The MAST Journal

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The Challenge of Justice

Spring, 1993

Dear Sisters and Friends,

The focus for this issue of the journal is perhaps best captured in a stanza within Maya Angelou's inaugural poem, "lift up your eyes upon the day breaking for you. Give birth again to the dream." As we, Sisters of Mercy, associates, and partners in ministry, attempt to incarnate the direction statement of our institute, we seek to give birth again to the dream of Catherine McAuley and all those who have focused their life through her legacy. To do this, two focal points must remain in dialectical tension: the tradition of the community and our contemporary experience.

The first, our tradition, can prove as difficult to read as Scripture might be for us. In other words, how do texts which describe life and action in 19th century Ireland help us to deal with the questions we face today? The lead article by Celeste Rouleau describes six phases our conversation with traditional texts might go through to read the future through our past.

The second, human experience, raises the questions we present to the past as well as pulls the past forward into the future. Three articles review our experience. Patricia McCarthy, CND, describes the present as violent and asks, "how might mercy speak to violence?" Sheila Harrington reviews present statements and research about religious life and views our present as raising questions. She asks, "how might mercy live into the future if we do not respond to these questions?" And finally, Camille D'Arienzo describes the stories on television as the stories controlling our culture. She asks, "how might mercy tell its story with the same strength?"

I invite you to read the articles and then return to Celeste Rouleau's and use her phases to place one of the questions arising for you as you seek to "give birth again to the dream" in conversation with a text from our tradition.

Happy Spring,

Maryanne Stevens, RSM

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Reading the Future of Our Past

Processes for interpreting foundational texts of Mercy

Mary Celeste Rouleau, RSM

We inherit a holy tradition and a holy charism. How do we envision the relationship between the concrete, historical evolution of Mercy tradition through specific external expressions in different cultures and times, and the charism — that inner graced life of the Spirit which we as community of Mercy are called to embody?

Conscious of our distance from the context of that tradition, we are also conscious of the struggle required to touch its essence and read its heart and meaning for our present lives. We know that our questions arise from our own experience at the end of the 20th century, and not from early 19th century Ireland. Yet with a kind of spiritual instinct we are convinced that there must be some relevance in our origins, and some medium of our connection with the past, a thread of continuity that will not bind us into older external forms but will rather be a wellspring of living energy. We believe that a rediscovery of our holy past will lead us from a pregnant presence into a future rich with new life. But how?

. . . it is precisely holistic thinking which might reveal to us the relations between tradition and charism . . .

One of our immediate stumbling blocks to approaching this question is another cultural heritage, one of dichotomized thinking. Assuming that body and soul are two things, somehow operationally connected but not existentially a unity, we tend to carry this Cartesian error into all dimensions of our reflection. As Americans we are competent at analysis, not so competent at synthesis, and very poor in a holistic approach to any question. Yet it is precisely holistic thinking which might reveal to us the relations between tradition and charism, the implications of our past for our present and future.

Over a century and a half ago, Catherine McAuley and the original community of Mercy gathered under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to initiate a movement of which we are the latest living continuation. Those women of their own time were surrounded by religious controversies and political harrassments, by the dire poverty of a large proportion of the population, by the conventional mores of their social class. When we examine how some of their actions, words, and relationships were translated into what we call our tradition, we can distinguish three phases of influence. First, there is Catherine McAuley herself: her personality, her spirituality, her influence. Then there is the founding community, those first women who gathered around Catherine for the works of mercy, each a different personality yet all graced with a common charism. Finally, when under divine providence they were shaped into an ecclesial institute, they had to choose how to translate the authentic spirit of mercy to neophytes who would not personally know the founder.

As in every viable human society, the leader and the first members created and adapted certain structures designed to make available to future generations the experience and vision of the founding group. Some of the social structures included vowed consecration within the church, a rule and commentary, a way of life with its integration of prayer and the works of mercy, formal instructions and informal correspondence, and rituals and customs. Some of these structures continue to our own day. Some have been modified, others abandoned. The criterion for change, adaptation, or relinquishment was always, let us hope, how each structure served to enhance and incarnate the grace of charism in a given culture.

The Foundational Texts of Our Tradition

One of the most important of the social structures is the language in which it was enfleshed. Language is a medium of contact with past tradition. It is simultaneously transparent and opaque: it reveals the past and puts us in touch with origins; but it also obscures from us what it was saying to that other age.

A community like the Sisters of Mercy is faced with a special linguistic problem as we deal with our foundational texts such as the original Rule, the letters, or the "Spirit of the Institute" (Bermondsey Manuscript). If Catherine's original language were Danish or Japanese or some other tongue foreign to us, we would have to keep translating it anew in order to keep in touch with the meaning. At the same time we would have to keep asking if this translation authentically represented the meaning, and on what basis we judge this. But since it is English, we make the erroneous assumption that she spoke the same language we do. She did not. What an expression meant in the Irish-Georgian Catholic world was not necessarily the same as it means in ours. Further, the emphases

placed on certain expressions of spirituality were always in relation to their implied context, the historical situation. Taken out of this milieu they become distorted.

So a primary way in which the living actions, words, and relationships of Catherine were handed down to the present is in the written word or "text", which unlike some of the earlier externals of her way of life, comes to us unmodified as it was set down, but now out of its original context.

Each text belongs to some specific genre of literature, which is an essential clue to interpreting its meaning. We have, for instance, formal writings such as the Rule, the Cottage Controversy, the Spirit of the Institute. There are informal letters, never intended to be read by anyone other than the addressee, yet quite significant in revealing the spirit of the authors. There are later writings by those who personally knew Catherine; the memoirs which are the basis of all later biographies, and two of the earliest published lives: the 1847 *Dublin Review* article, probably by Rev. Myles Gaffney,[1] and the 1863 biography by Sister Mary Vincent Hartnett, a younger contemporary of Catherine.[2] Another genre is found in the Familiar Instructions, Retreat Instructions, and various collections of Sayings recorded by others from her conferences. In 1865, 24 years after Catherine's death, a group of superiors who had known her wrote a Guide, for the purpose of " . . . recording simply the manner in which our Rule and Constitutions have been explained and practiced, principally by our beloved Foundress . . . displaying what the real spirit and object of the Congregation is in its singular devotedness to the poor of Christ." And there are also the annals of the earliest foundations, each beginning with the story of the origins, each written by the founding superior who personally knew Catherine McAuley.

Faith does not change anything in particular in our line of vision: it changes everything.

There are the principal texts of our tradition, most of which still await study for authentic critical editions. The purpose of the following reflections is to clarify a process for interpreting texts from a past that is our past, for finding a bridge to the present which can designate meaning not only for now but for our future.[3]

I have divided this process for the sake of simplicity into six phases or dimensions — not "steps" in a linear time sequence, but rather something like a spiral originating from a central point, moving in an increasing outward-reaching curvature, circling to form a series of changing planes, rising to include more and more in its scope. It is a holistic growth pattern in which each element is distinct but not separate, interactive with all the others. This process for interpretation merely makes explicit what I believe we have been doing intuitively to a great extent. It may clarify some of the points where ambiguity clouds our perceptions.

What, then, must we do to read profitably the future of our past?

1. Believe with active faith, "centered in God"

This may seem obvious: since our tradition is an incarnated spiritual reality, we need to rekindle an active faith as Catherine said, to be "centered in God." Our belief affects our understanding. Faith does not change anything in particular in our line of vision: it changes everything. The God-mystery we profess makes a profound difference at the core of our endeavor.

Faith, first of all, in the reality of the communion of saints, especially that of the special action of God in and through Catherine. Read this beautiful passage from Vatican II with our Mercy tradition in mind:

All who are of Christ and who have his Spirit form one church. . . So it is that the union of the wayfarers with our brothers and sisters who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted, but on the contrary, . . . this union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods. Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven . . . through him and with him and in him do not cease to intercede for us . . . In the lives of those companions of ours in the human condition who are more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, God shows us, in a vivid way, the divine presence and the divine face. God speaks to us in them, and offers us a sign of what heaven will be for us.[4]

Let us truly believe that the living reality of the great woman who is our founder is present to us as we listen to what she is saying in a text we have inherited.

