

# *The MAST Journal*

The Journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology  
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Dear Sisters and Friends,

The word "direction" generally implies we are moving forward and that we are mapping out a road for the future. How is direction-setting related to the past? The interchange can be explored in this issue of MAST Journal whose articles were edited by Janet Ruffing, R.S.M. Last winter near the southern French town of Avignon, hikers stumbled upon a cave with wall paintings that are probably 20,000 years old, from the period of Cro-Magnon society. The cave is "virgin" meaning it has been sealed ever since the entry way was blocked, probably by a landslide millennia ago. From this "pre-historic cave," we have no written records (since "history" is a biased term, generally referring to alphabetical production). But the witness of human intentionality and consciousness overwhelms the modern viewer. Hairy bison and long-horned rhinos ascend the cave walls in overlapping herds. Species extinct today appear in three-dimensional texture because their lines follow the bulging and recessing of the cave surface.

The images were produced by artisans who mixed clay pigments of ochre, red and black, with their spittle and then blow-painted the lines against the rock through tubes. We have to imagine this spontaneous artistry lighted by the flickering of tallow candles and wood torches. One dramatic center piece was created by the careful placement of a bear skull atop a column of stone. Appearing today as an altar-offering or memorial, it was left there by the last group to visit what one author called a "pre-historic cathedral."

We find no writing, unless we count a dance-like succession of our fore-bears' palm-prints along the wall. The cave is full of the vitality of human imagination. This people had a gracious, expansive sense of connectedness with living creatures. They designated a gifted artist to translate living animals from the outside world into life-charged art on the inside of the cave. They distinguished this moment and place as part of a ritual separate from ordinary daily life. No evidence of actual habitation is found there.

I think this can be an analogy for a community reconnecting with its charism. Direction is found by listening to the present and going forward. Direction is also going "back," toward a retrieval of sacred history. Sometimes the way of "going back" unfolds because of a happy accident of disclosure and revelation of the past, like stumbling onto the opening of cave, hinted by the draft of air that gusts against the face of the explorer. I think of a conversation recently with Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., who has evidence that a number of letters of Catherine McAuley have not yet been published, and some have probably not even been found. The archival closets of convents and diocesan chanceries, attic-hidden trunks and file-stuffed "McAuley rooms" have yet to yield many secrets. For example, to give voice to a favorite "cause" of mine, much about the production, publishing and dissemination of the *Cottage Controversy*, a document attributed to Catherine, remains unexplained.

We must acknowledge, too, that like Cro-Magnon people, much of our "back then" is "pre-historic" in the sense of not written down. That may frustrate the chronicler and the scientist—even the theologian—in us. Discovering the signs of our history and charism, like the majestic drawings on a cave wall, may produce not so much certainty about the values of spiritual life or ordinary life or specifics of the works of mercy in Catherine's day. Rather, the signs generate an overwhelming sense of awe in our own time. We are connected with the imagination and vision of past lovers of a "dear sweet world," with their consciousness of the primal energy of compassion charging full ahead from darkness into daylight. Direction in this sense is an experience of who we were before this moment, prior to writing our story in the language of annals, letters, books and statements. I recommend that our direction-seeking include a field trip, and that we head for the caves.

Editor, MAST Journal

*Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.*

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# The Genesis of the Direction Statement

Amy Hoey, R.S.M.

*"And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back." —T.S. Eliot*

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Where does anything that has meaning for us really begin? At what point in its development can we say that something as significant as our direction statement did not exist, not even in its constitutive elements? These questions are not intended as riddles, but as attempts to suggest that the Direction Statement of the First Institute Chapter traces its earliest origins to the hearts of thousands of sisters. Its proclamation by the chapter was the culmination of a process that gathered, synthesized, and made explicit the deepest desires of the sisters for our new institute.

In November 1988, the Federation Transition Task Force named four committees to help with the preparations for the establishment of the institute. One of these was called the Visioning Committee. The eleven members of the committee were asked "to design and implement a futurizing process among participating congregations which will provide an opportunity for the sharing of dreams and expectations for the institute and for identifying possible means for realizing them."

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## ... approximately 3000 sisters and associates had participated in Visioning I ...

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By June 1990, approximately 3000 sisters and associates had participated in Visioning I, a process that included sharing stories, creating images of Mercy, and assuming the perspective of 2001 to identify the values and issues with which the institute would be identified in its earliest years. Gatherings were held at many sites within and beyond the United States; in retirement centers; and as part of network meetings. For many sisters the high point of the visioning process was participating with sisters from other regional communities in planning the future of the institute. The energy and enthusiasm generated by the process gave momentum to preparation for the Founding Event and the Chapter. The images produced by the gatherings later decorated the great doors which swung open in Buffalo.

(I remember being at a Mercy Justice Coalition Conference in Burlington in July, 1990. There was some concern that no justice conference was scheduled for the following summer. Because I had had the opportunity to review some of the material generated

by the visioning process, I was unconcerned. The chapter was going to be about justice!)

A second phase of the visioning process during the Fall of 1990 found sisters aided by a video, booklets of stories produced during the first phase, and slides of some of the images. They reflected on and refined the materials produced earlier. Sisters gathered in 507 groups, ranging in size from 1 to 180, most of them smaller groups within a single regional community, and together they focused their concerns and desires for the direction of the institute.

The results of the second phase were synthesized around nine distinct yet sometimes interconnected issues. At a pre-chapter meeting in January, 1991, the visioning material was affirmed as a starting point for direction setting for the institute. Subsequently, the chapter steering committee decided to treat proposals as another part of the visioning material and they were incorporated, according to the nine themes, for presentation to the chapter members.

Such were the materials from which the direction statement was shaped, but the final shaping forces were the events of the chapter itself. I would cite three as particularly influential. First was the address of Sister Bette Moslander, C.S.J. Bette called the chapter to its "*kairos* moment" and reminded us of the *kairos* moments that Catherine had known. She spoke with simple eloquence of Catherine's "one great passion...her passion for the poor born out of a profound contemplative awareness of God's all encompassing tender mercy poured out upon the world." Her words struck a responsive chord in many sisters and echoed the dreams for the institute that had surfaced during the visioning process. Bette cautioned us about the temptation of trying "to do it all," and reminded the chapter that it was asked for a direction, not a blue print, for the next four years.

The second shaping event was the participation of our sisters from beyond the borders of the United States. For many sisters, especially from some of the previously independent congregations, this was their first encounter with sisters whose background, life experience, and language differed from their own. Relatively few in number, their voices and insights had a significant influence. Their interventions gave new significance to terms like systemic change, a strategy valued by women in the north, but often rejected by sisters beyond the U.S. who deliberately choose powerlessness as the way to identify with the poor.

The third shaping force I would identify as those women who called the chapter to remember our Mercy commitment to women. They reminded us that women are the greater number of the poor, that they

are not treated equally by church or society, and that they have been the special concern of Mercy since Catherine's day.

With the gifted facilitation of Ruby Cribbin, the chapter began to frame direction statements. Eight topics emerged; the first, commitment to the poor. The clarity of focus on the economically poor was a surprise only to those who had not been listening. At the end of the first week, the chapter bulletin could report, "The passion for the Sisters of Mercy is for the economically poor, especially women and children. Personal and corporate conversion is necessary as a foundation for focusing on commitment to the poor. Growth in awareness of our multicultural reality is essential."

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During the second week of chapter, the direction statement was "bent and changed, formed and reformed" as delegates struggled with its meaning and

implications. There were discussions about including racism, peace and membership as foci for the statement. All present wrestled with bringing forth a statement that could inspire and challenge, be focused and yet inclusive. There were some of the usual struggles over wording; was commitment strong enough; was of the world too inclusive? A writers' committee which refined the synthesizing work begun by the chapter steering committee served the chapter well. They narrowed the choices for the group, and by the end of the week the statement received overwhelming approval. It was, as one delegate observed, "an utterance of our corporate voice." A formal ritual of acceptance alternated Scripture passages with passages from the direction statement and members responded, "Amen, Alleluia."

The proclamation of the direction statement was an "alleluia moment" because the statement came from our deepest values and hopes about Mercy. The process of its development was one which engaged thousands of us and called us to go down to our personal and community roots so that we could go up; to go back to Catherine's passion for the poor and special concern for women so that we could go forward.

We have lived with the challenge of implementing the direction statement now for almost four years. It has given a perspective on our deeds and words as an institute and as individuals. As we continue the theological reflection processes in preparation for the second chapter, we are called to go even further "down" and even further "back."

## **Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology 1995 Annual Meeting**

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# Reflections on Conversion of Life

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

"I know all your works, your toil and your patient endurance...I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."<sup>1</sup> This poignant complaint of God at the beginning of the Book of Revelation has pierced the heart of Christians throughout time. It quickly pushes aside all the excuses of: "Look how hard I'm working." "See how little time I have." "See how demanding my schedule is." and asks the core question: "Do you really love me as much as you once did?" The question calls each of us to remembrance of our first love, our first zeal, our first passion.

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## First love and passion placed God at the very center of our life and choice.

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The fervor of first love impelled most of us to willingly exchange physical comfort, convenience and possessions for poverty. It involved a willingness to do without for the sake of something greater, a willingness to share what little we had with those who possessed less. First love and passion placed God at the very center of our life and choice. It saw all other relationships and priorities in the light of that love. First love caused us to embrace a communal form of discerning the will of God for ourselves. It made the task of listening to the Spirit a daily exercise in obedience.

All this was played out in the context of a community of disciples, a community of women shaped by the spirit of Mercy. We embraced a life of interrelatedness and a commitment to support and encourage each other throughout our journey. This commitment to each other is outlined in our *Constitutions*: "By our life in community and by sharing our faith and mission we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity...Community strengthens us for mission when we listen openly to one another, seek the common good and promote mutual trust. A sign of our union and charity is our personal and corporate willingness to share our lives and resources with the poor and the afflicted."<sup>2</sup>

First loves are warm and exciting but the authenticity of such love is witnessed by its durability and quality of regeneration over the long haul. It is easy to tire of doing good. It is easy to begin to accommodate to the norms of our environment without realizing that

they are luring us away from the stark simplicity of Gospel poverty. It is easy to be so spent in ministry that we have no resources left with which to water the soil of our communal lives. The multiplicity of voices and values vying for our attention makes it difficult to hear the soft voice of the Spirit stirring within us. An "I" culture makes the common good seem like an unwarranted demand upon our lives.

This was the context and reality which greeted the birth of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and in which it has grown from its birth to this point. The founding vision of the Institute, rooted in both the Gospel and the legacy of Catherine was crystallized in the *Direction Statement*. We committed our lives and resources to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world, to women seeking fullness of life and equality and to one another as we embrace our multi-cultural and international reality.<sup>3</sup> Continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries was identified as vital to the accomplishment of these goals.

The more we have pursued the task of reaching out to the most marginalized and oppressed, the more we have listened to and been changed by the stories of the poor, the disenfranchised, the stranger and the hopeless, the more we have been impelled to conversion of life. It is a radical call which invites us to confront the compromises that we have made along the way. Segundo Galilea gives a vivid description of its demands:

*To follow Christ implies the decision of submitting all other following on earth to the following of God made flesh. Therefore to speak of the following of Christ is to speak of conversion, of 'selling all,' to use the evangelical expression, in order to acquire that pearl and that hidden treasure which is the following of Jesus. Only God can demand such a following and it is in following Jesus that we follow God, the only Absolute.*

*All Christians know what conversion is: to conform ourselves to the values that Christ taught, which bring us out of our egoism, injustice and pride. We also know that conversion is the foundation of all Christian fidelity in our personal lives, in the apostolate, or in social, professional and political involvement. Conversion pulls us out of our hiding places and takes us 'where we would rather not go' in following Christ."<sup>4</sup>*

The conversion of which Galilea speaks is demanding. It pushes us beyond cosmetic changes to depth change. It is birthed by struggle, tension, resistance. In a word it is the death and rising asked of all followers of Jesus. The stirring of this spirit of conversion is not totally unique to Mercy. The challenges

have always been with us. In the immediate past we have heard them raised by Sheila Carney in her reflections on the transformative elements for future religious life,<sup>5</sup> the Nygren Ukeritis Study,<sup>6</sup> Sheila Harrington's "The Challenges We Face",<sup>7</sup> and Doris Gottemoeller's "Befriending the Wind."<sup>8</sup>

There is a rhythmic repetition of themes found in all these writings. They speak of our struggle with identity, with our commitment to the poor, with individualism and community, with corporate commitment. They speak of the struggle to develop new forms of relatedness, decision making and prayer. Most of all they speak of the challenge brought to us by new members and by the poor with whom we are called to walk. Underneath all the specifics there flows a common thrust: It is time to name who we are and what we are about. It is time to translate vision into lived reality.

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## The starting point for all conversion is embracing the present reality.

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The starting point for all conversion is embracing the present reality. It was this process that engaged the members of the Institute during the regional gatherings in preparation for the Dayton moment of our Institute Chapter. In our communal discernment of the issues and challenges facing us, we named some of the existent tensions that invite us to conversion. Among these tensions are the following:

**Membership:** Our understanding of membership is evolving and our questions go beyond the issue of the decreasing number of vowed members; we realize that the future demands an examination of the meaning of membership, association and alternative forms of affiliation.

**The Poor:** Our stance of solidarity with the economically poor of the world throws an uncompromising light on the choices each sister makes in regard to the simplicity of her own life and the simplicity of the corporate life of the Institute. Both dimensions must validate and Institute stance.

**Women and the Church:** We feel a deep and painful ambivalence in regard to our relationship both as women and as religious in the church we all love.

**Cultural Diversity:** We struggle to receive the gift of diversity of cultures within our Mercy life and ministry but we also recognize that it is a complicating aspect of our life together.

**Corporate Voice:** We want to speak and act corporately but there are trends in our lives and realities in our world and culture which prevent the realization of

that desire.

**Conversion:** We are not satisfied with the depth of our prayer nor with the vitality of our community life and ministry even though we maintain our commitment to our choice of fullness of life in ourselves, in our work and in our world.

**Aging:** As a body in the process of aging—as is every living entity—we experience our society's discrimination against those perceived to be aging. Simultaneously, we participate in and subtly endorse our culture's glorification of youth and accomplishment.

**Institute:** While we are "Institute" we long for the bondedness and benefits of being a large corporate body. However, many have not yet experienced any significant difference because of this reality in the areas of personal enrichment, congregational life, ministerial leadership or support.<sup>9</sup>

It is significant that there is a convergence between the tensions surfaced and the stirrings that have left us uncomfortable with our present reality. The naming of the tension areas draws us back to our *Constitutions*. There we say, "We strive to witness to mercy when we...pursue integrity of word and deed in our lives."<sup>10</sup> It is that pursuit that impels us to conversion, that impels us to live out not only the thrust of our *Direction Statement* but the vision of our *Constitutions* in their fullness. We are judged by the vision we espouse. Our movement to conversion in life and in ministry depends upon the honesty with which we respond to the question: "Does my life enfold the words of the *Constitutions* or leave them hollow wishes?"

