and structures are growing. Public submissions to the Synod on Synodality attest to this hunger in the Church and to efforts to address the "uncompromising nature of the Gospel." Voice is being found for the sake of the community of believers, especially those on the margins*.

What in your own ministry has attempted to address "unredeemed processes and structures" and how do you describe those structures and processes?

(Cancienne) The context of the world we live in presents an unending series of crises, such population explosion, hunger, tensions between world religions, pollution of land and seas, climate change, wars and their aftermaths, patriarchal traditions that persistently subordinate women in religious and political structures, violence against women and children, racism, economic exploitation of ethnic minorities, outbreaks of pandemics, as well conflicts between struggling democracies and authoritarian regimes. Which of these problems, as you reflect on them, has affected the lives of people you know, your own life, or your ministry?

(**Euart**) There used to be a complaint among some members of religious communities, especially during the Vatican's Visitation and Investigation of U.S. women's communities, that lasted from 2009 to 2015, "Why do we have to be canonical? Why can't we just "go non-canonical" and not have to deal with the institutional church? What understanding of the Church and women's religious life does Sharon Euart describe that explains why the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas can't "go non-canonical"?

(Gagnon) When have you had reason to use or pay attention to a compass— one that's hand-held, on your I-Phone, or observed, as on street address? Do you have a story about using a compass? Why use one yourself? Isn't it the job of someone else to take care of figuring out where "due north" is and to set direction for you?

(Schubert) Judith provides an array of figures in the Hebrew Bible who demonstrate various qualities of leadership—courage, risk-taking, resistance to unjust laws, charting direction, creating a spirit of unity, ability to negotiate, raising morale, distinguishing helpful directions from unprofitable ones, recognizing the moment and acting in a timely way, and offering comfort, compassion, tenderness to a struggling community. Which stories in this article surprised you as examples of "leadership" and what qualities do you think are especially timely for elected leaders this year?

(Sullivan) At the end of her 1995 article, Mary Sullivan recounts the story of how Catherine McAuley, on the morning she died, turned over her worn-out shoes to a Sister, and directed the shoes be burned. Catherine walked and walked, wearing out herself as well as her shoes, to carry out her ministry to relieve the poor--this remains a symbol for Sisters of Mercy, the "walking

nuns." What in your own ministry has involved "walking and walking"? How did you move from place to place to carry out your service to those in need?

(Talone) Patricia's article offers practical advice for newly elected Chapter delegates who are less familiar with the process than experienced delegates. If you have attended Chapter before, what points would you, personally, like to reinforce and "hand on" to newer members? What do you think stays relevant for anyone attending Chapter?

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, then a Sister of Mercy, twenty Sisters of 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. MAST has been meeting annually since 1987.

The purpose of the organization is to promote and support scholarship and theological reflection on Scripture, theology, spirituality, ethics, and related sciences undertaken by Sisters of Mercy around the world, our colleagues and friends in order to serve the Church and the Institute, especially women. To this end the association encourages the publication of scholarly writing through *The MAST Journal*; the convening of an annual conference focused on issues of theological or spiritual concerns; and mutual support for its members engaged in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration.

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 theological education.

Ellen Murray R.S.M., currently serves as MAST's Executive Director. The Executive Committee includes Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Katherine Doyle, R.S.M. and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

The Annual Meeting for 2023 will be held in person, at the Heritage Center in Belmont, North Carolina, Friday to Sunday, June 16-18, 2023.

Information about reservations, becoming a member, and being added to the mailing list, can be made by contacting the Executive Director, Ellen Murray, R.S.M., at emurray@sistersofmercy.org. To subscribe, renew a subscription, or change an address for *The MAST Journal*, contact the Subscription Manager, Julie Upton, R.S.M., at St. Mary of the Angels Convent, 600 Convent Road, Syosset, NY 11791-3863, or jupton@sistersofmercy.org. Dues can be paid by check, payable to *Sisters of Mercy-MAST* and sent to MAST Treasurer, Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., Holy Spirit Convent, 3920 West Land Park Drive, Sacramento, CA 95822-1123. Katherine can be contacted at mkdoyle@sistersofmercy.org.

Since 1991, The MAST Journal has been published three times a year. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M. was the founding editor of the Journal. The present Editorial Board is: Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. Editor, Patricia Talone, R.S.M, Aline Paris, R.S.M., Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M., Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M., and Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M.

Past issues of the Journal from 1990 to 2022 are available free through the MAST Archive at www.mastrsm.org.

Sisters of Mercy Hermanas de la Misericordia

Institute of the Sisters of Mercy
of the Americas
West Midwest Community
535 Sacramento Street
Auburn, CA 95603