We need active faith, secondly, in the church's teaching on the growth of tradition. There is another passage from Vatican II which analogically applies to our Mercy tradition:

Tradition . . . makes progress in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. This is a growth in insight into the realities and the words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study by believers who treasure these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate understanding of the spiritual realities they experience.[5]

We really know in faith that there is a development in the Mercy tradition, because we as believers trea-

sure it in our hearts, and come to an understanding from within of this reality of charism that we are experiencing.

Finally, we need active faith in our charism of mercy as a communal gift. Each of us is graced with a gift of the Spirit, in and through the community. Each of us must share her own understanding of this gift and receive from our sisters their insights, so that in its richness it can be treasured by all.

2. Question our assumptions and attitudes about past/present

A second dimension of interpreting the texts or documents of our tradition consists in freeing ourselves from our unnoticed prejudices, something easy to say, but very difficult to do. Prejudging indicates that one's mind is already made up, and thus that one is unwilling to consider alternatives. It is a kind of blindness. But if I am blind, I don't know what I cannot see. When we approach the past, we need to look at the way we think about the past, to be aware of the paradigm or thought-system which governs our understandings of it.

One way to raise our awareness of prejudices about the past is to examine the different ways in which we think about time.

> Time present and time past
> are both perhaps present in time future
> and time future contained in time past.[6]

. . . history is. . . an interpretation of what was in relation to what now is.

The least productive way of looking at time is to regard both personal and social history as a kind of dead sediment from which we are now emancipated, over which we have no control, and to which there is no particular incentive to return. On the surface we would say that this isn't our problem. But like a traumatic childhood which is so difficult to acknowledge and easy to repress, religious communities have to struggle with elements of their past they would rather not face. It is so much easier just to "get on with it." Let us at least be honest that there is a darker side to our history.

Another common view is of the past as cumulative history, both personal and social, now present in its influences on us. In that sense it is normative, though not determinative. The past is not separate from us now, because temporal distance is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which all that is handed down presents itself.

This is a partial view, facing backwards to trace only the path we have already covered. One of the problems with accepting this as the whole picture is that it fails to show us anything of the future. Then we can get fixated on externals, as if the past were a totally "objective" reality — a paradigm which contemporary scientists have already discarded. These externals, the inherited social structures, then limit and determine our prospects for the future, but do not enlighten our way.

A third view is that the past is an ever-changing reality, constructed as such by our remembrances which are selected according to our perception of present needs, and especially by our thrust toward decisions about our future. There are elements that do not change, of course: the artifacts and records of human passage through this earth. But history is not merely a record of what once was, as it was — but an interpretation of what was in relation to what now is. One period of history appears differently to contemporaries and to historians of later ages who have a long perspective on lasting influences from that period. Aspects of past events become visible in relation to questions posed by the present historian, in a present cultural context and time. For Augustine,

> *. . . human memories are the most powerful dynamisms in one's life precisely because they are not mere frozen snapshots in some wilting picture album. Rather, they are the dynamic and present recall of past events. Nor are they merely accurate recall of specific details; but they are also an evaluation of past events as the rememberer sees them in the present moment.*[7]

So the past lives now in the possibilities that we can choose and appropriate as our own, for direction into the future. John Henry Newman, a great younger contemporary of Catherine McAuley, pointed out that when an idea takes possession of intellect and heart, it becomes an active, living principle within the person.[8] Our relationship with the future, then, is mediated by our relationship with the past as a living principle within us, just as our remembrance of the past is mediated by our vision of the future.

A second kind of prejudice which we need to examine and exorcise is a narrow "either/or" view of how one deals with texts. It takes a real historian to speak to the meaning and intent of the author, within his/her milieu. Whatever we can learn of this may be helpful. However, we may suspect that in some cases this cannot be fully known. The author is now distanced from the text which stands on its own merits before us. Thus there is also another aspect: what does this text say for us now? What does it mean beyond the original context, as we read it in our day? Even if we do not understand what the author intended, we can ask these questions.

An analogy with scripture may be helpful. Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians were addressed

to the people who lived in those cities of Asia Minor in the first century; but they are addressed to all Christians, to us as well. How astounded Paul might be to know what those words about Christ as the pleroma of creation meant to Teilhard to Chardin! Yet the ideas are truly there, to be interpreted for a new age in Teilhard's immensely creative vision.

Finally, a lesser element of prejudice but one still lurking in the darker recesses of our suspicions: Understanding is not an intellectual game. As Newman said, it must take possession of our minds and hearts in order to become an active, living principle. We bring our whole person to the task, treasuring this tradition in our hearts.

3. Reflect on our present experience of Mercy charism

We contemplate carefully our sense of what charism is, how we experience God's mercy, how prayer and the works of mercy are integrated and integral to our lives, our individual and communal consciousness of shared energy around the project of reading the foundational texts of our religious roots, our hopes for the outcome of this work. We contemplate how mercy is being lived and reflected upon in our contemporary world. Such reflection on our present experience is essential as we enter into the process of interpretation.

4. Enter into dialogue with the text

The process of dialectic is a debate approached at first from opposing or very different sides or perspectives. There is a constant interface between thesis and antithesis, interacting one with the other. If both parties are searching for truth, something new is generated, a synthesis distinct from either initial position is created, which then generates its own antithesis and the dynamism continues. True conversation or dialogue is something like this, although not necessarily starting from opposing points. It is an interpersonal, intersubjective, two-way speaking and listening. If it is dominated by one side, it is not con-versation. It is like playing a game: if we really enter into it spontaneously and freely on an equal basis with other players, letting go of wanting to control, then, as they say, the game plays us. We have all had the experience of entering into a conversation with differing points of view, and then in the process of interacting, coming to newly emerging insights that neither party had thought of in the first place.

How do we enter into dialogue with a text, which is not personal? First, we ask our own questions of it. For instance, a number of years ago when I was giving conferences to our Mercy postulants about Catherine McAuley, they had read her life, and I told them to ask the questions they had about her. One of their big issues was how she ever managed to integrate prayer and the works of mercy. I finally realized that this wasn't her problem at all, for she did not have these apart in the first place. It is, however, our problem and question, emerging from our experience of a dichotomized and secularized world. Another example: today we are reflecting on the growing number of laity who are finding inspiration in Catherine's life and spirit. What does this phenomenon mean for the vowed members now? We can address our questions to the traditional texts and discover something of how she dealt from the beginnings with men and women who were involved with the original community in the works of mercy. These examples have served me as a kind of starting point for concretely realizing that it is possible to approach a text with a new contemporary question, and to discover there something of meaning for the present.

But that is only half our task in dialogue with the text. We have to listen to what it is now saying to our experience. This is not just a pretense or a figment of imagination. What are the real consequences of our reading it?

With due respect to real differences, we can perhaps draw an analogy from our reading of sacred scripture. David Stanley, S.J., has powerfully delineated how in the creation of the gospels, there was first the lived experience of Jesus with his disciples, then a period of later reflection on that experience by the Christian community, and finally the writing of the gospels. We, on the other hand, using the written word in our liturgy and prayer, reflect on its meaning for us now, and finally experience the living presence of the same Jesus in our faith community.[9]

Understanding . . . must take possession of our minds and hearts in order to become an active, living principle.

Something analogous is true for our foundational texts. First there was the experience of the original community; then they reflected on that experience, and translated it into various social structures and literary forms to be handed on. We receive these structures and texts as gift, then ponder their meaning while asking our questions of them, and finally come to experience the original, still living charism in a deeper way.

The contemporary German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, has written at length on how we contact and interact with tradition, and presents an intriguing and very fruitful image: that of "horizon". My horizon is my range of vision that includes all I see from a specific vantage-point. Depending on where I

move within my little world — in this room, outside the building, hiking on top of the hills — my horizon expands and changes, and is more or less limited. I also move in time; so my horizon on the past is continually shifting. The significance of events of my childhood, for instance, becomes more or less relevant according to my present situation. Within this limit, we each have a sense of perspective — the near and the far, the large and the small, the dominant and the less important, all seen from a personal vantage-point.