The implications of this question are sweeping. A brief overview of our *Constitutions* show that we have called ourselves not only to share our lives and resources with the poor and afflicted but "to give ourselves in love to our companions in community, to those in need and to family and friends,"<sup>11</sup> to "value the resources of the earth as gifts of God and use them in a spirit of stewardship,...to support one another through our labors and to strive for unity of heart and mind in sharing whatever we have,...to live simply and to balance concern for the future with compassion for the poor and needy."<sup>12</sup> Going further we see that we have committed ourselves "to search together for God's will in fidelity to our mission...to listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God's will."<sup>13</sup> Ever mindful of our legacy from Catherine we "commit ourselves to exercise the spiritual and corporal works of mercy."<sup>14</sup>

It seems clear in word but becomes muddy in enactment. We find ourselves struggling to reconcile our experienced reality with our espoused reality. Faith sharing, so vital to communal discernment, is often difficult for us. Membership can involve living alone or living together in ways that lack connectedness and depth. These realities challenge us to ques-

tion what we expect of community. What is the nature of the communion among us? What does it ask of us? What are we willing to embrace to make that union a vibrant witness to those who look for signs that humankind can move beyond separateness to interdependence?

We seek to respond to the emerging needs of the afflicted and poor and our response pulls us in diverse ways. We long for the support and encouragement that is the fruit of shared investment in the mission but sometimes experience loneliness and estrangement instead. "My" ministry does not always seem like "our" ministry. The expanding needs around us seem to consume both time and energy. Without the experience of a community that "strengthens us for mission"<sup>15</sup> the recognition of violence, poverty, hopelessness, societal injustice, spousal abuse and the abuse or neglect of children can demoralize and crush us.

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**Conversion is a beginning,  
but what is asked of us  
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in the  
pattern of Jesus.**

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The recognition of our brokenness, our addictions and compulsions, our dysfunctional behaviors and attitudes can be experienced as a reason for withdrawal from engagement, rather than an invitation to renewal and regeneration. It seems that no area of our lives goes untouched by the currents of ambiguity. Even the life of prayer that roots us and grounds us as it did Catherine is evolving as we search for more inclusive images of God and feminine ways of ritualizing our worship. We are women of the Church but experience barriers which exclude us from fullness of participation and ministry. The alienation and hurt that is the fruit of such experience make it more difficult for us to celebrate and embrace the ecclesial nature of our lives.

In the face of such ambiguity and struggle, the *Direction Statement* reaffirms a starting point for transformation. "Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources..." Sheila Harrington has pointed out, "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 con-

templation."<sup>16</sup> Each of us is invited to ask ourselves "When did I last experience passion for ministry, for community life, for the contemplative dimension of our lives?" When did I feel that zest for the mission that is not content until it expresses itself in service?

To live without passion deadens the spirit. A passionless Mercy is one which calls forth the same complaint of God that was voiced to the Church at Sardis: "I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death..."<sup>17</sup> What we must be about, then, is the kindling and rekindling of Mercy's flame. That is the image conveyed by the Chapter's theme: shaped by the Spirit's fire.

Given the realities we have named together, the call of our own foundational documents and the signs of our time, the fire of Mercy must be fed by four aspects of our lives: a) the reclaiming of the prophetic dimension of our charism; b) the stripping away of all that leaves us unable to respond fully to the cry of the poor in our times; c) the integration of contemplative experience and apostolic action and d) the internalized understanding of our human solidarity and interconnectedness.

Conversion is a beginning, but what is asked of us is not only conversion but on-going responsiveness in the pattern of Jesus. The break throughs of understanding, the experiences leading to transformation, and the words which move us to see with new eyes are useless unless they lead to continued reorientation of life. In the words of Galilea "We are not always aware of the path of conversion, or of its unique dynamism. Christ does not call us only once during our lives. We receive many calls. Each one is more demanding than the last and is part of the great crises of our human-Christian growth. Conversion is a process that calls us to a radical evangelical life in our 'world' in order to live the exodus of our faith and to follow the Lord."<sup>18</sup>

The path ahead of us is not easy. It assumes that we will have to question whether the changes we have worked to achieve are really ones which lead us into the depths of commitment in mercy. We may be asked to let go of things we have grown to see as needs instead of wants. We will have to wrestle with what it means to live lovingly with persons who are culturally different from ourselves, with persons whose brokenness is hard for us to accept, and with adjusting our timetables for those who wish to share prayer and companionship with us. It may mean that we will have to refocus our choices in the light of both the common good and the movement of the Spirit within us.

Such possibilities are formidable and possibly unsettling, but it is the call that is stirring among us. Once more the words of Revelation provide challenge and comfort: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in..and eat with [them] side by side."<sup>19</sup> Do we really want to settle for anything less?

## Footnotes

1. Revelations 2: 2, 4-5.
2. *Constitutions*, # 18,19
3. *Institute Direction Statement*, 1991.
4. Galilea, Segundo. *Following Jesus*. (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1985.) p. 3
5. Sheila Carney, "The Legacy of Catherine McAuley and the Transformative Elements for Religious Life in the Future," *MAST Journal*, V. 3 (Fall, 1992), pp. 1-5.
6. David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, "The Religious Life Futures Project: Executive Summary", Review for Religious 52 (January-February 1993) 6-55.
7. Sheila Harrington, "The Challenges We Face," *MAST Journal*, Vol. 3 (Spring 1993) pp. 13-16.
8. Doris Gottemoeller, "Befriending the Wind," Presenta-

tion to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, August 29, 1994.

9. Collation by Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., from Institute-wide synthesizers' report assembled in December, 1994, and published as "Themes from Regional Gatherings: USA", in January, 1995.

10. *Constitutions*, #8.
11. *Constitutions*, #23
12. *Constitutions*, #26.
13. *Constitutions*, #28.
14. *Constitutions*, #29.
15. *Constitutions*, #19.
16. Harrington, pg.13..
17. Revelations, 3:1-2.
18. Galilea, pg. 3-4.
19. Revelations, 3:20.

*New from Paulist Press*

## Reconstructing the Christ Symbol

### Essays in Feminist Christology

*edited by Maryanne Stevens*

How are contemporary Christian women supposed to visualize Jesus, a male figure, who is offered to them as a model of Christian life? This question, which is especially relevant these days, given the current Catholic church stance on women and the priesthood, is taken up here in this collection of essays by six feminist theologians from various Christian traditions.

The essayists, (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rita Nakashima Brock, Jacquelyn Grant, Marina Herrera, Elizabeth Johnson and Eleanor McLaughlin) who took part in a symposium at

Creighton University, critique classical Christology and attempt a reconstruction of the Christ symbol, each with her own emphasis.

These never before published essays grapple, states Maryanne Stevens, "with the implications of considering a Christ who is in continuity with the Christian tradition but not in continuity with the white patriarchy that has so pervaded the Christian tradition and shaped its symbolism." Feminists, theologians, and educated readers will find that this book makes especially provocative reading.

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# The Claim of the Institute Chapter

Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M.

In these days of "standpoint theory," I am well advised to state my social location before venturing an opinion on something as weighty to us all as an Institute chapter. I entered the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in 1958 at the age of seventeen. A decade later, a vote of the community sent me to my first chapter, at the regional community level (then, province). Subsequently, I was given the honor of attending the 1969 Special General Chapter as delegate from Baltimore. For the next decade or so, I was active in chapters at both levels. For the most recent decade, I have been one of the sisters represented by others. And now that Baltimore has opted for a chapter of the whole, I have returned to the awesome (for I do consider them so) duty of chapter delegate.

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**Chapters have been for me,  
then, occasions when  
I witnessed in the body  
the meaning of what  
Christians term  
"conversion."**

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Regional community and institute chapters have been formative experiences in my religious life. They afforded opportunities to meet Sisters of Mercy from other parts of the country. They showcased women engaged in rigorous preparation for adopting positions, shaping issues, and engaging in debate. For me, the chapter experiences were also formations in feminism. Not because every voice espoused what has come to be known as the feminist "line," but because I saw—as a relatively young woman—that women can indeed differ with one another on serious questions and rise to the challenge of arguing reasoned positions with intelligence, passion and good humor. Above all, I learned in these great convocations that differences need not result in a split into smaller and smaller units of like minds and similar life-styles. Rather, differences can be worked at, until a vision emerges and decisions are made in the interest of the common good.

Chapters have been for me, then, occasions when I witnessed in the body the meaning of what Christians term "conversion." I watched sisters have a change of heart and mind—I experienced many myself—as we wrestled together with questions that would affect the future of the whole institute.

## What Has Changed

In the last decade or so, there have been many changes in the nature and conduct of chapters. We have—it seems to me—followed the general trend among religious women to move from debate as primary to consensus building. We put a great deal of emphasis on "process" and enlarged the number of voices to be heard by inviting former members, sisters in formation, associates and colleagues to address the chapter body at various times. New rituals have come to replace former ones as sisters charged with planning chapters reflected on the models we present to ourselves and others in and through the "rites" of a chapter.

I have heard and engaged in conversations critical of one or other of these changes. Some bemoan the loss of clarity of purpose, of responsibility, of qualifications introduced by the changes. Others defend the progressive nature, the inclusiveness, and the positive feelings engendered by them. For the most part, I have thought that the changes undergone in the Institute chapter were the kind that life demands: new ways to do old things, changes in style but not in substance.

In the last year, however, I have heard comments on the First Institute Chapter that rang alarms. For the first time in my hearing, the validity of the work of a chapter was being correlated with the number of votes that a proposal received. My assessment was that the direction statement regarding "solidarity with women seeking fullness of life in church and society" had passed by a small margin and, in the eyes of some, therefore, it could not exert the claim on the community that the other direction statements did. Now I grant that my own decision to risk professional life on a response to that direction statement contributed to the rapt attention I paid to such an observation. But I want to argue here that far more is at stake in such attitudes than the fate of a ministry established on the strength of it. The fate of the new institute is at risk if we allow this kind of attitude toward the work of a chapter to go unchallenged.

## What Must Endure

In her article, "Chapters Present and Future," Catherine M. Harmer reviews the major elements of a general chapter according to canon 63i of the Code of Canon Law. It (a) "has supreme authority in accordance with the constitutions;" (b) "represents the whole institute;" (c) functions to "protect the patrimony of the institute...and to foster appropriate renewal;" (d) "elects the supreme moderator;" (e) "deals with matters of greater importance;" and (f) "issues norms which all are bound to obey."<sup>1</sup>

As the highest policy making body of the institute,

then, the Institute chapter exercises authority. This authority is exercised, according to canon 6-1)1, not by individuals there to represent a constituency, but by a body that "represents the whole institute." All are bound to obey norms issued by such a body, convened and exercising its authority according to the Constitutions of the Institute.

Our *Constitutions* has this to say about the Institute chapter:

*The Institute chapter, when in session, is the highest authority in the Institute. Through the Institute and regional community chapters we clarify and renew our vision, determine our priorities and respond to changing needs in our mission and life.*

*The responsibilities of the Institute chapter are to preserve and promote our Mercy charism; elect the Institute president and council; evaluate the spiritual and material well-being of the Institute; clarify our role in the church and in society; set directions in keeping with our charism; and amend the Constitutions and the Institute directory.<sup>2</sup>*

Given that "chapters and sisters in positions of governance exercise authority in the Institute according to the universal law of the church," acts of the Institute chapter are understood to call upon the obedience of the members.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Delegates need to pray for the grace to remove themselves from the divisive ways of "party politics" and to dispose themselves for the service of the common good.**

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All this talk of authority and obedience can be misunderstood, however, unless it is clear that the chapter exercises authority only because it, too, must be obedient. As an ecclesial event, the chapter is called to reflect, in the posture and attitude of all of its members, a desire to be directed by the Holy Spirit, a desire to see things with the mind of God, a desire to discern for the community the call of God. This is why the prayer to the Holy Spirit has traditionally been part of the convocation of chapters, and why days of prayer often precede them. Delegates need to pray for the grace to remove themselves from the divisive ways of "party politics" and to dispose themselves for the service of the common good.

I take this to be one of the reasons for downplaying the role of parliamentary procedure in recent chapters. The pros and cons of that form of argument can

make it seem that the goal is to win over the opponent. Other forms of presenting opinions may well assist us, but only if the foundational spirit of seeking God's will for the community, and not our own or those of our friends, is present within the delegates. Failing that, no mere process will make a difference.

This brings me to my central point. The purpose of the Institute chapter is to discern together the directions in which God is drawing the community. Delegates must be disposed to listen to the voice of God speaking in the assembly. The means to that discernment is currently a vote, with a majority signifying sufficient clarity. The size of the majority must not be read, however, as constituting some kind of "mandate" on the model of American politics, so that a proposal that "passes" by a few votes is considered to have less claim on our obedience than a proposal that "wins" by many.

If we transfer that idea from proposal to person, we can see how injurious it becomes. That would mean that a sister elected to authority with a smaller number of votes could not count on the loyalty of the sisters at large to the extent that a sister elected by a landslide could. Once this kind of thinking contaminates religious life, we go far from the inspiration that enabled John XXIII to call a revolutionary council, despite his having been elected Pope after many failed ballots. Such thinking would unravel the work of that council itself, not to mention the work of establishing our new Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Jules Toner's words on the communal discernment undertaken by Ignatius and his companions are instructive:

*... it was their intention that all "with one mind" would embrace the conclusions reached by a majority vote. There are a number of things packed into this brief statement. They can be drawn out if we ask: How can they embrace with one mind a conclusion on which they have a split vote?*

*First, they were ready to accept a conclusion by a simple majority vote, to accept it as that to which God in his infinite goodness had led them as "what the Holy Spirit had inspired." They did not expect unanimity nor demand it as necessary in order to trust their discernment and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.*

*Rather, they intended that unanimity would follow on the majority vote: all would embrace with one mind the conclusion recommended by a majority vote. Now, to have unanimity is not merely to have volitional consent of the intellectually dissenting minority to do what the majority wants. To have unanimity, the minority must cease to be an intellectually dissenting but volitionally consenting minority; they must now give assent to the majority conclusion as truly expressing the will of God.*

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Likewise, if sisters who are being represented differ widely in their understanding of the claim that the chapter has on our loyalties, corporate action is undermined, if not rendered impossible.

Every time a chapter is convened the identity of the religious community is at stake. Not because the chapter body always takes up questions of such import, but because the community knows itself in and through corporate action. If groups break down into those who support this or don't accept that, think this important but not that, the splintering I referred to above will inevitably divide us. The loss will not just be to us, but to the very women with whom we want to be in solidarity. There are too many examples among us of the divisiveness that arises from greater and greater individualism. What we all need is a model for working through differences to a common vision and a concerted action through true participation. Chapters have provided that model for women religious. If we remain true to what we believe, they will be available as a model for women seeking a way into the future together.

### Footnotes

1. Catherine M. Harmer, "Chapters Present and Future," *Review for Religious* January/February, 1994)
2. Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions* (Silver Spring, 199).
3. Ibid. #51.
4. There were differences among what are now our regions in the size of the vote that brought them into It—he Instl—  
itute.,)uch thinking would make some more fully mem-  
bers than others.
5. Jules J. Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 3 (St. Louis: American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, 1971) 128.

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# The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M.

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

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

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

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

No one can undergo our personal and corporate conversion for us. No predecessors or supposed successors. But there is one person who unflinchingly accompanies us in our present encounter with the Spirit's fire and who ardently attends our reshaping:

one who loves us and cares deeply that we be rekindled; one who is herself an enduring example of the depth of conversion born of God's Spirit. We have said, perhaps without fully understanding our own words, that we wish to be "animated" by her "passion for the poor" and by the gospel which so radically enflamed her life. She now urges us to conform our lives and ministries to the full reality of these words; and, for our encouragement, she humbly offers us the memory of her own passionate loving, hoping, and daring.

## Catherine's Loving

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

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

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

Catherine truly believed this word of Jesus. She was, therefore, earnest, zealous, whole-hearted in her daily desire to love her neighbor. She was not measured, cautious, self-protective, gingerly, in the donation of herself in love. At the heart of her belief in her vocation as a Sister of Mercy was her desire to resemble Jesus, and she realized that, like him, she must sac-

rifice herself for the sake of such loving. She was, therefore, completely willing to forego her own pleasure and ease, to put aside her own needs and preferences, to give up what would have comforted her, to displace herself, to bestow herself, to let herself be radically shaped by the Spirit's fire for the sake of the love and presence of Christ in those in need. She really believed and lived the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

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

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

It was Catherine's belief that our vocation as Sisters of Mercy is a call to give *everything* we are and have for the sake of God's dear poor. Therefore, she did not hold back, she did not consult her own interests, she did not ration her presence to those in need, she did not conserve money or energy for a rainy day, she did not retire from loving. She often gave up her own bed, she was the last to eat at meals, she chose the cheapest means of transportation, she often slept on the floor in new foundations rather than delay the work of mercy until these convents were completed, and her underwear was, according to her companions, of the "meanest description"—she who had once

dressed in high style and driven a handsome Swiss carriage. As one of her early companions said, "Every talent and every penny that our dear foundress possessed had been devoted to the poor" (Clare Augustine Moore, "Memoir").<sup>4</sup> And a woman who placed an abandoned child in the House of Mercy once said of her, "She made me feel what real charity and real religion is."

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

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

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

Catherine was herself the best example of what she meant. The generous zeal of her own charity, the unquenchable flame of her own loving, was indeed fervent and unwearied, even when she was—as she sometimes admitted—tired, nervous, sick, perplexed, or oppressed with care. At the dedication of the Baggot Street chapel in June 1829, when she, at fifty-

one, was just beginning the work of love of her final years, her good friend, Michael Blake, preached the sermon and said of her, "I look on Miss McAuley as one...specially endowed with benediction: her heart is overflowing with the charity of the Redeemer whose all-consuming fire burns within her" (The Limerick Manuscript).<sup>8</sup> Catherine believed deeply in this enabling Fire of God's love. She was willing to be impelled by it every morning, and to be consumed by it every day.

On a blank sheet in the front of her copy of *A Journal of Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, Catherine wrote this prayer, which she prayed each morning for the Baggot Street community: "Come Holy Ghost, take possession of our hearts and kindle in them the fire of thy divine love....shed upon us we beseech thee the plentitude of thy divine Spirit, and give us an entire and perfect submission to the inspiration of thy Grace...." This simple prayer, with all the generous love and self-donation it asks for and promises, is the heart of what she believed, for herself and for us. She prays it for us now—as we contemplate the Spirit's shaping Fire, and try to understand what it really means to say, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us" (Ro. 5:5).

#### Catherine's Hoping

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

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

When clergy and laity harshly criticized the community on Baggot Street, and called her an upstart and a parvenu, and she feared that the works of mercy they had begun would come to an end, she hoped God would lead her through this controversy. When she

and her companions decided to found a new religious congregation and three of them went to George's Hill, she hoped the community on Baggot Street would survive in her absence. When the Presentation Sisters intimated that they might not let her profess her vows if she did not remain in their order, she hoped in God's mysterious help.

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

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

Catherine's hoping was not an easy wishing for her own personal well-being or fulfillment, nor an a historical invocation of the resurrection of Christ, but a "hoping against hope" (Romans 4.18) in the face of widespread human affliction. Hers was a tenacious, active hoping at the service of the God-desired well-being of the poor, the sick, the dying, the neglected, and the unjustly treated. It was the kind of dogged hoping that is urgently aroused by human suffering and leads to the Godly fatigue of the cross of Jesus, where all genuine prayer for God's action begins.

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

*The first cholera broke out in Ireland in 1832, and the people were most injuriously prepared for it by*

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

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

#### **Catherine's Daring**

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

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

Catherine was passionately convinced that religious life in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy was nothing less than a gift of God given to the church and the world for the uplifting redemption of all God's

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

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

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

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

Catherine and the other sisters maintained good contact with priests and spiritual directors, and made known to them the life and work of the Sisters of Mercy so that they would be well informed when they



counseled women. She involved lay women in the ministries of Baggot Street and the new foundations, and welcomed associates and volunteers. She wrote letters to prospective candidates, explaining the religious life of the community and inviting them to come and see.

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

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

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Despite all the painful feelings engendered in the Irish by the British government during the penal era, and despite anti-nunnery attitudes, she founded two convents in England—in London and Birmingham. The house in Bermondsey was the first new Catholic convent founded in London since the Reformation. She always expected that each new foundation would be completed and carried on by new members entering from that locality, and she prayed the Thirty Days Prayer in each new place for this gift of God. She urged that the annual renewal of vows in each community outside of Dublin be made in the parish church, and she led this renewal herself in Birr on January 1, 1841.

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

### **Catherine's Shoes**

Very early in the morning on the day she died, Catherine asked Teresa Carton for some brown paper

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

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

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

### **Footnotes**

1. Chapter Steering Committee, Letter to Sisters and Associates of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, July 20, 1994.
2. Dolores Nieratka, RSM, "Spirit." This gathering song was sung during the Regional Community Reflection Process, September–October 1994.
3. Letter to Sister M. Teresa White, in *The Letters of Catherine McAuley*, ed. by Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M. Baltimore: Helicon, 1969, p. 142.
4. Clare Augustine Moore, "Mémorial."
5. The complete texts of all the archival manuscripts quoted in this reflection are presented in my forthcoming book, *Catherine McAuley: The Tradition of Mercy*, to be published by Four Courts Press (Blackrock, Dublin) in 1995.
6. Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, November 12, 1841.
7. Bermondsey Annals.
8. Ibid.
9. The Limerick Manuscript.
10. Letter to Sister M. Ann Doyle in Neumann, ed. *Letters*, p. 353.
11. Letter to Sister M. Ann Doyle in Neumann, ed., *Letters*, p. 376.
12. Letter to Sister M. Frances Warde in Neumann, ed., *Letters*, p. 256.
13. Clare Augustine Moore, "Mémorial."
14. Letter to Clare Augustine Moore, September 1, 1844.
15. See Karl Rahner's essay, "Parresia (Boldness)," in *Theological Investigations* 7 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1971), 260–67.



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# Solidarity: Another Name for Mercy

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## Introduction

As we prepare for the Second Institute Chapter, we are urged by the steering committee to reflect on the Direction Statement that issued from the first chapter and ask the Spirit of God to "stir again in [us] the passion for the poor and suffering that moved Catherine McAuley." We are all aware that we are living through a decisive period in our history, having experienced the founding of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in Buffalo in 1991, we are anticipating the "Dayton moment" in July of 1995. If we are alert in the Spirit, we are certainly aware of the urgency of the needs of the poor and suffering in the world today.

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Providentially the delegates of the First Institute Chapter named "solidarity with the economically poor of the world, especially women and children; women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society; and one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality" as our corporate posture in this historical moment. What follows is an extended reflection on the meaning of solidarity for us now. The Direction Statement comes to us from our past, not only from the Buffalo moment, but out of the rich history of faith and sacrifice that the Sisters of Mercy represent historically. At the same time, it opens up a future challenge to reinterpret and renew that tradition among the most needy of our own time, wherever in God's providence we might have the privilege of walking in solidarity with them.

## Solidarity: A New Name for Mercy

The term "solidarity" recalls all the ways we have inscribed and reinscribed the love command throughout the centuries. "Previously it was called mercy, then charity, and later commitment. Today it is called solidarity.... Solidarity is inscribed in the very substance of the church."<sup>1</sup> When we talk about it today, we use terms like recognition, respect, collaboration, covenant, friendship, and help. It is the moral mandate implicit in the fact of our radical interdependence as individual human beings and particular communities. The term "solidarity" specifically refers to a relationship of mutual assis-

tance and support that fosters individual growth and creativity, while at the same time consolidating humanitarian bonds. A way of naming solidarity that resonates in our Mercy hearts and finds an echo in our Direction Statement is "tenderness both efficacious and collective."<sup>2</sup> In its purest expression solidarity is a commitment to "be there" for the other to the point of dying for her or him.

Solidarity can also be termed "political charity" insofar as it involves taking a public stand in defense of a person or group whose human rights are in jeopardy.<sup>3</sup> Solidarity requires of each of us that we make protection and promotion of the other's rights our own conscientious duty. When the rights of one are violated, the rights of all are threatened. Those who carry the struggle for human rights across national boundaries can be said to be "internationalizing charity," that is, giving a concrete expression to charity in one country that is efficacious for the whole human community.<sup>4</sup> Within this perspective, John Paul II called peace "the fruit of solidarity."<sup>5</sup>

The Direction Statement calls us to solidarity with the poor of the world. What does this mean for us in a world in which the numbers of poor are growing along with the depth of their deprivation? The answer to this question is not given in the form of an Institute corporate stance or plan of action. It is only gradually revealed to each of us and to small communities of us as we journey with the poor, with women and with each other.

## Solidarity With the Poor:

### Joining Their Struggle for Survival

The concrete contours of desperate poverty are literally unimaginable for those who have never experienced them personally. Even those of us who deliberately choose to share the lot of poor people by living in their midst, trying to mitigate the dehumanizing effects of their poverty cannot know in our own flesh what it feels like ... no, what it is to be poor. This is because we are among those who take life for granted. Jon Sobrino makes the morally disconcerting claim that the world's population is divided into those who take life for granted and those who do not.<sup>6</sup> And, he observes, not to take life for granted changes everything. The problem of desperate poverty is not only that some have while others have not. The problem is that desperate poverty transforms all of life into a daily struggle for survival, eating away at a person's dignity and threatening daily the bonds that tie people together as families and communities. Because of their economic dependency, the most vulnerable among the poor have always been women and children, and among these, the widows and orphans.

For us Sisters of Mercy to commit ourselves to solidarity with the poor is to enter into their daily struggle for survival. One of the concrete historical forms of soli-

arity with the poor in Latin America today is the "insertion community," a small group of religious who live among the poor, in rural villages, urban neighborhoods or refugee camps. The guiding vision is simple, to share their daily existence, and to witness to the special love which Jesus Christ has for them. While the vision, born of a desire to follow Jesus wherever he leads, is quite simple, daily life is full of ambiguity. Those who before took life for granted now live as strangers among those whose daily existence has always been defined by survival issues. Those who before had felt secure in their identity as religious have to come to terms with living on the edge of the ecclesial community, groping with new ways of being religious, and even justifying their lifestyle to their own.

In this context a characteristic "insertion spirituality" has begun to define itself. Its most obvious feature is what might be called "itinerancy," the commitment to journey with the poor. Those who respond to the call commit to follow Jesus wherever he goes, he who has no place to lay his head, he whose mission takes him to Jerusalem, there to be crucified. It is a call to leave home in every sense of the word, geographically (even if you just move across town), culturally (even if the call takes you to a community within your own country among people who speak your mother-tongue), ecclesially and spiritually. It is a call to remain in solidarity with the people, wherever their journey takes them and whatever it may cost.

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## **The call to solidarity with the poor is a call to undertake an arduous journey compared by Gutierrez to a "motionless dance," in which we move forward only to find ourselves in the same spot.**

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Another important characteristic of the spirituality of insertion is a kind of internal structure that is experienced as a rhythmic movement between contemplation and effective action.<sup>7</sup> The movement springs on the one hand from eagerness to express solidarity with the poor by helping them in some concrete way, and on the other from the belief that only God can render our works, however effective, truly fruitful. Insofar as prayer is authentic, the creative energy that it releases will find expression in works of mercy. In spontaneous gestures of solidarity and help the God of Mercy is revealed in a privileged way.

Jon Sobrino claims that what "explains" the miracles of Jesus is his spontaneous compassion in the face

of the pain and grief of the afflicted person. (Mt 20:29-34; 15:21-28; 17:14-29; Lk 17:11-19) He notes that the evangelists speak of salvation only in the plural. Jesus brings salvation, that is, he cures specific, concrete evils that individuals are suffering at the moment. In the gospel accounts he appears to be so deeply and spontaneously moved by the pain of the helpless person that he cannot help but respond. It is as if the pain that he feels in the presence of the other's pain gives him no peace. In other words, Jesus' reaction is primary, spontaneous, and for that reason, "ultimate" as ultimately revelatory of his Father's mercy.<sup>8</sup>

A sense of the gratuitous mercy of God envelops all attempts to be effective within a desperate situation; it is the spiritual space within which God comes to meet his poor and those who join in solidarity with them. Those who in faith come to meet God there offer the Spirit the opportunity to transform human misery into the Reign of God. The more fully they share the situation of the poor, the deeper is their realization that it is only God who can save them. This total reliance on the gratuitous mercy of God that is at work in the heart of the "spirituality of insertion" is expressed simply and lucidly in the following, drawn from the notes of a Maryknoll sister in El Salvador:

*A prayerful attitude. The poet says: Traveler, there is no path; the path is made by walking. Pastoral work is a process guided by one who is the way, the truth and life: the Master prepares the disciples, sends them off, and welcomes them back later to listen to them, and to deepen their preparation. There are many risks in pastoral work: triumphalism, fatalism, discouragement, activism, individualism. Prayer is the only security that we have.<sup>9</sup>*

The call to solidarity with the poor is a call to undertake an arduous journey compared by Gutierrez to a "motionless dance," in which we move forward only to find ourselves in the same spot. This spirituality is characterized by "great mobility and a profound sense of history, or time, and at the same time fixation in God."<sup>10</sup> He recalls other classic journeys in faith, the Hebrews' exodus and the church of the Acts, called "the way." Sisters of Mercy recall as well Catherine McAuley's characterization of our life as a dance in which we are always moving forward and backward, always "tripping about," but with hearts that remain centered in God.

### **Solidarity With Women: Utopias and New Forms of Life**

The Direction Statement also proclaims our solidarity with women "seeking fullness of life in church and society." This commitment clearly implies forming relationships with poor women struggling with the daily challenges of survival. But it also means joining cause with leaders, those women already engaged in the radical transformation of the present patriarchal social order. One way of drawing out the implications of this commitment is to think about ourselves as utopian

dreamers and women of hope. This is indeed what we have to be as Christians committed to building the Reign of God in our time.