When we dialogue with one another, enter into genuine conversation, and really try to see the world from the perspective of another, then my horizon may be fused with yours, and yours with mine, so that both of us can see more. This commonly takes place among us as contemporaries, but it can also bridge time-spans. There can be, as Gadamer says, a true fusion of horizons because of what is present to us now from the past, and we can enlarge our vision by trying to listen to what these texts from the past are saying to us.[10]

5. Discern and savor the experience of "fusion of horizons"

Gadamer also states that the historical life of a tradition depends on constantly new assimilation and integration. So I can ask: have I come to a new understanding because of my dialogue with these texts? Have we, in our shared reflections, come to something new? Do we experience this understanding as fidelity to our original charism as a life-source? What resonates as true to the Spirit?

We are changed by being made aware of new possibilities for our future.

And what does not fit? Where are we uneasy with our new interpretation, or resistant? What do we find destructive of the spirit, or stifling? What in this whole experience doesn't matter to us, what do we not care about — and do we know why?

In this action of discernment of spirits, there comes a point of graced insight which Thomas Aquinas identified as a special gift of the Holy Spirit — practical wisdom or prudence. Here is an example of a language problem: our contemporary use of the word "prudence" is likely to be pejorative, and thus we dismiss it. But in an older context, it meant a connatural knowledge or right judgment about concrete action proceeding from a right and loving heart. This is echoed in the church's statement: "Tradition . . . grows through the contemplation and study by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts."[11] Aquinas further identifies prudence as that gift of the Spirit which specifically corresponds to the beatitude of mercy.

6. Dynamism: decision for future action

Prudential judgment about what needs to be done, then, in the light of our discernment, moves directly into decision for action. In freedom, we need to allow a dynamism to flow from the energy generated, directing us toward the future. We can now apply our insights and understandings to our way of being mercy in the world. T.S. Eliot, in his splendid essay on literary tradition, states: "Tradition cannot be inherited; if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour."[12] If we want to continue our Mercy tradition, we need to work at it: discern and decide. A decision results in a sense of responsibility, an empowerment for ensuring the ongoing vitality of the spirit of mercy.

We are changed by being made aware of new possibilities for our future. By concretizing the values we now perceive, we are enfleshing, mothering and nurturing a new creation: works of mercy for our times. We are operating out of a new paradigm, a new way of thinking and interacting that is appropriate for the present and will carry us into our future, in fidelity to our past.

Actions based on these decisions, experiences as "the spirit of mercy flowing on us," in turn flow back into the process for interpreting foundational texts. They enhance our faith-based insights, help to free us from our prejudgments, further our reflection on present experience, and continue to inspire us to enter into dialogue with the texts, to discern what is relevant and to decide for action.

But at any point along the way, there can be human error. We can stagnate, fossilize, petrify. Look again at the image of the spiral. The destructive force of tornadoes and whirlpools begin with fluid air or water gradually circling inward, tightening down toward their center as they suck all into a vortex. Or a centrifugal, outward-moving spiral: while the slow growth of a nautilus gives us this wondrously formed little shell creature, if the movement outward is too fast, it is disintegrating, like taking an eggbeater out of the batter before turning off the electricity. That is a messy but apt image of what could go wrong.

In each phase of interpretation we could err. We can lack a true living faith, and fail to see the face of Jesus in the persons of his suffering poor. We can be proud in clinging to our prejudices, using materialistic paradigms and external literalism in our interpretation. We can frantically engage in over-activity and busyness which traps us into not paying attention to our real experience in the present. In fear of risking change, we can dominate the conversation with the text, as if we were in total control, and thus not listen to what it might say to us. We can be impatient, not taking time to weed out in discernment what is false from what is

faithful. Finally, we can also be apathetic and indecisive, just sitting around talking but failing to act.

Conclusion

In 1845, four years after Catherine McAuley's death, John Henry Newman wrote a marvelously creative essay on the development of Christian doctrine which took more than a century to penetrate the theological mainstream. In it he pointed out seven criteria for discerning the authentic continuity of tradition, signs of the church's fidelity to the Spirit — not one of which has anything to do with external expressions or cultural forms. These signs might be paralleled with how our community has preserved fidelity to the authentic tradition of mercy. Newman speaks of the "health development of an idea"

> *. . . if it retains the same type, the same principles, the same organization; if its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases, and its later phenomena protect and subserve its earlier; if it has a power of assimilation and revival, and a vigorous action from first to last.*[13]

The last of these signs is especially evident here: what Newman called "chronic vigour," enduring vitality. So let us pray that in our communal discerning of our charism we may find that we have been and continue to be faithful, as we endeavor to interpret the privileged foundational texts of our Mercy tradition.

Footnotes

1. Myles Gaffney (?), "The Sisters of Mercy," *Dublin Review*, March 1887.
2. Sister Mary Vincent Hartnett, *Popular Life of Catharine (sic) McAuley*, edited by Sisters of Mercy (from Dublin edition, 1863), Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Publishing Co., 1887.
3. For a profound and detained reflection on this topic, I highly recommend the superb book by Philip Sheldrake S.J., *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, (N.Y.: Crossroads, 1992), especially Chapter 7, pp. 163-187, "Interpreting Spiritual Texts."
4. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church*, 7:49-50.
5. Vatican II, *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 2:8.
6. T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton I," in *Four Quartets*.
7. *David J. Hassel, S.J.*, Radical Prayer, (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 21.
8. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, (1878) (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 1968), p. 36.
9. David M. Stanley, S.J., "Contemplation of the Gospels, Ignatius Loyola, and the Contemporary Christian," *Theological Studies*, (Sept. 1968), 417-443.
10. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (1960), (N.Y.: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1985), passim, esp. p. 269ff.
11. Vatican II, *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 2.8.
12. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," (1919), in *Selected Essays:* New Edition (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950)
13. Newman, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology
Annual Meeting
Monday, June 7 — Thursday, June 10, 1993
Our Lady of the Pillar Marianist Retreat Center
San Antonio, Texas

Please join us if you are interested in scholarship and research in spirituality and theology. Remember, theologians and scripture scholars need philosophers, historians, literature scholars, and other interesteds!

For details, call or write Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, RSM,
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Nonviolence: The Call to Go Beyond Justice to Mercy

Patricia McCarthy, CND

A few years ago at a Chapter meeting in my community, we had a marvelous facilitator, a sister from Kentucky. She had a keen sense of timing and incredible common sense, neither of which are to be presumed at Chapters. About the fourth day into the meeting she stopped us as we were approving dozens of resolutions and commented: "Y'all don't really mean to do all this, do you?" We had to go back to the drawing boards and decide what did we intend to pursue and what was just words.

Something in me wants to begin today with the same question about the topic chosen: the call to go beyond justice to mercy. Do we really mean to seriously reflect on mercy and do we intend to change our lives to begin living it?

We pray, we work, we allow our hearts to be formed into hearts of mercy.

We cannot put mercy into a school or keep mercy in a school by ordering new books, changing the curriculum, or having a few service projects and peace and justice days. A life of mercy is far more radical than that. We might do all those things in the process but that's not the starting point. We begin in the human heart — our own and Christ's. We pray, we work, we allow our hearts to be formed into hearts of mercy. Then we will learn to think thoughts of mercy, to do the works of mercy and to be people of mercy.

If we commit ourselves to becoming such people, then there will be no room for anything but mercy in our lives. There will be no room for defensiveness, for self-justification, for vindictiveness, for racism, for stereotyping, for sides. And at the same time, there will be no room to dismiss those people who are attacking us or who are racist or bigoted or treating us or anyone else unjustly. There will be no separation of the world into the good and the bad. No one is excluded from the mercy of God and no one can be excluded from our mercy.

In practical terms this means no one is beyond hope of redemption, no one is dismissed by us as hopeless or impossible to change or outside of our compassion and love. This simplifies life, not allowing us to have separate hearts for friends and enemies. However, simplicity does not come easily. It's hard work on a day to day basis to approach with affirmation the people with whom we come into contact.

To be in the work of mercy for the long haul brings us into messy situations with no support other than trust and love. Often there will not even be room for efficiency, the golden calf of today. Mercy takes precedence over efficiency, the person is more important than the job. The person opposing us is more important than the righteousness of our cause. Charity toward that person comes before defense of our own case. This is not the American way!

We are about the way of God and it is not the standard of society, but it is the standard that is needed if society is to be healed of its ills. It is not the standard of the adolescents in our schools, but it is the only standard that will bring peace and growth to these youth.