In Latin America philosophers and theologians love to indulge in utopian discourse. While the mostly male academics analyze the events of the past and speculate about the future of the human community, there are significant numbers of women stepping forward to create in the present a more just and peaceful world. They are assuming public responsibility for the future of their children and their communities. Rigoberta Menchu, the Guatemalan Nobel Peace laureate (1992) is only one. As we recommit ourselves to solidarity with "women seeking the fullness of life and equality in church and society" we can learn something from listening to their voices and taking note of the new communities that they are shaping. Whether these communities are ecclesial or civic, in Latin America the utopian dreams that inspire them are dreams of the reign of God, a central theme in liberation theology.

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## **Utopias are the "motor of history," enabling peoples to leave behind the old order in order to open the future for the new.**

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The term "utopia," coined by Thomas More with the publication of his book by that title in 1561, suggests two etymological derivations which together unlock the rich meaning of the term. Utopia comes from *ouk-topos*, meaning nowhere, thus an ideal, unreal place that exists only in fantasy, and the alternate derivation, *eu-topos*, or good place, that is, where one is truly where she belongs, where she can feel comfortable.<sup>11</sup> The "good place" serves as a model for what could exist in reality, thus conferring on the ideal social order the character of real historical possibility at some future time. So social utopias insofar as they are models of a just society serve as blueprints for concrete historical strategies for social and political transformation.

Utopian thinking emerges in those periods when civilizations are in crisis. Utopias are the "motor of history," enabling peoples to leave behind the old order in order to open the future for the new.<sup>12</sup> It is no wonder that Latin American philosophers in this historical moment are preoccupied with the conceptualization of a radically new social order, even with a revolutionary scenario. No wonder that the reign of God is a central theme in the discourse of liberation theologians and catechists. Utopian models offer Christians conceptual instruments with which to shape their concrete projects in service of the reign of God in the historical present.

But Christian hope looks beyond purely human utopian dreams and projects toward an "absolute future" in which all human relationships will be definitively renewed in Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> While temporal utopias project the end of present injustices and the creation of a just society within human history, Christian hope confidently embraces the present with the opportunities it offers for collaborative movement toward a more humane future. The future that Christians hope for will always lie beyond our grasp, however, hidden in God's mysterious plan for the full redemption of the world in Christ.

Throughout the history of Israel God's promise gave rise to various utopian images: Abraham and Sarah's numerous progeny, the promised land, return from exile, and at various times a messianic age or person. In the time of Jesus the idea of the reign of God captured the aspirations of the people for deliverance from the forces of political oppression that bound them. Jesus does not disdain the human aspirations for freedom and a fuller life that are promised by utopian images. He is clear about the fact that his reign, which is not of this world, is the only one which can fully satisfy the utopian longings of the human heart. Any purely temporal utopia that claims to do so is a delusion.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus' "strategy" for the transformation of the unjust socio-political order in his own time was situated within the traditions of the prophets: to call the people to conversion of heart and to announce the good news of salvation. Jesus chose strategically to make the poor his "target audience," announcing the coming of his reign first to them.<sup>15</sup> The arrival of the reign of God would mean a total change in their destiny, giving them hope for eventual deliverance from poverty, oppression and humiliation. Jesus told them that all people are sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters of each other; that as members of the same family, all are to share what they have, caring especially for the most needy; that the purpose of authority, whether religious or civil, was service, not domination. His mission was not to offer the poor and oppressed of his time a strategy for revolution, or even a new socio-political vision. What he came to offer all, especially the poor, was new life. Paradoxically, it was this promise of new life that was the most threatening part of his message, and the ultimate historical reason for his death. His central message was religious rather than political. But his prophetic call to justice, love and mercy was announced in a socio-religious and political context where the powerful civil and religious leaders heard the call as a threat to their position of privilege. This inevitably guaranteed his death.

Significant numbers of Latin American women, carrying in their hearts utopian dreams for a transformed church and society, have moved into the posture of social activism. Many of them have drawn their original inspiration and formation from Christian base communities.<sup>16</sup> Along with the word of God and their dreams for a better future for their children, their solidarity with

each other is a powerful source of energy in their present struggles. Paradoxically for them as for Jesus and the prophets before him, the pursuit of a fuller, more human life has taken them into the heart of conflict. A nasty law of human history seems to be that human liberation becomes accessible only by engaging the forces of death.

So women's struggle for life is inevitably a struggle for survival not only in the sense that they must strive each day for the family's bread. But if they are also committed to socio-economic transformation in order to create a world in which their childrens' survival can be taken for granted, they must be prepared to risk their own lives. Those who are actively engaged in changing unjust socio-economic and political institutions represent a direct threat to the powerful figures who fear that these changes will dislodge them from positions of economic dominance and privilege.<sup>17</sup> Our Institute Direction Statement calls us to join cause with these women too, to stand with them in dangerous public space and to help them articulate their utopian dreams in the language of Christian hope.

Women have been active as well in the transformation of the Latin American church into a community of believers more capable of responding to the needs of women, and more open to their leadership. Several recent church documents by women addressing the women's situation testify to this initial opening of public ecclesial space to the active participation of women. In September, 1993, the Confederacion Latinoamericana de Religiosos (CLAR) sponsored for the first time a conference on the role of women in church and society within the perspective of social transformation. Notable in their final document is the participants' commitment to engage in a reinterpretation from women's perspective of the bible, theology, church history, the church as institution; and the form and structure of religious life as they have been living it, their spirituality, their religious lifestyle, and their pastoral activity.

The God who calls them to this task they describe as:

*...both Father and Mother; who is grieved by the situation of women and the people in general, who has heard their cry and raised up women to lead them to freedom. Provident, tender and maternally strong, God is revealed in the harmony and equality of the sexes... Our reading of history shows God to be silent and invisible like the life within pregnant women.*

Clearly reflected in this portrait of God is a powerful sense of their own call to lead the community to fuller life. What the Spirit of God seems to be saying in their midst is that a God pregnant with life is calling them forth to play the role of the midwife. They are not only to reinterpret their spirituality, lifestyle and ministry as religious, but in solidarity with other women to claim their place in church and society. The call they hear is a prophetic one to correct history and to begin to

build new kinds of relationships among persons, with the natural world, and with God.

Their action agenda also reflects this organic link between the "rising of the women and the rising of the race." They commit themselves to give priority to women in pastoral involvements, and within groups of women with whom they work they will help indigenous women, campesinas, black women and laborers to articulate and value their proper identity. Educational programming and group reading of the bible will have a feminist orientation, and will facilitate the discovery of "seeds of utopia present in feminist practices and reflection." Their utopian dreams, unlike philosophers' speculations, will arise out of the rich soil of their shared experience. As the historical moment demands, their agenda also calls for political involvement. They urge solidarity and creativity in the initiation of projects to counteract the effects of neoliberal economic policies, thus keeping alive hope in the midst of the people.

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## **What is also evident is their sense that now is the "hour of women" and that as religious, they have a role to play.**

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The document speaks clearly of the preoccupation of the religious women with the plight of the people. What is also evident is their sense that now is the "hour of women" and that as religious, they have a role to play. To make women a pastoral priority is to do for the whole people what is strategically most urgent today in the proclamation of the Reign of God. Moreover, it appears to them that among the poor, marginated women are God's strategic priority in this historical moment. It is a rich document, expressing commitment to the transformation of consciousness and projecting concrete responses to certain socio-economic issues. However, there is little said specifically about transformation of the structures of the church.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast the document on the proper role of women in Latin America today, which was prepared by women for the Fourth Latin American Episcopal Conference in Santo Domingo, addresses more directly women's ecclesial identity.<sup>19</sup> The introduction states boldly, "We are convinced that the new evangelization will only be possible out of a renewed sense of the core-responsibility of all the baptized."<sup>20</sup>

The section on woman in the church opens with a recognition of the good news, the bright spots amid the shadows. To be noted, for example, are the mention in magisterial documents since Vatican II of men and women sharing responsibility for the church's mission; the new opportunities for women to play official ecclesiastical roles opened up by the new code of canon law;

new forms of solidarity among men and women in some of the new movements. Most notable is that more women are participating in theological discourse and reinterpreting the scriptures from women's point of view.

At the same time, the long shadow that falls over the situation of women in the church is named with refreshing acuity and force:

*Great incoherence persists between what ecclesial documents teach about the dignity of woman and the practice of the church. Frequently women continue to suffer double discrimination, as women in a man's world, and as laypeople in a clerical world.<sup>21</sup>*

They observe that women are valued more for the "auxiliary" services they perform than for the contribution they can make to the substantive work of ecclesial decision-making. The document also records the persistence of sexist attitudes and language, as well as paternalistic practices and problems related to sharing pastoral responsibilities.

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One of the most interesting theological passages of the document is paragraph #57, where the redactors attempt to name the specific gifts women bring to the task of building the ecclesial community of the future in Latin America. The particular historical challenge for all Christians in the context of Latin America today they name as "the construction of a culture of life and solidarity." This way of identifying the challenge resounds with prophetic clarity and force. When these women name life and solidarity as the identifying marks of the reign of God today, they speak from the edge. They are women whose daily lives, as we have suggested, are lived in the shadow of the "culture of death." These are women whose loved ones have died violent deaths, whose children die from malnutrition and preventable childhood diseases. Hoping against hope, they project a utopian future in which women will work for the people of God wonders as yet unseen.

What do they say women as women bring to the task of creating a culture of life and solidarity? First and most elemental is women's direct link with the rhythms of life, which disposes them to value, protect and ennoble life in its many forms. This closeness to the unfolding of

life gives them a special capacity to detect and denounce the strategies advanced in the public realm to promote the "culture of death," and to engage the task of building a "culture of life." Secondly, woman's identity as custodian and defender of life opens up spiritual space with rich possibilities for herself and the ecclesial community in the future. Third, the protagonists of the document see women bringing to the community "new forms of communication, dialogue and solidarity, at once more global and more personal...."

Specifically with regard to the future configuration of the church, they project an "ecclesiology of communion."<sup>22</sup> The new ecclesiology will require a new mariology. Theologians will have to purge traditional mariology of distortions so that the figure of Mary, model of the church, emerges clearly, and that within it Mary's role as liberator receives proper definition. More fundamentally, the new ecclesiology will demand the revision of anachronistic interpretations of scripture that demean women or ignore their presence in favor of readings done within the horizon of the unique and integral vocation of women within the ecclesial community.

Two things are worth noting about the commitment to life and solidarity that these women proclaim with such energy and clarity. First, they see the church as the place from which to leverage social transformation, the social space where Christ's reign of justice and peace can and ought to take root. Their hope is not in the church of the present, but in the God who promises to renew all human relationships in Jesus Christ. Secondly, humbly and selflessly they see themselves as the principal protagonists of reform within the church and society. In this space that they are opening up there is room for Sisters of Mercy, and perhaps a specific call insofar as collectively we have already declared our solidarity with women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society.

#### **Solidarity With Each Other:**

##### **Catherine's Legacy of Union and Charity**

If solidarity is also another way of naming the love command in our day, then the familiar adage, "Charity begins at home," may bear new and unsuspected weight for us. Clearly as Christians we are sent to proclaim the reign of God in the name of Jesus Christ, and a community of people who love each other is the clearest sign of his continuing presence in the world. In the name of Jesus Christ we Sisters of Mercy received from Catherine McAuley at the moment of her death as her "legacy to the institute" the precious gift of union and charity. It is certainly true for Catherine that community in the form of the traditional cloister was incompatible with her call to witness to the effective mercy of God at the scene of misery — the slums, work houses, prisons and army camps. And it is true as well that her consolation in the most trying moments was that she felt God knew that she would do whatever lay in her power to succor the poor. But for her the surest sign of God's

presence in the fledgling community of mercy was the fact "the sun never went down on" disputes among the sisters.

What Catherine could never have imagined was the amazing expansion of the mission of mercy entrusted to her, and the subsequent ethnic enrichment in the membership of the Institute. In 1841, the year of her death she writes,

"I am quite renovated by a delightful addition to the flock; on Wednesday last came the first Scotch Sister that has joined an Irish Congregation. The variety of accents is now quite amusing."<sup>23</sup>

What strikes us who now witness Mercy International is that, although Elisa Monroe's accent may have sounded quaint to Irish ears, her mother tongue was, like theirs, English. Elisa apparently had never before been outside of Scotland. In the United States, although most Mercy vocations came from the Irish immigrant community, women from other groups also entered the ranks of the Sisters of Mercy. The Caribbean, Pacific and Latin American communities further enriched the chorus of Mercy accents. How delighted Catherine must be with the variety of Mercy languages and accents now!

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is officially bilingual, communicating among its members in English and Spanish. Our Direction Statement calls us to solidarity with each other, embracing our multicultural and international reality. Our love for each other, the statement urges, is to carry us across cultural barriers and national boundaries. Apparently, we all have to learn to "make ourselves at home" with any and every member of the Institute, whatever her cultural background and wherever she happens to live. It also demands of us that we be prepared to leave home psychologically and spiritually, that we learn to think globally, to think of ourselves as women with an international mission of mercy. This double challenge is formidable, but like the call to solidarity with the poor and with women seeking fuller life, the call to solidarity with each other across cultural and national frontiers is urgent. Our charism of union and charity is given to us today for a world torn by xenophobic violence and vicious ethnic wars.<sup>24</sup>

The commemoration in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas opened up some dangerous memories of violence perpetrated by the conquerors and missionaries in the fifteenth century. These memories and the utopias they nourished have unleashed new hopes for liberation in peoples still living under the burden of poverty, oppression and violence, and with these hopes, new risks of open conflict. But the commemoration has also provided a providential opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation, and a maturation in the church's understanding of what it means to evangelize a people. The "new evangelization," which distinguishes clearly between the gospel and Christianity as a western cultural system, is con-

ceived as inculturation rather than the imposition of alien cultural values.<sup>25</sup> Inculturation is necessarily a process characterized by mutuality. The gospel takes root in a given culture only by virtue of the believers' reception of it. This community in which the gospel is "inculturated" then becomes the space within which gospel values can enrich and challenge the values of the host culture. The call of the Direction Statement to embrace our multi-cultural reality, demands that this process of inculturation become second nature within our Mercy communities. Not only will we experience increasing cultural diversity in the ways we live our Mercy vocation in the future, but our communities will witness more clearly to the universality of Christ's mission of love and mercy in the world.

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## **The call of the Direction Statement to embrace our multi-cultural reality, demands that this process of inculturation become second nature within our Mercy communities.**

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The story of Guadalupe is an amazing account of inculturation which perhaps in time we will come to own as our story. In fact, it is a story about the inculturation of the gospel in a context of utter disrespect for the local people and their culture, of oppression and violence. In 1531, on a hill near Mexico City, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, an indigenous catechumen. She who looked like a young indigenous woman, addressed him affectionately in his native Nahuatl, identifying herself as the mother of the true God. The hill, Tepeyac, was already a pilgrimage site, the place to communicate with Tonantzin, the queen-mother goddess of the peoples of the region. Those who flocked to the site curious to see the mother of the white man's god found "la Morenita," a young woman who looked like them and spoke their language.