To pursue such a radical stance we must be well grounded in truth, the truth of God's love for us and the truth of our love for our students. Our children today are coming to our schools like battle-scarred veterans. One in three girls is abused before the age of eighteen, one in five boys, and that doesn't count emotional neglect or abandonment. They are surrounded by violence in all its forms in personal life, sports, entertainment, sexual experiences, and even academic pressures and expectations.

Mercy urges us to face the violence around us honestly. Force and violence are the most common forms of settling disputes among nations. Lip service is paid to negotiations for peace while armies are preparing for war. Within a nation, if we don't use overt force, we rely on the power of fear and threat and intimidation to resolve disputes.

Businesses and workplaces are built on advancement at any cost. Family life, for too many, is a center for explosive anger and abuse. Even our leisure time is spent watching or participating in violent activities. T.V. shows and movies without violence are rare. Sports have become occasions for unbridled aggression where winning is the only goal.

The recent Olympics is proof of the obsession of winning over the joy of competing. Kids today don't think they are good enough, popular enough, smart enough, thin enough, fast enough. They lack the fundamental sense of being loved and of being loveable, and that is what we are missioned to help them learn. That is the essence of our goal as teachers in a Catholic school, in a school committed to mercy. Everything else we do in school, as important as we may think it, is not of the essence.

Becoming a Merit Scholarship finalist, getting into a good college, winning a sports scholarship or a state championship are not one bit important unless they directly lead to an increase in the child's sense of being loved and of becoming loving in return.

The Center for Disease control in Atlanta has declared violence to be epidemic and reported that 20% of high school students carry a weapon for protection. Add that to the statistic that 50% drink and 25% have considered suicide. We are playing with fire. The American Medical Society says that violence has escalated to such proportions that it should be treated as a public health problem. For teenagers firearm homicides are the second leading cause of death, after motor vehicle accidents.

The pain of our children is calling out to us for relief and mercy. We cannot be deaf to the cries or continue to keep doing the same things that actually produce the violence. To be merciful means that, first of all, we believe there is a way out of the misery, that we act in confident trust in the ways of God. Mercy requires of us that we replace helplessness, competitiveness, and violence with empowerment, cooperation and compassion. Mercy requires of us that we invest faith in the future.

The moment we walk into a classroom or any learning environment we are investing in the future. We are not merely preserving and safeguarding ideals and great deeds of the past. We are feeding inspiration into the deeds of the future.

We are not teaching new vocabulary, we are teaching a new process of living and acting.

We are not teaching new vocabulary, we are teaching a new process of living and acting. We don't need to make up lesson plans for these concepts. That's not how children learn. We need to enflesh every aspect of our teaching with compassion, we need to act cooperatively with the students and expect them to do the same with each other, we need to involve them in their own process of education, to help them assume control over their own lives. This spirit will permeate every aspect of education: Preparing classes, the actual teaching times, working with other faculty members, grading, meeting with parents, planning curriculum, even contract negotiations. Nothing must be outside the process.

On a slow day it would take a newcomer to the field of education about five minutes to realize that cooperation and compassion are not the first things to strike you in a classroom today. In fact, you are lucky if it is not a book or a desk that is striking you instead. In my teaching experience, I have had both desks and books tossed about the classroom. It's not the end of the world, as long as you're quick and duck. Potential disaster can become a healing moment.

One time I was teaching trigonometry to a group of adolescent boys whose immediate preparation for my class had been time in jail. Carl walked into the classroom, threw his math book at the wall, told me what I could do with it, and stormed out of the room. Because of the anxiety I could read on the faces of the other students, I simply stated that it was impossible for a math book to do that and went on with the lesson. The students relaxed a bit and within a few minutes Carl was back at the door. He privately told me that he couldn't keep his mind off his problems. I assured him he couldn't think of trigonometry and problems at the same time and invited him back into the class, which was resumed. After the class, in which Carl did participate, he told me his story. He had stolen $100 to buy his mother, from whom he had been taken because of abuse, a present and she threw it back in his face the day before this class.

Another time I was teaching reading to a grade six class, all of whom were below grade level except for one child — Ricky. As we lined up for lunch, Ricky, who was last in line, turned around and started throwing down all the desks. I let the other children go to lunch and stayed watching my classroom being turned upside down. When he got to the back of the room, Ricky ripped all the bulletin boards from the wall. Then, he began to climb out the window. It was a first floor classroom and this whole tirade lasted about three minutes. He was too far away for me to hold back which was just as well. I told him that if he went out the window it was out of my hands as to what would happen. Of course, the obvious thing was that the scene was already out of my hands. Anyway, it stopped Ricky and he sat down and cried telling me that his lunch ticket had been stolen. This was Monday, the last time he had eaten a good meal was Friday at lunch. This school was located within a pocket of poverty. Ricky was hungry. I gave him an apple immediately and then a lunch ticket and showed him where I kept apples and candy in my desk which he could take whenever he wanted.

In both of these cases the reason for the angry volatile behavior was uncovered. It's not essential that we always get that information. What is essential is that we respond to the violence expressed with firm compassion. These are moments of opportunity for the teacher, once your heart returns to a normal beat. We may not have the power to control the child's anger, but we do have the power to respond to it without fear or force. We help the child grow beyond the anger into more constructive action.

Ricky and Carl had deep seated emotional problems which did not get resolved overnight. But, in the classroom, I never had another incident of violent anger from either of them. They both had difficulty in other places. It was as if the classroom had become for them a safe place — emotionally and physically. In some cases, providing safety for our students means

protecting them not only from harm inflicted by others but also from their own fears.

To some of you these two examples might seem extreme. If so, be grateful. To others, they could seem less serious than some you have had to face. I am sure that every teacher can give countless examples of violence in schools, violence that can be both physical and emotional.

Very briefly, I would simply say that any actions involving a serious threat to the physical safety of any student or teacher in the school must be dealt with immediately and decisively. Every school should have a policy in place with serious consequences for serious infractions. My experience with situations of this nature has been that for the sake of everyone involved — victim and perpetrator — responsibility for criminal actions must be accepted as such. I am not advocating jailing youngsters. I oppose that strongly. I am being firm regarding the impact of some actions.

. . . we need to increase our understanding of conflict and expand our peacemaking skills.

Let's concentrate for a few minutes on the more common everyday classroom conflicts: the pushing or shoving in line, the cliques, the mockery toward some students, the ignoring of others, racism, prejudice, rudeness, swearing, arguments, insults.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that we cannot control all the students' behaviors but we can control our own. It doesn't require very much experience in a school to realize that some volatile behavior on the part of students is due to the teacher's reaction. I taught high school math for over twenty years. During that time, I always had students ask how to do an example in the middle of a test. This allows for a variety of responses. I could bang my head on the desk because I had taught the example a hundred times, and this student never had a question. I might have the urge to bang the student's head on the desk because there had been two days of immediate preparation for this test. I could go into a tirade about the sanctity of the testing time and the impossibility of helping the student. Most likely, this would put the student into a tirade as well and cause greater disruption. I could tell the student I was sorry but it wasn't the time to help. Or I could quietly explain how to do the particular example, telling the student that she couldn't get credit for the example I did, but hoping that it might help her to do a few on her own. Later on, I might try to help the student ask the questions before the last minute.

In the course of my teaching career, I have shown all the responses, but the only one that worked was the last one. What difference does it make when a child asks the question as long as it gets asked? The purpose of tests is supposed to be to facilitate learning. If they aren't doing that, they are worthless. And many tests in school are not learning experiences, which are those experiences that assist students in helping themselves, experiences that empower students.

Empowerment is not a fancy word that we reserve for school philosophies to be recorded in a handbook. It is measured in the way we respond to the demands of the students on a daily basis. It is what we teach when they stop you in the middle of an algebra test and ask you how to solve an equation. No matter what the behavior of the child we cannot give them the message that they are bad or stupid. We hold them responsible for their behaviors that may be inappropriate, but we separate the value of the behavior from the value of the child; and we help them make the separation so neither of us is judging the child along with the behavior.

Discipline can never be confused with punishment, and always we ought to err on the side of mercy. To give the benefit of the doubt is not a sign of weakness. Remember, we are about mercy not mere justice.

Just as we teach and reteach the quadratic formula for solving equations or the irregular verbs in Spanish, we teach and reteach the way of mercy, the way of non-judgmental acceptance of all people, especially those who aren't nice to us. So we teach and reteach the students how to get along with each other and deal with the conflicts that come along.

Conflict is part of every classroom and school. It can be overt or subtle, it can be about important issues or trivial ones. Our choice is not whether to have conflicts, but how to deal with them. We can foster the productive use of conflict, control all conflict with authoritarian power or just let things take their course and live with the chaos. All three responses to conflict can be found in our schools today. I would hope that as educators we find ourselves moving toward the first response, that of seizing conflicts as opportunities for growth. This growth, of course, will be for us as well as our students. It is a rare faculty that couldn't use some conflict resolution skills in dealing with each other.

It is in the resolution of conflicts that we see clearly the precedence of mercy over justice. If we try merely to negotiate between the rights of opposing sides, we rarely get more than a disgruntled settlement. Often even that is impossible to reach. To cling to what we think is justly ours is to value rights over persons. Conflict resolution tempered with mercy implies the acceptance of people over the differences in issues. We can learn this, we can practice this, and we can teach this.

As teachers and administrators, we need to increase our understanding of conflict and expand our

peacemaking skills. I'm not telling you to go back and get more credits on a graduate level. The actual techniques of problem solving with students are not complicated. There are many good resources available today. The crucial factor in the process is the attitude of the teacher or administrator, the philosophy behind the technique.

When Gandhi reflected on his nonviolent campaign to free India from the control of the British empire, he acknowledged a "Himalayan blunder" of not properly educating the masses to the philosophy behind the techniques of nonviolence. Gandhi felt too many used the tactics without understanding the underlying basis of nonviolence. What was intended as a way of life became a political tool. In the United States Martin Luther King, Jr. made the same complaint about his work for civil rights. "The greatest mass have used it pragmatically . . . without being ready to live it." People grasped the technique but not the meaning.

Let's not make the same mistake in our schools. To be effective in dealing with classroom conflict we must approach it with the right attitude or no program will work. As indifferent as students can be, they are still astute critics of the truth of our actions. The first brick of our work in building a cooperative classroom is to examine our own attitudes. We have to honestly assess if our style of teaching is contributing to conflict or to its resolution, if our style of teaching reflects the ways of mercy.

Do we model behavior that is tolerant of differences and intolerant of prejudice?

Are our methods of teaching and treating students and other faculty members conducive to an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance? When we communicate with the students, do we observe and listen as well as talk?

Do we model behavior that is tolerant of differences and intolerant of prejudice? If students see us giving the same respect and interest to the brightest and the slowest, to the most polite and to the most rude, then we can be credible in asking them to do the same. We teach the works of mercy by living them. If the students see us still being kind even when another student is yelling at us, they will learn a great deal. They will see an alternative to force. They will see us using all our wits and imagination and creativity and sense of humor in dealing with an obnoxious student and they will learn tolerance. Their own imaginations may even be sparked.

Einstein reminded us that "Imagination is more important than knowledge." The difficulty in not developing imagination is that it limits the power of the person to find alternative solutions when needed. If you teach in such a way that you expand your students' active imagination in dealing with crises and open them to differences of all kinds, then when the time comes for them to handle the problems, they might have a few ideas in their own imaginations. Adolescents, in particular, experience difficulty in seeing beyond their own immediate environment. We can never do enough brainstorming with them to broaden their outlook and to help them realize the possibilities available in any given situation.

The obvious corollary to developing cooperation among students and expanding their options for dealing with each other is that the learning environment cannot be a passive experience for the student. A teacher-controlled classroom that allows no room for input from the students is not an environment that will foster the critical thinking necessary for the moral decisions mercy requires. We can't expect students to take initiative when we haven't encouraged their initiative in a multitude of ways. If we want students to assume responsibility and take control over their own actions then we have to allow them to exercise that power on a regular basis. We learn to walk by walking, to talk by talking, to be merciful by being merciful.

They have to learn to make decisions and live with the consequences and evaluate the results. This is an on-going process that does not get fostered in a classroom where there are inflexible rules and where there is a teacher who misuses power in an authoritarian way. Mercy doesn't grow in such a climate.

Our students deserve more than this. Too many of them endure extreme degrees of emotional neglect. Too many of them are suffering terribly. If their lives are going to have any light in them, they desperately need us to help them live with themselves and with each other. Too few of our children can look out on their future as a "brave new world that has such people in it." When we get weary of their demands we need to take a little distance from the immediate problem and remind ourselves of this responsibility.

Finally, I would like to spend a short time on academic expectations as an opportunity to practice mercy. If it's hard to reconcile the two, then that's the sign that we need to look at this relationship. Theoretically, we claim that the purpose of education is to allow children to develop to their full potential. We say we try to elicit the best from each child. In my experience, I have met many teachers who teach with this philosophy.

However, I have seldom been in a school whose educational structure supports this goal of individual development. I am not speaking here of comparisons based on styles of classroom management such as open classroom or traditional, homogeneous age

groupings or multi-age classrooms. I am speaking of our whole emphasis on academic competition and the rewarding of academic excellence in examinations.

We seem to be more interested in the accumulation of knowledge than in the development of wisdom. Why do we not accept into our schools those students who are the lowest academically? If they don't fit into our program then the programs should be changed rather than the children rejected. Why are our commencement exercises top heavy with rewards for academic honors and excellence? We occasionally put in a service award, but the majority of the acclamation goes to those who are bright and have surpassed their peers in proving their intelligence. Why does the valedictorian have to give the address at graduation? Why not have it given by the student who best exemplifies the spirit of mercy? Academic competition is contrary to all the principles of sound educational theory. The value of intellectual pursuits is to be measured in its own right, not against another's achievements.

. . . the great challenge of teaching — to find that spark of curiosity and the small flame of self-esteem and to fan them into light . . .

Maria Montessori warns us that "an education that is merely a blind struggle between the strong and the weak can produce only inefficient adults . . . Sadly, children now receive rewards for triumphing over their schoolmates in competitions and excelling in examinations, which allow them to pass from one year to another of monotonous servitude."

For children who are less intellectually gifted, school is almost always an experience of being at the bottom. From the time they are in first grade, they know the difference between the rainbow reading group that can read and the sunshine reading group that can't. School is already difficult enough for a child who struggles with every step, without the continual reinforcement of watching the bright children get honors all along the way.

It is an equally unfair situation for the brighter children, because it puts pressure on them not just to learn but to get better grades than other children. We all know the one with the highest grades is not necessarily the most intelligent child or the most responsible or creative. And we also know that wisdom is not the same thing as intelligence. They are two distinct talents. The question is, do our children know this?

Are we teaching in a way that fosters the growth in wisdom of all our children? Are we teaching in a way that respects the ability of each child? Some classroom conflicts come from the frustration of students not feeling able to perform to the standards required. If a group of children cannot write well, don't assign them an essay. Everyone, teacher included, will just end up angry and frustrated and in conflict with each other. Teach them to write good sentences. When they can write good sentences, teach them to write great sentences. Celebrate their achievements. If it takes all year, don't worry about it. There are college graduates who still can't write good sentences.

The key is to measure the progress not the end result against an arbitrary standard of achievement. I would encourage you, as individual teachers and as administrators, to examine your academic practices to see if you are directly or indirectly encouraging academic competitiveness. And I would encourage you, as professionals, to examine your total structure to see again if the emphasis is on superiority as opposed to mastery. This is not a small point in creating an atmosphere of mercy in a school. Too many of our children feel they can never measure up to the academic expectations of school. They feel like Sisyphus pushing that rock up the hill day after day.

This is the great challenge of teaching — to find that spark of curiosity and the small flame of self-esteem and to fan them into light — not a light from the outside but the very light within the child. We can only empower the children if we believe in them. We have to think their ideas are important to them if not to us, we have to think their thoughts are worth listening to and their feelings worth being taken into account and valued.