Mary had a mission for Juan Diego. He was to go to the archbishop's palace and tell him that she wanted a church built on mount Tepeyac. As we know, the official church in the person of the archbishop paid no heed to the peasant. When Juan pleaded with the Virgin to send somebody with more stature to do her bidding, her response was loving but insistent: "Listen, my dear son, you must know that I have plenty of servants to send who would do what I ask; but it is better that you do this errand ... that it be through you that my desire is brought to fruition...." Gebara and Bingemer note that the Virgin insisted because the success of her mission really

depended on whether the Spanish ecclesiastic would believe the Indian's word, and recognize him as an indispensable protagonist in the establishment of Christ's church in America. "It is as if the execution of what the Virgin was asking signified the affirmation of the identity of a people that began a new moment in history."<sup>26</sup>

It would not be enough, of course, to claim this story as our own on the grounds that the feast of Guadalupe coincides with our foundation day, or because Catherine McAuley and Juan Diego were declared venerable by the church on the same date. But these apparently coincidental links with our story can serve to draw our attention to the future that the Virgin and her messenger open up for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. It is a story that offers us hope and guidance in our efforts to embrace our multicultural and international reality not only in the Americas, but in the Carribean and the Pacific as well.

### **Solidarity: The Path of Conversion**

If we are faithful to the solidarity to which the Direction Statement commits us, we will be undertaking a journey of "continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministries." In the words of the statement, "this commitment will impel us" to call each other to continual conversion. The liberation theologians have taught us that to walk in solidarity with a poor and oppressed people inevitably leads to our recognition of social sin, and specifically of our own complicity with the socio-economic institutions and practices which maintain some people in desperate poverty. This theological development of the concept of social sin has required us as well to expand the scope and depth of what we understand by Christian conversion.

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## **Christian conversion always demands a rupture, a cutting loose from sinful habits, possibly even a radical change in one's lifestyle.**

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Christian conversion always demands a rupture, a cutting loose from sinful habits, possibly even a radical change in one's lifestyle. It involves the most personal of journeys, one that begins with the recognition of personal sin, but always as a condition for entering into deeper, fuller life in Jesus Christ. An honest examination of conscience within the present historical context should uncover social sin as well, and place us before the personal consequences of social sin. In other words, each Christian in the name of solidarity with millions of desperately poor people, will inevitably be faced with

the human cost of her own complicity with socio-economic systems that are designed and maintained at the cost of the poor. The path to conversion then leads to a decision regarding what changes she needs to make in her life in light of these human costs. In the works of Oscar Romero, "a true Christian conversion today has to discover those social mechanisms which make of the laborer and peasant marginal persons, why the poor peasant has income only in the coffee and cotton seasons."

One way, possibly the only way, to discover the personal consequences of sinful socio-economic structures that maintain groups of people in poverty is to live in solidarity with these people and share their daily struggle. On the ground the personal consequences for the poor become painfully evident. What is also gradually revealed to those who stay tuned to the Spirit of God working within the communities of the poor, is that they too have to depend totally on God. With this recognition of their own need they begin to walk truly in solidarity with the poor. Recognition of this need also opens them to live more fully, more deeply and more freely life in Jesus Christ. This attitude of total confidence in God which characterized Catherine McAuley's life, puts them on the path to continual conversion.

### **Footnotes**

1. Vicaría de la Solidaridad de Santiago, Chile, "Abrir la huella del buen samaritano," *Signos de lucha y esperanza*, Lima, 1978, #140a.
2. Pedro Casaldáliga y José María Vigil, *Espiritualidad de la liberación*, Guatemala, Ed. Lascasiana, 1993, p.85.
3. Casaldáliga and Vigil
4. Casaldáliga and Vigil
5. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #39
6. Jon Sobrino, "El Espíritu, memoria e imaginación de Jesús en el mundo. "Supervivencia" y "civilización de la pobreza," *Teología Espiritual*, Mayo, 1994, p. 191.
7. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, New York, Orbis Press, 1984; Pedro Casaldáliga and José María Vigil, *Espiritualidad de la Liberación*, Guatemala, Ed. Lascasiana, 1993; Segundo Galilea, *El Camino de la Espiritualidad*, Bogotá, Ed. Paulinas, 2nd ed., 1985.
8. Jon Sobrino, "Centralidad del reino de Dios en la teología de la liberación," *Misterium Liberationis*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría y Jon Sobrino, San Salvador, UCA Editores, Tomo I, pp. 482-483.
9. M. Lange and R. Iblacker, *Witness of Hope: The Persecution of Christians in Latin America*, NY, 1981. Quoted in Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, p. 112.
10. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Epílogo: Caminar para llegar," Casaldáliga and Vigil, p. 270.
11. K. Kerényi, *Ursinn und Sinnwandel des Utopischen*, Zürich, 1964, p.12, quoted in João Batista Libânio, "Esperanza, Utopía, Resurrección," *Misterium Liberationis*, Ellacuría and Sobrino, p.498.
12. Libânio, p. 504
13. The theologians of hope have given us this term. See especially, Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, London,



SCM Press, 1967.

14. Libanio, p. 507

15. José Sánchez, "La Estrategia de Jesús al servicio del Reino de Dios," *Christus*, Mexico City, Cuad.2 (Noviembre, 1988) pp. 27-33.

16. See "Mujer en Conflicto" unpublished paper given by Carmen Manuela (Nelly) Del Cid at the Central American regional meeting of the Latin American Caribbean Conference of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Arena Blanca, Honduras, July, 1994. Available from Del Cid or the author.

17. Among these women in Guatemala are Rosalinda Tuyuc, the founder and Director of CONAVIGUA, an organization of widows born of the massacre of thousands of indigenous people in the 1980's; Nineth Montenegro, the Director of GAM, an organization of mutual support for relatives of the disappeared; Helen Mack, lawyer and founder of the Mirna Mack Foundation, a human rights organization named for her sister, an anthropologist, murdered apparently for politically sensitive research; Marta Altoaguirre, journalist; Karen Fisher de Carpio, lawyer pursuing the case of the assassination in 1993 of her father-in-law, Jorge Carpio, until his death a prominent political leader and former presidential candidate. In Honduras, Doris Mejia, member of the Committee Honduran Woman for Peace "Visitación Padilla" and former secretary of STENEE, the national Honduran electrical workers union. See also Renny Golden, ed. *Hour of the Poor, the Hour of Women* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), stories collected by Golden from Salvadoran women engaged in the struggle for liberation during the recent war.

18. References to the church in Latin America are, generally speaking, references to the Roman Catholic Church, which for 500 years has had a very visible and politically powerful

presence.

19. *La mujer en la Iglesia y la cultura latinoamericana. Aporte de las Mujeres Latinoamericanas a la IV conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano*, Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia, 1992.

20. *Ibid.*, p.3, #7. The Spanish is more forceful: "la corresponsabilidad de todos los bautizados y bautizadas:

21. *Ibid.*, p. 9, #51.

22. *Ibid.*, p.18, #101,102.

23. *Collected Letters of Catherine McAuley*, ed. Sister M. Ignatia Neumann, RSM, Bethesda, MD, Sisters of Mercy, 1969, p 348. Quoted in Sister Mary Carmel Burke, R.S.M., *A Woman Sings of Mercy*, Sydney, Australia, E.J. Dwyer, p. 55.

24. On Jesus' call to a global mission, see Claude Marie Barbour, "Jesus, Shalom, and Rites of Passage: A Journey toward Global Mission and Spirituality," *Missiology: An International Review* 15 (July, 1987).

25. There is an extensive literature on inculturation. See the following church documents: *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)*, 22; *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, ch. 2; Paul VI, *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*; Carta pastoral de los obispos de Guatemala, *500 años sembrando el Evangelio*, Guatemala, 1992. See also Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, NY, Orbis, 1985; Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, New York: Orbis, 1988; Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*, New York: Orbis, 1990.

26. Ivone Gebara and María Clara L. Bingemer, *María, Mujer Profética. Ensayo teológico a partir de la mujer y de América Latina*, Madrid, Ed. Paulinas, 1988, p.170. The quotations from the conversation between the Virgin and Juan Diego are also from Gebara and Bingemer, p. 169.



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# The Burning of the Heart on Account of Creation . . .

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

(This is a revised version of the 1994 Mercy Day Address at Hartford, Connecticut)

Isaac the Syrian describes the merciful heart in this way:

*And what is a merciful heart? The burning of the heart on account of all creation, on account of people and birds and animals and demons, and for every created being. ...Great and intense mercy grasps the heart and wrings it out, for the one who is merciful is not able to bear or hear or see any harm or the slightest sorrow which takes place in the created world...*<sup>1</sup>

As a community of mercy we continue to reflect together on the present moment in religious life in the United States and in our Institute. Like other religious communities, we, too, are struggling with the process of personal and institutional transformation and with changes in our identity as women, as apostolic religious, and as members of the Institute. Each of us is unique and yet each of us is also part of a larger whole. None of us has been unaffected by the last twenty-five years of change in religious life and in our growing appreciation of the post-modern context in which we live. Each of us has appropriated these changes differently depending on our particular social context and personal experience.

Isaac's description of the merciful heart reminds us that religious life is ultimately a matter of vision and commitment. We who share the charism of Catherine McAuley are drawn together in a particular faith vision of mercy. The Original Rule claims: "Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following him, has...excited the faithful in a particular manner, to instruct and comfort the sick, and the dying poor..."<sup>2</sup> This path of mercy is one of constant personal and communal transformation because we can only be merciful and do mercy in the measure with which we have experienced ourselves in need of such mercy and received this gift from a compassionate God.

The meaning of doing and living mercy changes in every historical period. But it always has to do with an ever deepening capacity to see, feel, act, and respond to misery wherever it appears. This ancient text from Isaac the Syrian reminds us that our merciful response extends to the entire created world, our care for the earth and all of its creatures. In today's context we more clearly understand how human choices have endangered the earth's capacity to sustain life on the planet. Thus, the doing and living of mercy extends beyond the personal to the earth itself.

In our own on-going journey of communal transformation, living mercy has meant redefining our charism to include acting on behalf of justice and linking Catherine's "special concern for women" with a

feminist consciousness shared by other women religious that "wherever there is poverty, women suffer more and bear more of the consequences."<sup>3</sup> The more deeply we appreciate the reasons for women's poverty, we will begin to recognize that the neglect and despoilment of the earth is intimately related to the subjugation and oppression of women.<sup>4</sup>

All of us are to be transformed. This means that our own hearts must become capacious, deep wells of mercy, compassionate toward our own weakness and diminishment, compassionate toward one another in our struggle to renew religious life, compassionate toward all of creation, compassionate toward all people of the earth, compassionate toward all who suffer. If we are to claim this gift of compassion, we are at risk in many ways. We risk being changed by the suffering we share. We risk suffering the constant contrast between what is and what ought to be in ourselves and others. We risk finding ourselves as much in need of the very mercy we seek to offer others. And we risk being changed by the differing social locations and cultures we choose to enter.

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**Only the compassionate  
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To undergo this kind of change requires a profoundly contemplative stance. Only the compassionate heart of Jesus united with our own can open our hearts in love when we are confronted with the worlds of pain of this late twentieth century. Without this centering in God, our hearts harden or numb themselves against the pain. It is God's spirit in us, God's sustaining love, and God's enlivening energy that holds us steady on this path of mercy and which invites us to ever deeper intimacy with God and love for others.

As you read, try to become aware of that for which your heart burns. What energizes you? Where is your passion and for what? What pain can you not ignore? What is the particular misery you are compelled to relieve? Whose is the pain or the situation to which you must respond? Why do you continue to

choose to live religious life? Gently allow yourself to recognize and name not "oughts" or "shoulds" about your life, but to name what is—the present experience of God and of mercy community which grounds your reality. What is God calling you to now? More of the same? Or the same done differently? Or with different people? Or in different kinds of institutions? Who among your regional community are the women on the edges of the group and on the edges of new expressions of mercy? Are you able to hear an echo in your heart when you hear them speak about God's mercy and vision? Can you dare to trust your deepest longings and visions to one another without fear?

Against the background of your passion for mercy and recent research and reflection on religious life, I will focus on several of the salient themes from the research in relationship to our Institute Direction Statement. These themes are: the transformation of religious life as an institution, identity and charism, prophetic interdependence, the influence of feminism, and Institute identity.

### **An Institution in Transformation**

Both the LCWR Ministry Study and the Forus Study 5 clearly assume that religious life, especially apostolic religious life is undergoing a paradigm change. The Forus study clearly describes a working hypothesis that we are no longer in a process of adaptation to changed circumstances, but that religious life as an institution is in a process of transformation. Consequently, a larger, deeper vision is required for these times. This implies an openness to conversion, an openness to something new, something prophetic, something different. Yet whatever that might be can only issue from the movement of the Spirit in our midst. It emerges from a deep interior connection with a truth for ourselves and about ourselves emerging in our chapter preparation and process.

The LCWR Ministry Study offered six core challenges of the new paradigm emerging from leaders in religious life: prophetic interdependence, openness to change and being changed, inculturation, multiculturalism, boundary crossing, and a spirituality of reverence and contemplative openness. These core challenges were already in view by the time of our First Institute Chapter. No doubt you recognize some of these elements in our direction statement. We will, however, be struggling with their implications far into the future. We cannot ignore them. We perhaps do not even all agree that religious life is to be as prophetic, liminal, and radical as these documents assume. Religious life as it was when most of us entered was a stable institution, resistant to change, a well-regulated structure embedded in church and society. Role identity was clearly defined by the vows and by the specific works we did. Do you espouse in an operative way the need to confront the six core challenges identified in the LCWR Ministry Study which are certainly implicit

in our Institute Direction Statement?

### **Identity and Charism**

The FORUS Study identified considerable role confusion among religious, especially apostolic women. Our role is understood differently by different constituencies in both church and society as well as among ourselves. When we are unsure about our identity, we feel defensive, uncomfortable, often frightened. But if religious life itself is in transformation to a more flexible and radical response to evangelical life, our identity, as apostolic religious women, will undergo change. For this conversion to proceed, we actively need to foster a process of personal and communal change—even choose to change in some particular ways. One way to do this is to embrace the kinds of experiences that induce change, such as boundary crossing. We see things differently if we change social location. Henry Nouwen refers to this kind of boundary crossing as "downward mobility" in his most recent book.<sup>6</sup> We begin to see things from the perspective of the poor when we enter their world, live as they do, walk around in their shoes with them. But such experiences remain only experiments unless they are entered into in a discerning way, attentive to the pulls of the spirit toward conversion, toward response in new ways, an unfreezing of feelings, a reshaping of desire. Are there ways you can imagine boundary crossing — deliberately placing yourself in a different social location which could open up new possibilities?