I was in a kindergarten class once on one of the first days of school. A four-year old girl was working on a wooden pumpkin puzzle. When it was time to go home, she still had the unfinished puzzle in front of her. The teacher told her to quickly put it together, and the child said she didn't know how. The teacher impatiently asked, "Why did you take it apart if you didn't know how to put it back together?" As the teacher rushed around to get the other children ready for dismissal, the little girl asked another child to help her and remarked, "How do you know if you can put something together until after you take it apart?" Who was the better educator in that circumstance — the teacher of the four-year old?

We have to risk letting kids take things apart to figure out how to put them back together. The hope in all of this is that some of our students will find new ways of putting things together that we have failed to see. We have to risk taking things apart to figure out if mercy is the cement holding everything in place or if we have substituted other values in place of mercy.

We have to risk being vulnerable simply because Christ is vulnerable. The hope is that we and our students learn that defenselessness leads to a more peaceful life for all people. We have to risk being merciful

even when it makes us feel weak. The hope is that in living mercy we will find mercy and show our students the way to find it.

We have to surrender the desire to be powerful and in control, and be fulfilled and satisfied in the promise and ways of mercy.

The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest—
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes . . .
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice . . .
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.
(The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Sc. I)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As you reflect on the spiral of interpretation presented by Celeste Rouleau, give an example of how your experience has mediated a renewed understanding of a traditional text.

2. Celeste Rouleau argues that the dichotomy between prayer and action is a dichotomy Catherine McAuley did not have to face, but one arising from our dichotomized world. What are other problems we encounter in our attempts to be religious today? What resources do you use to respond to these problems?

3. What experience of violence have you encountered in your ministry? How might these conflicts be opportunities for growth in mercy?

4. Patricia McCarthy argues that we must risk taking things apart to see whether mercy or something else is the cement holding them together (p. 11). What have you risked taking apart only to find other values as the cement? What have you risked taking apart and found mercy as the cement?

5. Which of Sheila Harrington's questions occur to you as a crucial question? — a question we must answer as we face the future?

6. What restrains us from recommitting ourselves to a common mission?

7. How does television educate us to justice or injustice in programs other than *60 Minutes*?

8. Do you agree that "whoever tells the stories controls the culture . . ." What implications does this have for the mission of Mercy in our culture?

Please send your reflections on any of these questions to Maryanne Stevens, Managing Editor, *The MAST Journal*, 9411 Ohio Street, Omaha, NE 68134.

The Challenges We Face

Sheila Harrington, RSM

We, the Mercy Sisters of the Americas, stand in the shoes of Catherine McAuley at a crucial moment in history when the world, this nation, our church and religious life are in a state of transition, even turmoil; of uncertainty, even upheaval; of decay, even death. The old set formulas, the stable and universal answers no longer give authentic response to today's reality — its need and its questions. It is most unsettling. We might be tempted to re-create the "stable" past or conclude a pat answer made for today, rather than await patiently the vision of religious life as it unfolds before us. We receive encouragement in these times from the words spoken to Habakkuk: "Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late" (Habakkuk 2:2).

. . . we as Sisters of Mercy are animated by the Gospel.

Though the future is yet unseen, we as religious women in the Americas, have been given signposts along our journey that indicate a direction for us to follow so that we may enter the future readied and disposed. In this article, I will reflect on the great similarity expressed in three different statements by contemporary religious groupings — 1) The Transformative Elements of Religious Life, developed by LCWR/CMSM; 2) the National Vision of the *Convergence* Conferences, developed by listening to the voices of grass-roots religious; and 3) our own Direction Statement as Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, developed at the First Institute Chapter in July of 1991. All three present religious life with certain particulars. Not to take steps to prepare ourselves to live into this vision would be to ignore the signs of the times and walk lamely into the future. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus challengingly questions the officials of his time when he says to them: "In the evening you say, 'Sky red and gloomy, the day will be stormy'. If you know how to interpret the look of the sky, can you not read the signs of the times?" (Mt. 16) Does not Jesus challenge us also?

It is not enough to see the signs, we must know how to interpret them and ready ourselves to face them. This preparedness is required of all religious and in particular of the women who join our communities, and those sisters who accompany them in their incorporation journey.

These reflections about the future are seen in the light of a personal assumption, namely that we are aware or trying to become aware of all that mitigates against moving forward into the future vision of religious life. The challenge is to face that truth and let it go. Barbara Fiand states in her book, *Living the Vision*, that "characteristic of every crisis or turning point is the death or disintegration of the dominant mode of perception that is always necessary before anything new can appear."

Our Direction Statement begins with the conviction that we as Sisters of Mercy are *animated by the Gospel.* To be animated is to be filled with the spirit of something or someone — it is to be passionate about something, to be deeply moved. That spirit comes forth from the depths of prayer and contemplation. The LCWR statement says religious of 2010 will be converted by the example of Jesus and the values of the Gospel. *Convergence* speaks of the need to be contemplative people, allowing ourselves to be shaped by attention to God, to other persons and to events around us. Such a contemplative attitude demands a *life* of prayer, not just *saying* prayers. LCWR, in its visions, affirms that "recognizing contemplation as a way of life for the whole church, (religious) will see themselves and their communities as centers of spirituality and the experience of God."

Are many sisters content with *saying* prayers — routinely, hurriedly, privately? How many even pray? Is our experience in community one of trust-filled faith sharing? How many turn off the entire Gospel as a tool of patriarchy and thus miss out on the experience of Jesus? Many women who join us are already deeply prayerful and contemplative. Does their entrance into community continue to nourish that or is it starved by superficial communities? Do we have to offer them powerful programs on prayer and contemplation because they cannot find any of this in our local houses?

Catherine McAuley"s passion for the poor fills the Sister of Mercy in this future vision. LCWR says that religious of the future will have reexamined, reclaimed and set free the charisms of their foundresses. We touch into what the charism meant in the historical context. It does not mean to do the same things as before, but to respond to today's unmet needs as the foundress so passionately responded in her day.

Convergence proclaims: "It is time to re-claim the SPIRIT, to let the passion that early on moved us to a fearless commitment to the unknown and to the newness, to take over once again!" What holds us back from this passion? Is it routine or lack of challenge? Is it fear of change or fear of consequences? Are we

fatigued because there are so few of us and we experience loss at the many who left us? The Scriptures say "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst" — For what do we hunger and thirst? For what would we die? *Convergence* quotes Alan Boesak of South Africa who says, "We will go before God to be judged, and God will ask us, 'where are your wounds?' and we will say 'we have no wounds.' And God will ask, 'was nothing worth fighting for?'"

Many women who join Mercy are deeply involved in ministries to the poor — yet they join us because they want to be part of a common passion — they will be strengthened by the whole and will strengthen the whole by their unique response. Or perhaps some see us as very settled in professionally and thus want to be part of the status quo. Why do they come to us?

We are impelled to commit our lives and resources — because for this very thing were we born. Catherine McAuley spent her life and all her inheritance for the poor. Our lives are not given us only for our own personal development, enjoyment and fulfillment. Our resources are not for our security now and in our retirement years. LCWR envisions that religious of 2010 will minister where others will not go. If our option is for the poor, then we ask ourselves how does each personal and collective act or decision we undertake further the consciousness of the dominant culture or advance the alternative vision? How much are we co-opted by the values of society rather than moved by the Gospel?

As women come to self-awareness they refuse "to discount the validity and richness of their own experience. . ."

How can we encourage ourselves to become professionally prepared for ministry without taking on the values, the culture of professional upper class? Marie Augusta Neal proposes a challenging observation in her recent study. She states that it is very possible that "professionalism might become the determination of choice of work and that ministry for mission might disappear."

From our contemplative stance comes our awareness of the inter-connectedness of all creation. We are called *to act in solidarity with the poor of our world, especially women and children. Convergence* proclaims that authentic prayer leads us to a global spirituality that calls us to human solidarity where as Pat Mische says "the new human order is created in the meeting ground between contemplation and struggle, reflection and action."

LCWR expresses how our spirituality of wholeness will foster harmony among all peoples, that the listening to and learning from the poor will shape all aspects of our lives. Such solidarity with the poor and an identity with their causes demands that we disenfranchise ourselves from the identity with and benefit from the powers and the prestige in church and society. How can we impact the social order if we are so caught up in its values? We can't. Women who come to us have grown up in this society of flagrant individualism and inordinate consumerism. I suspect they desire something more out of life but need the strength of a common vision to resist the powerful enticements of society. Mary Jo Leddy states in *Reweaving Religious Life* that, "religious life in North America is disintegrating to the extent it has internalized the patterns of decline in liberal capitalism."