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**"Our social position  
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and prohibits others."**

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In a book published more than ten years ago, which emerged out of a Brazilian context, J. B. Libanio identified social "position" as a source of inordinate affections. He suggests that we are incapable of engaging in discernment at any time our choices involve the concrete social realities of which we are a part and of which we are not critically conscious. This unconscious, privileged position of identification with middle class or professional culture, for instance, renders us inordinately attached to its comforts, biases, judgments, and interests. "Our social position permits certain views and activities, and prohibits others."

Libanio argues that religious who embrace a primary identification with the poor must also be committed to a social praxis of liberation. He describes three interrelated ways in which religious congregations can respond to this fundamental option for the

poor. The first level of response involves making choices which take into account the social interests of the poor and the oppressed. This may occur in situations which do not directly involve the poor themselves, but in which religious participate and can represent the interests of the poor. The second level is the experience of living close to the poor, being evangelized and affected by encounters with the poor. For some this experience will be intermittent; for others it will lead to a third level, that of a total commitment to living with and sharing the social position of the poor. For any genuine discernment to take place, Libanio asserts that minimally, members of a community must be predisposed to a generosity that knows no limits. What is helpful about his reflection on the personal and communal conversion implied in this option for the poor, which we so clearly embraced in our direction statement, is that it admits of a corporate choice. This may be embraced differently but not less emphatically in different ways by different segments of the group. As more members of a community acquire all three levels of experience, and communicate with one another, it is more likely the group will be able to embrace the conversion of life and ministries implied in the direction set by the first Institute chapter.

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## **Much of the change already underway across the Institute has been a reclaiming, renewing, and reinterpretation of mercy charism.**

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Much of the change already underway across the Institute has been a reclaiming, renewing, and reinterpretation of mercy charism. We recognize that although the first generation of Sisters of Mercy were limited by their historical times, they were literally creating a new way of being religious—walking nuns, going about the streets and alleys of Dublin to where the poor were, beginning schools for those who had been deprived of all educational opportunity, creating new responses to concrete need. All apostolic women's communities are in a similar process of reappropriating both their unique histories and particular charisms. At the same time, religious life itself is evolving into some new form. When we look carefully at the founding myths and stories from the perspective of our own challenges, we often discover new things.

For instance, when the Burlingame Regional Community was struggling a decade ago with the decision about becoming a sanctuary community, voices from our annals from the Southwest during the Mexican-American War influenced our deliberations.

It seemed the sisters sheltered Mexican women and their children in the middle of a battle that surged around the convent compound. They also cared for both American and Mexican soldiers. This "wild," non-law-abiding slice of history helped sisters who could not imagine the risk of breaking an unjust law for the sake of a greater good consider this choice in the light of their retrieved history. This story was rarely recounted until it was rediscovered just prior to the pivotal meeting which dealt with the decision on sanctuary. For most of the community this story has been lost from our collective myth, but it offers clear precedent, enabling many to shift their positions in the present situation. Most likely each regional community has a similar, more fluid, less fixed history which might offer some sense of continuity in the change process. What changes would be more in continuity with a forgotten part of your own past?

### **Prophetic Interdependence**

A second area related to charism and identity is the challenge of the prophetic character of religious life. In the present context, the LCWR Ministry Study links prophecy with the themes of interdependence and inclusiveness which emerge out of the post-modern context. The prophetic dimension of religious life functions in relationship both to the secular culture and to life in the church. The core reality of the vows, a choice for simplicity of life, inclusive love, and response to the spirit's impulse in interdependent community contrasts dramatically with materialism, consumerism, sexually exploitive relationships, and the dominating exercise of power. Although recent ecclesial documents expect religious to be prophetic in relationship to secular cultures, they attempt to tame the prophetic challenge religious make to the church itself. This challenge addresses ecclesial practices in relationship to finances, privileges, the exclusionary character of clerical relationships, and its own authoritarianism. The 1994 Synod Working Paper equates "charity" with subordination to hierarchy and denies that the prophetic role of consecrated persons can ever assume public opposition to the pope and bishops.<sup>8</sup> This claim undercuts the perennial role religious have always played from earliest times, of criticizing, largely by their way of life, ways in which the church behaves contrary to the Gospel. This position toward the prophetic role of religious in the church is also historically inaccurate. Since the twelfth century, every new form of religious life has been resisted by the hierarchy, often for one hundred years or more before it was accepted and integrated into the church's understanding of religious life. In the present moment, we are profoundly ecclesial, attempting to live in fidelity to the Gospel and in fidelity to our experience of Jesus. We are also promoting an interpretation of the thrust and intention of Vatican II that is fiercely being resisted by much of the present hierarchy. The challenges

most deeply resisted by some of the hierarchy include the change in structure and discipline that would include women and laity as full partners in church membership, and the mission and option for the poor.

In a recent collection of essays, Cassian Yuhaus raises four questions which individuals or communities must be able to answer in the affirmative if they expect to embody the prophetic character of religious life. The first is: Have you heard the cry of the poor? This question implies careful social analysis, concrete choices made in the context of social realities in which the prophet hears the cry of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized and attempts to address the oppressing agencies and causes.

The second is: Can you read the signs of the times? This question implies on-going discernment—a finely honed capacity to distinguish between renewal and adaptation, the recognition that the events of life and history make concrete demands on our ministry and merciful response, and the recognition that the Gospel challenges many of our cultural assumptions while it is in harmony with other assumptions.

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**The following of Jesus is not  
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The third question is: Have you encountered Christ as liberator? This implies the contemplative dimension of prophecy. Has your understanding of Jesus expanded to experience Jesus as your liberator as a woman and the liberator of the poor and the oppressed? The following of Jesus is not an abstract fantasy, but an animating relationship with Jesus whose energy moves us toward mission, emboldens our speech, and fills us with the compassion we embody. It is interesting to note that Jesus is never named as liberator in the Working Paper for the Synod on Religious Life but only as Lord, Master, Teacher, and Bridegroom.

The final question Yuhaus poses is: Can you drink of the chalice? This fourth question implies that if we choose to live, judge, and act as Jesus did, some form of suffering will be consequent upon those choices. Jesus suffered and died for us not because he chose to do penance or to suffer, but because there were concrete social and political consequences which followed from his way of life. We can expect no less.<sup>9</sup>

### **Institute Identity**

A third area related to identity is the change we are all involved in as a result of forming the new Institute. It began in a sense of shared charism. We had wonderful experiences of articulating mercy life and charism more clearly in the core constitution project than we were able to do in our regional communities. Yet most of us are only beginning to glimpse what belonging to the Institute is going to mean in action. Some of us are not used to receiving a direction statement or directives from beyond our regional communities. We have already made a choice for a new form of prophetic interdependence and have created a new relationship with one another that more fully actualizes it. The new world view tells us that literally, everything is connected to everything else. Isolationism or individualism is no longer a viable stance. Not only are we learning to become interdependent again in our regional communities, but we are now interdependent across regional boundaries.

Originally, this choice was taken in order to insure a future for mercy women in the Americas. But we are just at the beginning of having married into each others' families. We have poorer families and wealthier ones. We have twenty-five different community cultures, and we are suddenly feeling a multiculturalism among us we hadn't noticed, even as we notice not enough multiculturalism within individual regions. The founding event was thrilling, exuberant, hopeful and energizing. But all of our leadership teams and all of our regional chapters or assemblies are just now beginning to feel some of the effects of this change. At the grassroots level, many of us have not assimilated membership in the Institute as a primary aspect of our identity. We became Institute so we could do some things together we could not do alone. Now perhaps we wonder. Change toward Institute identity will engage us for the next several years. It will need to be actively fostered by maximum participation and identification. In Pittsburg last summer, our newer members startled many participants by introducing themselves as a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas rather than as a member of their regional communities. How deeply do we identify ourselves, individually, as a member of the Institute?

Our ability to negotiate this particular form of interdependence is truly building for the future. The LCWR Ministry Study indicated that collaboration across religious communities of women is essential for the future of ministry. We need to continue to deal with the primary obstacles to collaboration: fears of loss of control and loss of identity. Overcoming these obstacles in relationship to Institute collaboration will yield returns far into the future.

### **Influence of Feminism**

A fourth factor affecting both our identity and mission is the effect of feminism on religious life. The

Brookland Commission Study is the only one I know which directly examined the influence of feminism on religious life. The LCWR Ministry Study acknowledged a strong influence of feminism on member congregations but did not gather statistical information on this theme. Experientially, we sense that individual congregations differ significantly in the degree to which they have consciously espoused a feminist perspective. I propose that regardless of whether or not we consider ourselves to be feminists, we have all been more influenced by the effect of the women's movement in our own culture than most of us admit.

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## **I find women religious are often deeply ambivalent about feminism and are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists.**

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In order to provide a context for this part of my reflections I want to recall Maria Riley's definition of feminism from *Transforming Feminism*. A feminist is "a woman or man, who believes in the essential equality between women and men and seeks to create social attitudes, policies, and structures that reveal and sustain that equality."<sup>10</sup> Who among us does not really believe this? Yet many of us find it very hard to apply the "F" word to ourselves. It is no wonder since every recent magisterial document reacts with fear to the concept of feminism and characterizes it as dangerous, bad, unhealthy, or corrupting. In the Working Paper for the Synod it says: "...adherence to extreme present-day forms of the feminist movement has led to spiritual disorientation in the consecrated life in some countries."<sup>11</sup>

I find women religious are often deeply ambivalent about feminism and are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists. Is it possible that what is labeled as spiritual disorientation is fundamentally an experience of Jesus as liberator and an experience of sisterhood with one another which is a deep source of hope and healing? In my recent work on issues of feminine and masculine spirituality, I continue to be amazed at how deeply wounded our feminine selves are as a result of growing up in a patriarchal culture and in a church which continues to devalue, denigrate, and render us invisible. In women's communities we have often done as much damage to our members' feminine selves as have men. As women, we all learned to pass on to other women what we received: the sometimes dubious skills of manipulation to avoid conflict; internalization and reinforcement of women's secondary place in church and society, and devaluation of one

another as women. Women religious did not significantly participate in the late nineteenth century phase of the women's movement and many of us were relatively late-comers to the contemporary women's movement, if at all. Yet despite this, most already espouse the essential equality of women. Some are increasingly more in touch with their own pain as women, and many are beginning to value themselves and their experience of other women.

The research gives us only a glimpse of where we are. The FORUS Study found that religious did not consider feminism to be a serious cultural threat to religious life. The Brookland Commission collected more nuanced data from a smaller sample.<sup>12</sup> Two thirds of the sample group were dissatisfied with the progress made on women's issues within American society while three-fourths were dissatisfied with progress on these issues in the church. Three-fourths felt their communities supported feminist attitudes and values and they found feminist attitudes and values, in accord with their own way of thinking. More than sixty percent supported the ordination of women and claimed to be articulate about women's issues in the church. However, thirty-six percent found it difficult to be a feminist and a practicing member of the church.

On the use of inclusive language and images for God there was considerable difference. While nearly three-fourths want inclusive language used in worship, only slightly more than half report feminine images of God as part of their prayer lives, while only one fourth are disturbed by masculine images of God, such as Lord or King in worship. These findings as a whole suggest that women religious are consciously aware of their oppression as women in the church. At the same time, there are real differences in the degree to which women religious are experiencing changes in their images of God and desire change in language in prayer.

These differences indicate that only one stage of feminist consciousness has occurred in many of us. We can name some experiences of gender discrimination but do not understand or appreciate how this discrimination is supported by language and symbol systems. The marked differences about preferred language for naming God increasingly create difficulties in our finding a common language for prayer. In addition, most women religious who embrace feminism do so through a feminist theological perspective. This is sometimes informed by feminist theologians but more often it is an intuitive sense of the incompatibility of the core of the gospel message and the experience of Jesus in our own lives that renders it impossible to believe that our oppression as women is in any way God's will. Maria Riley in her position paper in the Brookland Commission study further challenges women religious to be less church-focused and more societally focused in our feminist agenda, and to bring

a critical stance to secular feminist theory. We could contribute our rich social justice tradition to feminist thought as well as appropriate a theological perspective.

I remain concerned about the number of women religious who continue to be afraid of feminism and who continue to deny any conscious experience of sexism. The journey through a feminist awakening is not without its hazards or its pain. But our community life will continue to drain us rather than nourish us if we do not learn how to be supportive of one another precisely as women. We live in bonded community with one another and have a unique opportunity to heal the wounds of sexism and to nourish ourselves from the deep sources in Christian spiritual tradition which support the flourishing of women. We need to pay attention to the differences among us about feminism so that we do not further polarize ourselves in this part of the process of the liberation of ourselves as women. Despite the negative portrayal of Christian feminism in recent ecclesial documents, it is not an evil. Rather, it is a threat to the status quo which maintains the institutional subordination of women in the church. It is a harbinger of the community of co-equal disciples that the early Jesus community so clearly lived and which is our inheritance as disciples who share in the Good News Jesus announced and lived.

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## **To promote women's issues is to promote ourselves, too, something with which we are less comfortable.**

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Our Institute Direction Statement implies a conscious feminist commitment in choosing solidarity with "women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society." Social analysis continually makes a connection between poverty and gender. But it would seem highly unlikely we could embrace this direction from the Chapter without ourselves espousing some clear form of Christian feminism—namely, that "in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female." (Gal. 3:28) Gender affects multiple aspects of our experience. We ourselves are women. To promote women's issues is to promote ourselves, too, something with which we are less comfortable. The fact that we may be experiencing problems with financial resources is directly related to gender discrimination in the matter of compensation and the exclusion of women from decision-making positions in the church. Embrace of any justice agenda, including justice for women, requires a liberation theology perspective, not only to link the various strands of oppression to one another, but to identify the theologi-

cal resources in Christian tradition which support resistance to such oppression.

This example of feminism illustrates several strands of reflection on religious life. Addressing the inequities resulting from gender discrimination requires consciousness, critical social analysis, collaboration with other groups, theological reflection, and internal change as we journey through the process of reflecting on our experience as women. Everything is connected to everything else. And multiple skills, including intellectual ones, are needed.

### **MultiCulturalism**

Multiculturalism is no less a many-faceted challenge to who we are and who we are becoming. Why is it that our community's ethnic profile looks so unlike that of groups with whom we minister? A thorough-going multiculturalism requires very specific forms of education and experiences which enable one to learn "interpathy." Interpathy refers to a learned skill which enables us to suspend our own point of view and normal assumptions. We practice this in order to walk in another's shoes—to perceive life as another does, to recognize how different another's unconscious assumptions are about how to celebrate, how to show respect, how to relate, how to be family or community—all without judgment. As a group of educators, there is a two-pronged challenge here. Are we willing to learn from those who are culturally different from us? And how would this willingness concretely change our manner of ministry? And are we willing to welcome diverse ethnic groups into the family of mercy as genuine peers? Are we willing to change as a result? The Institute Direction Statement challenges us to be willing to embrace such multiculturalism both for the good of the institute and for the good of the regional community in both its apostolic work and its openness to expanding membership.

Among these multiple challenges confronting religious life today, which among them resonate with some desires in your hearts? Which capture your imagination? About which ones could you dream new dreams? In terms of our Direction Statement, which invite you to a deeper conversion of life-style and ministries? Which voices urge you to go deeper? Which challenges moved you to respond? Who have you met in the last few months who claims your compassion? Is there any consoling movement of joy, compassion, peace, or urgency which claims your attention? It is easy to become overwhelmed by both the complexity and the depth of the many challenges which confront us in religious life today, many of which I have neglected to highlight. However, it is imperative to hear these challenges against the life of the spirit, the challenge identified as a spirituality of reverence and contemplative openness. Ultimately, these are questions of discipleship. Are we willing to enter more deeply into the mystery of God and God's

limitless compassion for us? Are we willing to allow God to live in and through us? Are we willing to be transformed by the very discipleship we claim? I would like to conclude with this quotation from Henry Nouwen:

*Discipleship in the Christian sense is the realization that without Christ compassion is indeed impossible, but that with, through, and in him it has no limits. Just as the moon depends for its light on the sun so all of our compassion is dependent on God's compassion in Jesus. In Christ, there are no boundaries to our compassion. In Christ, we can carry the burden of the whole world. But his burden is a light burden.*

*Once we can see and experience this great mystery, our concrete work of every day changes dramatically. Because then we can see that the work we are doing is not "as much as we can handle," but a manifestation...of the great compassion which God has shown to our world in... Jesus. When we care for a lonely man, teach an ignorant child, spend time with a sad woman, offer food to the hungry, and work for justice and peace in our own house, city, state, country or world, we are in fact giving visibility to God's boundless compassion. In Christ, there is no place for guilt feelings or complaints. In Christ we can "do a little thing" while doing much, we can show care without being crushed and we can face the pains of the world without becoming gloomy, depressed.... As long as we act as if the task to save the world (or religious life, for that matter) rested on our own shoulders, we have to ignore a lot of pain or we become depressed. But when we begin to realize that we can do nothing ourselves but everything in Christ, our solidarity with our neighbor can be a joyful solidarity, a solidarity through which the great compassion of God can bring new life into the hearts of people.<sup>13</sup>*

## Footnotes

1. George A. Maloney, trans., ed. *Pilgrimage of the Heart: A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983), 163.
2. *Rules and Constitutions of the Religious Called Sisters of Mercy*, Ch. 3.
3. RSCJ Chapter 1988 cited in Janet Ruffing and Theresa Moser "An Option for Women?" *The Way Supplement* 74 (Summer 1992): 94.
4. See for instance, Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1993) for an explicitly feminist treatment of this theme.
5. Anne Munley, *Threads for the Loom: LCWR Planning and Ministry Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1992) and David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis, "The Religious Life Futures Project: Executive Summary" *Review for Religious* 52 (January-February 1993): 6-55.
6. Henry Nouwen, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).
7. Libanio, J.B., *Spiritual Discernment and Politics: Guidelines for Religious Communities*, trans. Theodore Morrow (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), 12.
8. "Consecrated Life's Role in the Church and the World:" 1994 Synod/Working Paper, 24 *Origins* (June 30, 1994):#67 and #72.
9. Cassian Yuhaus, "Religious Life: A Prophetic, Dynamic Movement" in *Religious Life: The Challenge for Tomorrow*, ed. Cassian Yuhaus (Mahwah: Paulist, 1994), 182-183.
10. Maria Riley, *Transforming Feminism*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1989.
11. Working Paper, #20.
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13. Henry J. Nouwen, "Compassion: The Core of Spiritual Leadership," *Occasional Papers*, Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, Minnesota, (March 1977), 5.



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# Contemplation of the Works of Mercy: A Response to the Call to Continual Conversion

Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

In reflecting on the call to continual conversion in the Institute Direction Statement, two distinct resources furthered my thought this year. One resource is a meditation book on Dorothy Day and the other is an adult education text on contemplation. The soon-to-be-published book on Dorothy Day, has two chapters on the works of mercy, one on the spiritual and the other on the corporal works of mercy. The book is based on adult transformation theory. As I studied and reflected on both of these sources, I was continually reminded of the call to conversion as we commit our lives and resources in ministry. I offer some remarks on these two resources and relate reflections on the theology of Mercy and conversion. My hope is that this reflective essay will assist us in the animation of the gospel and Catherine McAuley's love for the poor. I trust this commitment will bring about changes and liberation in our lifestyle and ministries.

## I. The Works of Mercy

*Praying With Dorothy Day* is part of a meditation series on praying with the saints that will be published by St. Mary's Press in April of 1995. One of the co-authors of this text, Rosemary Broughton, is a volunteer minister with refugees at Romero House. Before moving into reflections on my experience of the Dorothy Day book, I would like to invite you into the contexts of Romero House which is supported by its ministry which is supported by the friends of the project who gather weekly for study and reflection.

Romero House is a ministry with refugees who come to Toronto from various parts of the world. (It might be helpful to know that the United Nations declared Toronto as the most multicultural city in the world.) Romero House is actually three houses where refugees are offered hospitality. It is also a network of people supporting refugees throughout their process of immigration. Romero House was originally begun by the Christian Brothers and is now directed by Mary Jo Leddy. As both a student and minister in continuing education at Regis College, I am engaged in outreach to those who work at Romero House.

Each of the houses of the Romero project have apartments where individuals or families are temporarily hosted. The houses are also used for many gatherings of the new refugees with former refugees, who now have visa or immigrant status; and the groups include friends of the Romero community. When a family is reunited or receives legal status, the thanksgiving celebration is an expression of multiculturalism at its finest. This space is a source of security as all anxiously await the decisions which determine the future of the refugees.

The government of Canada predicts that the process of immigration can be completed in a year if there are no complications or cause found for deportation. Complications, often political, cause the process to take longer which adds to the tension of an already anxiety-laden experience. Deportation is the deepest fear and greatest cause of stress for both refugees and the staff of Romero.

To assist the staff and the volunteers, full and part-time, Mary Jo Leddy introduced an evening of study, reflection and discourse. It is an effort to discover meaning in the often difficult experience of this ministry and to support the on-going spiritual development of those involved in this service. I describe this effort because I believe gatherings of this nature, with our collaborators, could be a helpful way to engage in corporate prayer and reflection in our respective ministries of mercy. The grace of such gatherings might assist us in our efforts to respond to the call to continual conversion so clearly articulated in the Direction Statement.

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## Dorothy Day lived out this love of God as an activist and as a woman of prayer.

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Each Wednesday evening during this semester a small group of six to eight friends of Romero gathered around the kitchen table of one of the houses. Rosemary Broughton led a group reflection on the themes of her Dorothy Day book. Members of the group had various levels of familiarity with the works of Dorothy Day. Sharing the information added insight to the discussion. Rosemary was able to imbue the conversation with an awareness of the spirit motivating Dorothy's call to prayer, justice and the works of mercy.

Each chapter Rosemary shared comprised a meditation on a different theme in the life and spirituality of Dorothy Day. Besides the chapters on the works of mercy, some examples of the fifteen themes addressed in the book included: Pilgrimage, peacemaking, and the long loneliness. The text is clear and simple but stirring and thoughtful. Each meditation follows a specific format. It is introduced as a theme which flows into a prayer to begin the reflection. Since we generally followed this framework in our reflection, informa-



tion about the life of Dorothy Day is presented from various sources. Then there is a provocative question which helps the listeners connect with the experience of Dorothy. The meditation continues with Dorothy's own words on the particular theme. The authors then give a reflection on Dorothy's life and words and suggest some practical application of the theme to the group's experience. The suggestions are both challenging and inspiring. The meditation is then linked with the scripture for further reflection. Finally a closing prayer ends the meditation.

The chapter on the spiritual works of mercy reveals that Dorothy Day believed they were a way for God's love to be manifested through her. They guided her life and daily activities. She realized the truth that to inspire, comfort or encourage another is a response to God's merciful love.

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## **Much wisdom and witness occurred around the kitchen table as we pondered the life and call to action of Dorothy Day.**

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Dorothy Day lived out this love of God as an activist and as a woman of prayer. She believed that her journalism was a vehicle through which she could instruct the ignorant and counsel the doubtful. She believed the works of mercy could be used to silence the works of war. Protesting for her was a way of admonishing the unjust. Dorothy took the spiritual works of mercy of praying for the living and the dead very seriously. In her missal she had a list of people for whom she prayed daily. She often prayed that all of her words, written or spoken, would reflect the gospel and God's compassionate love.

In the spirit of Dorothy Day, the authors, Jim Allaire and Rosemary Broughton, encourage the reader first to accept his or her God-given temperament. It is in this freedom that application of the spiritual works of mercy can be made to the reality of daily living. Applications are suggested which touch both public and private life. For example, parents, teachers, supervisors and artists are encouraged to pray for those they instruct. A call is given to reflect on a concrete action of reconciliation. A closing prayer seeks God's merciful love to heal and guide the human family.

The chapter on the corporal works of mercy reveals that Dorothy Day believed these were a way of being faithful to the gospel call to respond to the needs of others. She believed that she was called to extend God's merciful love, through compassion, to the poor

and suffering. When a homeless woman committed suicide, Dorothy was impelled to provide shelter for other homeless women. Her legacy lives on in the Catholic Worker houses where hospitality and safe refuge are hallmarks. This movement has taken up the works of mercy as a norm.

From Dorothy's own words we learn that the works of mercy were a way to grow in faith and to manifest love. She believed that Jesus' words in Matthew 25 are a call to personal responsibility for acts of compassion and that we will be judged by our works of mercy. The authors reflect on the corporal works of mercy, from the spirit of Dorothy, as acts of love. They remind us that compassion in times of suffering is an expression of God's trusted and secure love. This love is like a stable rock or a mother's love. Living this love may both strain and strengthen us but, at the end of the day, the works of mercy are Jesus' criteria for the Kingdom.

The reflection on the corporal works of mercy was both inviting and challenging. All was done in the context of the Scripture passage, Matthew 25: 31-46. An examination of conscience is presented and each precept is to be considered in the presence of Christ. Thanksgiving is suggested as a prayer for an awareness of a faithful response to the call of the works of mercy. The Jesus Prayer, a favorite response of Dorothy Day's is recommended for the times we have been merciless.

Much wisdom and witness occurred around the kitchen table as we pondered the life and call to action of Dorothy Day. Many members of the group try to practice the works of mercy. Participants also acknowledged the ambiguity of today's society compared to Dorothy's times. The meditations helped connect the works of mercy to the daily living of the group members. Examples include listening to a teenager or being generous with time for a neighbor or a refugee. These were affirmed as works of mercy in the lives of the participants. Fears were acknowledged about extending help to others when one experiences inadequacy in a culture of drugs and violence.

I was called upon as a Sister of Mercy to give my understanding of the word "mercy." Many thoughts come to mind but from some study I had recently done I offered my understanding from a biblical perspective. In the Hebrew Scriptures the word *rahamim* describes the merciful love of God. *Rahamim* not only designates the love of a parent for a child but also the love of brothers and sisters who have shared the same womb. *Rahamim* calls us to universal love. As faith reveals, we are all daughters and sons of God, and brothers and sisters of each other. In *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Irene Nowell asserts that "mercy" designates a physical response.<sup>1</sup> She also reminds us that compassion for another is felt in the body and impels us to action on behalf of suffering and poverty. This "womb-love" of God also graces us

with the capacity to forgive one another as a mother or father forgives a wayward child.

I shared with the group that this biblical reflection was comforting to me in the grief I was feeling at the sudden death of my brother. I knew the love I had for my brother was very deep and the loss reflected this kind of love. I also experienced loving compassion from family, friends and community. To name this as an experience of "womb-love" was an encounter of God's mercy. Even in the midst of sorrow, I know I am called in faith to live this "womb-love" for my brothers and sisters who are refugees, my sisters in community, the homeless in the subway, or other women students seeking the fullness of life in the church. Merciful love also calls me to compassionate care for mother earth and all of creation.

## II Contemplation

I would now like to move on to the other resource, *The Contemplative Practitioner*.<sup>2</sup> I will begin with some background on transformational learning and then describe the place of meditation and contemplation in the life of practitioners. I will end with a few reflections on contemplation-on-ministry and its role in our commitment of the Direction Statement to continuous conversion.

I was excited to find a whole area of adult education focused on transformation. In exploring this area, I again felt a unique connection to the call to continual conversion. What was most hopeful about this study was the connection I experienced with so many others on the same journey. As Sisters of Mercy, we might call the journey "conversion" while others call it "transformation." The goals are similar, union and compassion.

Transformational learning is a theory describing how adults learn to make meaning of their experiences. It is based on an approach to learning that believes that the actions, hopes, contentment and performance of adults develop from how they interpret and explain their personal experiences and life situation.

Some expectations govern our perceptions, if we desire to change we need to be aware of our perspectives, or the meanings we assign events and situations. Awareness of our perspectives, usually determined from our past or our unconscious, is the first step in transformation. Often these unthematized interpretations do not fit the complexity of the modern adult world. These meanings, beliefs and attitudes are no longer reliable in new realities. The call of adulthood is to examine these perspectives critically and to reinterpret the meaning in life experience. Transformed consciousness can lead to enhanced adult identity and more responsible decision-making. Reflection is the adult process of examining old assumptions and justifying new interpretations.

According to one adult educator, reflection is a

careful consideration and/or the testing of the worth or reliability of assumption, beliefs and emotional reactions.<sup>3</sup> Learning the skill of reflection helps adults to reinterpret biases or rationalizations. It also assists in a more conscious living of values and beliefs. Reflection helps to overcome the power of distortions, and gives new meaning and perspective to life. Reflection transforms habits of expectations and interpretations of experiences. It is imperative that transformative learnings be carried over into action. The action is based on the reinterpretation of new insights gained from critical self-reflection.

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## Through trusting the imagination, an adult can learn to reinterpret reality from a new perspective.

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Groups and social movements are capable of perspective transformation. In these settings adults can become aware of points of view that may be discordant with their perspective. Through trusting the imagination, an adult can learn to reinterpret reality from a new perspective. New perspectives can be tested by friends or a group and validated through critical reflection and critical discourse. It is believed that social and cultural transformation occurs within an individual. With the support of a group, transformed individuals in turn influence social, cultural and societal life. Group thinking which is unquestioning and loyalty which is uncritical will hinder societal transformation. On the other hand, adults who have undergone perspective transformation can assure cultural reformation and influence action for a better society.

From this study, it is clear to me that a necessary part of conversion is reflection on the assumptions underlying our commitment to act in solidarity with the poor, especially woman and children. It is important that we critically examine our attitudes and capacity to embrace multiculturalism. We must clarify our expectations about women seeking fullness in church and society. This process of self-reflection could contribute to our call to continuous conversion as a community and lead to the future development of the direction of the Institute.

John Miller has developed the adult education process from reflection on contemplation. He believes that a good adult practitioner has a way of knowing that reveals a depth of character which he calls "Being". Miller suggests that Being can be developed through contemplation. This, according to Miller, is a non-dualistic state of consciousness that involves unification of all that is fundamental to life. He makes a distinction between reflection and contemplation.