LCWR writes that religious life of the future accepts the truth that we are church and supports all members as equals in diverse ministries. Our Direction Statement places us in solidarity with *women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society.* And *Convergence* declares that the "sense of mutual influence, of freedom and liberty is most true to feminine spirituality which is rooted in the dynamic of connectedness rather than separation." As women come to self-awareness they refuse "to discount the validity and richness of their own experience. This challenges the male model of dominance as the norm and mode of operation in our lives."

What does this say to the way we relate to women in the incorporation stages in community? In what ways are our "formation" programs and personnel still operating out of a hierarchical, non-inclusive mindset? Doesn't even the word 'formation', 'novice', bespeak a dualistic paradigm? In responding to a statement that we attract candidates but cannot seem to keep them, Barbara Fiand poses the question: "could one of the reasons not be our expectations and demands of them once they enter — demands which few of us live up to ourselves?" I am convinced that the issue for us is less one of good programs and good personnel as it is of a revitalization of community and the call of our Constitutions "to seek integrity of word and deed in our lives." (#8) In *Living the Vision*, the author proposes that "if we cannot meet them where we live and as we live, perhaps we should not encourage them to come."

The call to *embrace our multi-cultural and international reality* is a very important call for today and into the future. It is valued by LCWR which sees religious life of the future to be inclusive of persons of different ages, genders, races and sexual orientation. *Convergence* also addresses the importance and desirability of openness to diverse cultures in our communities. Hopefully for us in Mercy this openness to diverse cultures comes out of our respect for the digni-

ty of all peoples and nationalities. In the least, however, we need to be receptive to other cultures, especially the Hispanic and Afro-American, because they will be the majority church of the next century. Augusta Neal points out that at present only 2% of sisters in this country are Afro-American and 2% Hispanic. I believe we will embrace our multi-cultural reality, only when we first acknowledge our past history of exclusion of minorities and recognize our present prejudices — we must name the demons in order to be freed of them. Otherwise we will be putting new wine into old wineskins. Particularly for us at this time as our new institutional reality is still forming itself, we must include, even insist upon, the perspectives and insights of our sisters from other countries and cultures. Theirs must not come in as an after-thought once decisions are made and direction taken. Even at present, the experiences of formation by our sisters in other countries can be very insightful to those of us in the North. It is clearly a formation for mission with the poor and among the poor, a call to simplicity and radicality, a call to deep prayer and deep communion — a call to solidarity and sacrifice. It struck me just now as I describe formation in other countries — how 'unamerican' it seems — mission with the poor as opposed to "make friends with the rich and powerful" — a call to simplicity as opposed to "more is better" — radicality in contrast to "do what's needed to get by" — deep prayer as opposed to "superficial appearances" — communion as opposed to "one above the rest" — solidarity as opposed to "looking out for oneself" and — sacrifice as opposed to "instant gratification." How much of the American anti-values are present and active in us?

Our Direction Statement says that in order to live this commitment we must *develop and act from a multi-cultural international perspective.* Kathleen Healy, editor of *Sisters of Mercy, Spirituality in America,* writes in her introduction that it was "easier for New England spiritual seekers to relate to the Sisters of Mercy because Catherine McAuley had taught them that they were to pursue their goals of caring for God's people in the particular age and culture in which they found themselves." That perspective does not come by reading books alone. It develops through experience of other cultures, listening to other nations' sense of what our country's policies have meant for them, nurturing a spirituality that is global and inclusive, that sees the interdependence of all things and peoples on this earth. Encouraging these kinds of developments for the women who enter Mercy will be vital for our future.

We must *speak with a corporate voice.* We can make a difference as individuals, but we can be very effective as a whole. If we have corporate identity and corporate institutions from which we have received corporate benefits, then we have an obligation in justice also to use our corporate voice for the sake of the poor. Both LCWR and *Convergence* envision religious of the future as very committed to critique societal and ecclesial values and structures. Their vision agrees with our Direction Statement that also calls us to *work for systemic change.* Throughout our history as a Mercy Community we have been courageous in responding to need through direct service. An important part of our heritage is the commitment to work to change the systems that keep the poor, poor. One such example is given in Healy's book of the House of Mercy founded in New Orleans in 1869. People of that time responded favorably to help orphans, the sick and the blind but, as the Convent Annals say, "to aid healthy young women who, they say, should be out working, is not to be thought of." The Annals continue: "they fail to see that to make capable workers, workers must be properly trained." In this light, we are obligated to offer the women who join us the skills necessary to do critical analysis and systemic change. We must encourage them to utilize those same skills as they participate in our internal life as a community.

. . . religious of the future will be transformed by the poor, living a simpler lifestyle.

And finally, the Direction Statement calls us to *continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries.* In the Transformative Elements, LCWR says that religious of the future will be transformed by the poor, living a simpler lifestyle, Mary Jo Leddy writes in *Reweaving Religious Life* that "the cries of suffering and the songs of hope of people on the periphery have always called forth new visions of religious life. But we cannot hear those cries and songs, we cannot attune ourselves to them, unless we place ourselves with those on the periphery . . ." The grass roots sisters who make up the *Convergence* vision say that religious will be committed to integrity, that is, making their actions match what they say. They feel it will lead to a willingness to discern their ministry choice communally in the light of human needs and the congregation's common vision and mission.

The liberation theologians of Latin America have constantly urged religious and others to open up to and be present among the poor because the "poor will evangelize you." Bishop Romero, the martyred bishop of El Salvador, once said in a homily, "I believe that the bishop always has much to learn from the people. Precisely in those charisms that the Spirit gives to the people, the bishop finds the touchstone of his humility and authenticity."

This is a vision — not etched in stone — not elaborated in detail how it should be lived out — but cer-

tainly a vision that gives a possible direction for us. It is not far-fetched. In many ways, we are making choices today that point us toward that direction. There are many signs of hope.

Yet what changes must occur, what challenges need to be faced if religious life wants to keep on course?

1) We must recommit ourselves to a *common mission or direction.* All the ministries our sisters are presently engaged in may very well be "good" ministries, but not all good ministries are in keeping with our direction. Anything goes is not a valid criteria. It is not healthy for a community when its members are "looking for jobs" only. The Futures Study done by Hygren and Ukeritis offers this conclusion: "To achieve a desired future, religious as a group as well as individuals must confront the forces that currently restrain them to, in fact, be responsive to absolute human need in the context of their particular charism."

2) We must honestly *acknowledge the effects* on us of today's *cultural emphasis on individualism.* One example for me is the affection for psychological and self-fulfillment programs and interests. Although healthy psychological maturity is essential, absorption in this arena may detract from the vital dimension of the call and obedience to a common mission as motivating forces for religious in their choice of ministry. The Futures Study states: "The future lies in the ability to decide between the high cost of Gospel living in a religious congregation and exclusively privatized understanding of vocation to religious life."

3) We must authentically face the issue of how our community understands the *normative element of religious life, namely, a commitment to the poor and a response to unmet needs.* It is too general for us to accept phrases like the following — "Everyone is poor in one way or another." — "Not everyone can work directly with the poor." One sister in the Teleconference on the Futures Study said that the church, religious life, is most itself when it is by the side of the poor.

4) We must *call forth prophetic leadership and we must embrace the authority* we have entrusted them with for the sake of the mission. Collaboration and dialogue are essential in community decision-making but what each individual wants and expects for herself should not be the only or final word. To say this does not infer a return to the old ways of authority — it does mean that authority is more than the rubber-stamping of what each one decides for herself.

5) We must *reclaim our corporate identity and purpose* in the Church. What makes us "different" from our lay brothers and sisters? To even utter the phrase bothers so many of us — we fear perhaps it advocates our getting back onto a pedestal or being better than the laity. We don't want that, of course, but we do want to believe firmly in our unique gift to the church and proclaim it. Ask the question in another form — if *there is no difference* then why continue to exist?

Finally, as we journey into the future where religious life is seen to be prophetic, contemplatively active, multi-ethnic, globally in solidarity with the poor, authoritatively inclusive and materially simple, we are drawn by necessity to that inner space both as individuals and as communities, wherein the Spirit dwells in order that the vision might be given to us. The challenges are great but the conviction that the moment of *chairos* for religious life has come to us, encourages us onward.

Mary Jo Leddy concludes her book on religious life with a "Meditation for a Threadbare Moment." I would like to borrow a part of it to end my reflections.

Placing ourselves together in prayer:
Visions find their first voice
at the deepest level of our lives
deeper than the conscious or
self-conscious levels of our lives.
In that space where
we are who we truly are
where we are of God with God and for God
where our lives are threaded with others
in a seamless garment of Spirit.

In this space visions are born.
In the in-between of our prayer
beyond isolation,
beyond superficial togetherness
let us dwell in silence
together — to wait, to listen.
Let us nourish this prayer
with the symbols and stories of
our outrageous faith.
Let us read the Scripture together
letting the words form
in the silence of our being
letting the words shape
the word we have to speak together.
Let us wait in the hope
of co-authoring a new chapter.
Let us hold ourselves
in readiness for a vision.

60 Minutes and the Quest for Justice

Camille D'Arienzo, RSM

The sparkling new glow of the Mercy mandate to commit ourselves and resources to the formation of a more just Church in an intolerant and discriminatory society runs the risk of growing dull with the passage of time. Our local community, like many others, I am sure, recites the words of the Institute's Direction Statement at the conclusion of our evening prayer. As earnest and faithful as we try to be, I believe we have yet to grasp the vocation in our pledge to "commit our lives and resources . . . to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world, especially women and children, (with) women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society and (with) one another as we embrace our multi-cultural and international reality."

It is, after all, a vocation, an intense call, to "act from a multi-cultural, international perspective; speak with a corporate voice; work for systemic change; and call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries."

Anyone serious about this commitment needs all the help she can get. Jesus, who encouraged his followers to read the signs of the times would not today exclude television, the most pervasive teacher of our time, sending signals via airwaves, cable and satellite to prisoners and presidents, sisters and soldiers, artists and artisans, those who are educated and those who are illiterate, the merry and the miserable, the oppressed and the oppressors.

Since 1968, *60 Minutes* has made its niche and its millions by unmasking injustice. From a fledgling dependent of CBS News to a profitable program in the Nielsen's top ten, its Sunday evening news magazine competes with morning church services as a religious activity for many. Some of the viewer's faith is justified. Mike Wallace, Morley Safer, Ed Bradley, Diane Sawyer and, yes, Andy Rooney, focus on the *stories* of our times. Week after week these reporters, serving as detectives, analysts, commentators, tourists and referees, bring us unit after unit of the human community, each facing its own conflicts, challenges and triumphs. They expose villains, comfort victims and give people who are powerless a sense that *60 Minutes* is working for the good that can overcome evil.

What does all this have to do with the Sisters of Mercy who have pledged to spend their lives for a more just world?

Apart from the stretch of the individual's creative ability to draw from this public forum information and insights for use in personal ministry, there are two insights I offer: the first, that *60 Minutes* fulfills a prophetic function in the marketplace and second, a recognition that the program's topics and their treatment are themselves, occasionally unjust and deceptive.

In the first instance, *60 Minutes,* despite its selectively and often criticized edited segments, is reality-based. Its heroes often articulate the viewer's experience of powerlessness against institutional forces. The reporters — familiar, reliable and constant — demonstrate heroic, although occasionally quixotic, efforts to be a public conscience. They often succeed in unmasking evil, humiliating arrogance and encouraging a more just world. In a symbolic fashion they stand "outside the city" and shout to all who have ears to hear, eyes to see and hearts to care, that something rotten is going on "inside," something requiring exposure, redress. Furthermore, while raising awareness, they dissipate despair by doing something.

. . . a caution that *60 Minutes* is sometimes less than just and not as honest as audiences are led to believe.

Isn't this what so many of our members, associates and co-workers do in health care, social services, education and parish work? The scale may be different but the process is similar.

And now for my second point, a caution that *60 Minutes* is sometimes less than just and not as honest as audiences are led to believe.

Women reporters and women's issues are underrepresented. As retired CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite used to say at the close of the network newscast, "And that's the way it is . . . " Dominance by white males is the way it is throughout the broadcast society. That may be so, but it isn't right. Challenging that nearly exclusive fraternity would be consonant with the Mercy worldview. Offering suggestions of woman-centered projects with national appeal is a productive way of doing that.

There is the matter, too, of choosing locations and spokespersons, editing conversations, excluding points of view and selecting camera shots.

These observations will surprise few thoughtful viewers; however, the extent of the technological effort to control the content and persuade the audience is monumental. Richard Campbell, assistant professor of communication at the University of Michigan, provides a scholarly analysis of the program in *60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America.* He reveals the impact of the camera in *60 Minutes'* consistent use of more visual or frame space

for its reporters that it allows its subjects. Reporters, he notes, are usually shot at greater distance than their interviewees: the latter frequently appear in close-up; the more extreme the character, the more extreme the close-up. "The reporters . . . have more space within which to operate. They appear in greater control. Victims and villains are shot in tighter close-ups; they are less in control and often cut off from the place around them."

The heart of *60 Minutes'* success is in its storytelling. Every segment is a small drama with characters, conflicts and crises. Professor George Gerbner, outstanding scholar on the subject of the effects of television violence, says, "Whoever tells the stories controls the culture and television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time."

Stories help to mold character, provide information, arouse emotions, affect values, offer heroes and heroines and inspire action. Sometimes we think of these stories as myths, fables or parables. Stories are also our method of living out our promise to commit our lives to the works of justice which are at the heart of mercy.

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60 Minutes and the News: A Mythology for Middle America, by Richard Campbell, was published by University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Contributors

Mary Celeste Rouleau (Burlingame) is currently teaching philosophy at the University of San Francisco. She did post-doctoral studies in spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and private research in libraries and archives in Europe. Her hobby since she entered the Sisters of Mercy over forty years ago has been the spirituality of Catherine McAuley. She has written the article on Catherine in the French *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite* (Paris, 1978), and other articles on religious life in various journals. Her present project is a book about interpreting the spirituality of Catherine, integrating a method of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics with data she has collected over the years.

Patricia McCarthy CND, a sister of Notre Dame from Rhode Island, first presented the talk reprinted here to the Mercy Secondary Education Association meeting in Fall, 1992. Her 27 years teaching experience in grade and high schools has been with the poor student, that is, the student who suffers from poverty, material deprivation, abuse and learning disorders. For the past three years, Pat has devoted her time to the full-time teaching of the history and spirituality of Christian nonviolence and all the implications of this stance for community, family, parish, social, political and business life. Her articles have appeared in *Review for Religious, Momentum, The Spiritual Life* and *The International Union of Superiors' General.*

Camille D'Arienzo (Brooklyn) has just been elected president of her regional community. With a Ph.D. in Communications from the University of Michigan, she has written extensively on justice issues and provides weekly religious commentaries for WINS Radio in New York. She recently authored a textbook *Writing Scripts for Television, Radio and Film.*

Sheila Harrington (Providence) has been on the regional leadership team for the Providence regional community since July, 1992. Previously, she spent twelve years in Honduras and began the formation program for the Sisters of Mercy there. Her article in this issue was originally a talk given to a joint meeting of the Mercy Vocation-Formation Directors and the Institute Leadership Conference on October 29, 1992.

Maya Angelou's Inaugural Poem

In hopes for a mercy that will bring a new morning and in great admiration of Maya Angelou, *The MAST Journal* reprints her inaugural poem.

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon.
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no more hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spilling words.

Armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face.

Across the wall of the world,
A River sings a beautiful song,
Come rest here by my side.

Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more, Come,
Clad in peace and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the stone were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
Brow and when you yet knew you still
Knew nothing.
The River sings and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.

Today, the first and last of every Tree
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed
On traveller, has been paid for.
You, who gave me my first name, you
Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet, left me to the employment of
Other seekers — desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.
You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot . . .
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare
Praying for a dream.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am the Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.
I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree
I am yours — your Passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts
Each new hour holds new chances
For new beginnings.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply, Very simply
With hope, Good morning.

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