Instead of reflection on an object or process, the adult becomes contemplative or one with reality. The invisible world of goodness and truth is available to the heart through contemplation. In this process of radical openness, Miller notes that we develop compassionate attention and a wholeness within ourselves and with the earth. The outcome of contemplation is compassion and unification.

In this awakened stance the adult reverences the sacred of all life. The importance of the sacred is being proclaimed not only by educators like Miller, but also by the scientists and those close to the earth. In an era of shifting perspectives, we are moving from valuing scientific materialism to recognizing the importance of a holistic perspective.

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**...meditation... helps us  
to focus our attention and  
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Miller acknowledges that the spiritual practice of meditation fosters contemplation. It helps us to focus our attention and enables us to be connected to all that happens in our lives and in the world. It is evident to Miller that clear awareness through meditation is a stance that can infuse all of our being and doing. Miller makes little distinction here between meditation and contemplation. He asserts that meditation enables one to be contemplative and begin to live with a sense of an "awakened heart". This basic stance of attention and connectedness can be part of everyday living, including the workplace.

The definition Miller gives to adult education is the "release of the human Heart," fostered by meditation. His adult students meditate during class and he gives four reasons for this practice. First, he values the concept of self-learning and believes contemplation enables this to take place in the adult learner. Contemplation helps one to trust insight gained through mindfully focusing on individual experiences. This shifts the authority from the experience of the professor to that of the student's.

The second reason for contemplation's role in adult education is to assist the learner deal with the stresses of life. Teaching and educational administration can hold many pressures. Learning how to contemplate contributes to the well being of the teacher and so influences the experience of the student.

The third reason is that contemplation can contribute to reducing the experience of separateness that many people experience in today's culture.

Competition, ego inflation, striving, role identification and fear all contribute to the isolation of Western society. Meditation helps a person to let go of these ego-controls and frees adults to be compassionate with others. Meditation can flow from being a practice to being to a way of contemplative living.

The final reason for facilitation of contemplative experiences in the classroom is the fulfillment one receives from self-based teaching. Miller highlights the experience of communion with students as one of the joys of teaching that is evoked in the contemplative practitioner.

For the above reasons, Miller requires each student to meditate as part of the classroom activity. He is quick to point out, however, that these courses are not required. Although students may experience resistance in the beginning, Miller has many experiences of participants being grateful for the influence of learning the practice and value of meditation.

Miller finds the work of Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, as particularly relevant to his work on the contemplative practitioner.<sup>4</sup> Senge reminds organizations that they are to become "learning organizations" if they are to survive in this modern world. Miller connects Senge's "personal mastery" in his components of learning organizations as appropriate connections to contemplation in adult learning. Both bear the same fruit: connectedness and compassion.

Personal mastery is the life-long discipline of seeking the truth through seeing things clearly and deepening one's aspirations and vision. Miller notes that Senge regards a personal vision as a calling and views reality as an ally rather than an enemy. Considering our highest aspirations as a calling enables us to view personal mastery as a life-long process. It also enhances one's capacity to develop practices which connect deep personal vision with all of life, including work. As a means to this end Senge advises meditation and visualization. "Senge believes that meditation in the form of contemplative prayer, simply quieting the mind, is a way to access our subconscious mind, which can be a source of creativity. Personal mastery allows the integration of reason and intuition."<sup>5</sup>

At the end of his work, Miller suggests many other spiritual practices for educators and other professionals. Each leads the contemplative practitioner to a life of joyful purpose that is lived out in compassion. Slowing down is fundamental to this way of living. Living contemplatively enables us to focus our attention on one activity at a time. New energy grows from the attention we give to one task. Through this mindfulness we can be intimate with all that surrounds us and with the Zen master "we can be enlightened by everything in the world."

What impresses me in Miller's work is that he integrates a contemplative value into the demands of the workplace. He sees this happening in the fields of

business, medicine and law. He quotes Peter Senge who suggests that workers in various businesses and organizations need to develop personal mastery through meditation. This leads me to question the possibility of a similar stance for ministers engaged in the works of mercy. My assumption is that many of us and our coworkers may indeed meditate individually. I also know meditation is a part of religious education programs on the primary and secondary level. Is it fair to say, however, that we are often hesitant to integrate the deepest values of our religious and spiritual traditions in our workplace. Yes, we might pray at certain times or even have retreat experiences with collaborators, but would contemplation be a constitutive part of the workplace? Might this practice, in our ministry settings, be a radical response to the commitment to call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyle and ministry?

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## I believe that the works of mercy are calling us to continual conversion.

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This leads to the question of religious freedom and belief. Just as Miller only has meditation in the classes that are not required, I believe there needs to be ultimate respect for freedom in the invitation to contemplation. However, Miller was able to weave the best from the world traditions of spirituality into his theory of the contemplative practitioner. The five contemplatives he describes in the text are Buddha, Teresa of Avil, Emerson, Gandhi, and Merton. We might add many more from the Mercy and feminist traditions. What is clear is that contemplation is a practice that is valued in all spiritual traditions. Miller has taken the best of the inter-faith world and offered it to his students. How does this practice address us and our commitment to continual conversion?

### III. Conversion

Before I close I would like to offer two descriptions of conversion which I trust might become operative for us individually and within our ministry settings. One is from Mary Hembrow Synder, a religion professor at Mercyhurst College in Erie, and the other is from Elizabeth Johnson in her book, *She Who Is*.

Snyder expresses the traditional Christian understanding of conversion in contemporary language from a feminist perspective. She asserts that conversion is:

"A permanent process of both turning away and turning toward - turning away from all that intellectually, morally and spiritually keeps one mired

in abusive relationships characterized by domination, intimidation, fear or dishonesty and turning toward the unlimited grace of God ever calling us to relationships characterized by mutuality, respect, courage and truthfulness."<sup>6</sup>

This description affirms the permanent or continual nature of conversion and images the grace of God as compassionate relationship. Conversion in these terms is reflective of *rahamim* or "womb-love".

Referring to the myth of Sleeping Beauty, Elizabeth Johnson illuminates the meaning of the experience of conversion from a feminist perspective. Since most work on conversion has been from the perspective of male theologians, Johnson describes the grace of conversion in the life of Sleeping Beauty as empowerment. The princess is awakened and discovers her own identity. She responds to a call to live from the new awareness of her giftedness, strength and responsibility. Conversion in these terms is turning away from all that is demeaning and turning toward the grace of recognizing self as God's good gift. Contemplation of this reality for women could evoke continuous conversion in lifestyle and ministry.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, I believe that the works of mercy are calling us to continual conversion. Contemplation in ministry, not only in the privacy of individual prayer, but in the reality of our ministries, might contribute to the empowering of union and compassion for the Kingdom.

### Footnotes

1. Irene Nowell, "Mercy" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988), 650.
2. John Miller, *The Contemplative Practitioner*, (Toronto: OISE Press, 1994).
3. Schon, Donald A., *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
4. Miller, 134.
5. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*. (New York: Doubleday, 1990).
6. Mary Hembrow Snyder, "Mercy Values and Contemporary Culture," *The MAST Journal* 5,2 (Spring, 1995), 42.
7. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 64.

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# Unemployment Benefits: A Theological Reflection on Being Out of Work

Marilyn King, R.S.M.

This is a personal story of my own recent experience of unemployment. I agreed to write it because I believed my experience and subsequent reflection on it might be helpful to others who have gone through something similar. However, I didn't realize, until I began writing, the degree of personal revelation that would be involved. I wondered about the wisdom of reawakening the pain and embarrassment I went through. I also hesitated to recount some of the circumstances of losing my job, with its aftermath, because I feared portraying the persons involved in an uncomplimentary way. In the end, I did decide to share details of the experience, trusting in the ability of my readers to know that there were many angles from which my story could be told. I am presenting only my version of both the losses suffered and the fruits reaped.

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## I didn't remember the blossoms during the spring of 1993.

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I begin with an account of how I lost my job. This will be followed by a description of how that event affected me personally and how I tried to cope with the reality of unemployment. Finally, I offer some theological reflection on the experience, along with some questions that linger.

### How I Lost My Job

For the first time since the beginning of Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, I didn't attend the annual meeting in 1993. In fact, I had been thinking I shouldn't be a part of MAST anymore and had even drafted a letter to the officers saying I didn't feel I was qualified as a member because I was no longer a "professional theologian". I respected too much the high quality of the organization and I felt I just couldn't do theology at that level in my present circumstances. I went on to write: "This is not to say I am not doing theology. I am constantly trying to make sense out of the lived experience of being in central rural Kentucky, asking the question, 'How does what I believe make itself real in the raw data of life here and how does what I live each day get interpreted and gain its meaning by what I believe?'" But I have moved out of theological circles, have given away most of my

books, subscribe to no journals except MAST, and live miles from the nearest library with a theology section." Surely this situation disqualified me.

That letter seemed straightforward and reasonable, I hoped. It didn't however, mention the real reason why I wasn't coming to the MAST meeting. That reason was that at that time I felt I wasn't worth the price of the plane fare. That feeling about myself was one of the first shock waves which hit me when I came to realize I was about to be unemployed. The story follows.

On Easter Sunday of 1993 a Dominican friend of mine showed me her community newsletter in which my job at a local parish was being advertised. It was the first concrete evidence I had that I was being edged out of my position. Because the pastor had effectively cut off all communication with me over the course of the previous two years, I had guessed he wanted me out, but this final example of non-communication infuriated me. Previously I had taken the course of keeping up my side of the communication, trying to excuse his behavior and doing as much as I could in the parish without his support. But this time I confronted him with the newsletter advertisement and my anger. I astonished both him and myself with my vehemence, the release of months and months of bottled-up resentment at the way I was being treated.

Later that week there was a message on my answering machine that he wanted to meet with me. As it turned out, I had scheduled a Zen retreat the week before the meeting date, so I had time to come to an inner stillness about the situation. On retreat it became immediately clear that it was time for me to move on, to move away from a "toxic situation," as one friend named it. Also, it became clear that one strategy, which was to ask the pastor to join me in getting help to work through our relationship, was not a realistic option because of other stresses in my life at the time. I knew I couldn't operate anymore in this situation with his behavior towards me, regardless of the reason. Nor could I defend him anymore with the parishioners. And so I would risk resigning and becoming jobless. In our meeting he informed me that my behavior had been very unprofessional in our last encounter and he doubted he would renew my contract. I told him I would finish out my commitment to the parish for that year and then move on. I needed to do this because our relationship had so badly deteriorated and I didn't have the energy to try to build it up again. He gave me the exact date when he began to change his attitude toward me. At least I had the consolation of knowing it wasn't all in my imagination.

I didn't remember the blossoms during the spring of 1993.

A complicating factor in this story is my commitment to The Laura. For several years I and another Sister have been establishing a way of living our religious commitment which seeks to take seriously the centrality of contemplation, material simplicity and living among and serving poorer people in a community of life which also supports personal solitude. Such an arrangement is called a Laura.

During this upheaval in my ministry at the parish, we had just bought ten acres of land and begun the first phase of our building. We had both received permission from our communities to pursue this dream and had raised \$90,000 for it to be realized. So, for me, it wasn't just a question of reading the Ad Random section in the NCR or responding to the job listings in the community newsletter to find another position. I had to find work in the area. I had to worry that my perceived unprofessional behavior would not be communicated to pastors in surrounding parishes as I sought possible employment with them. I had to face the fact that I might not find anything more than a minimum wage job, or none at all. If that happened, I would have to move and give up The Laura.

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## **Suddenly I knew first-hand what so many of the people in the area have been facing— the loss of a job and many of the insecurities that go along with that loss.**

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Suddenly I knew first-hand what so many of the people in the area have been facing—the loss of a job and many of the insecurities that go along with that loss. In one way, the experience could never be comparable to that of my neighbors because I know I always have the community to fall back on and I could go back to California, grateful that I had been given the opportunity to at least try to realize The Laura. Further, I didn't have a family to support or generations of family history in the area to consider. I had plenty of skills that were transferable to other positions elsewhere.

Despite all those alternatives, however, I, nonetheless, identified with the many women who had just lost their jobs at the local sewing factory, some after twenty-five years of employment there. I was aware of the GE employees who had been laid off over the past years, perhaps as a result of the boycott my community participated in as a protest of GE's involvement in the war industry. I sulked with the tobacco growers

whose sure cash crop is now in jeopardy because of the anti-smoking movement and who see this family-centered enterprise vanishing from the fields right next to their homes.

Before my parish contract ended, I found a position at the local for-profit prison as a principal and instructor in the prison school. Actually, I felt an attraction to this new possibility. What a work of mercy! I went for some training and met some of the men and really liked it. Was it going to be that easy for me to quit one job and go right into another? There was a problem, however. The person whose position I was taking had been demoted with a sizeable cut in salary, because of her lack of credentials. She still worked in the school and I would be her boss.

When I began work in July, the week after I finished in the parish, I soon realized this was not going to be a smooth entry into my new position. My orientation was supposed to be given by this former principal. She refused to talk to me; she would not even tell me who would be in my class or when the class would begin, nor even where the restrooms were. By the end of the week I saw the warden and demanded that this behavior be addressed. I knew he was aware of the situation because he had forewarned me during my interview. His solution was to give me an immediate leave until the involved parties could meet and work out a strategy. Well, the leave never ended; and after about six weeks of being put off again and again, I found myself jobless.

After only four months of unemployment an archdiocesan position miraculously opened. I began work on November 1. But during those four months I didn't know when I might find work. What follows is an account of my feelings, thoughts and prayers during the events and non-events of those four months.

### **What Unemployment Feels Like**

The Sisters of Mercy are an active community, a very active community. Our name implies works of mercy. We may say that our work is not who we are; we try not to introduce ourselves by saying what we do. But in many ways we really are what we do. I came to know that in a very personal way.

One cornerstone of The Laura way of life is the primacy given to simply being over involvement in activities. In The Laura the members try to balance activity with contemplative living day in and day out. Each day myriads of choices are made in how we allocate time for ministry, prayer, shopping, preparing meals, conversations, entertainment, solitude,...and doing nothing. The balance of these choices can determine whether we identify ourselves by what we do or by what we are. Regular engagement in the activity of doing nothing and conscious effort given to paying attention to the stillness of the present moment in every activity of the day is a goal of Laura life.

This being said, my experience of being out of

work for the first time in my adult post-school life made me realize how much my ministry identified who I was, how much my paycheck was an affirmation of my worth, how much my schedule was my motivation for the day. During this four month period of unemployment the form came out from my community for our directory and I didn't have anything to put on the line which stated ministry. I was ashamed and saw how the position I held was a status symbol for me.

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**... as the days wore on  
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what had happened.**

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Although I knew there was no culpability on my part, as the days wore on my sense of self-worth began to ebb away and I started to blame myself for what had happened. I read the want ads faithfully and put the word out that I was looking for a job. Even that was somewhat humiliating for me. What was wrong with me that I needed a job? The openings that most closely matched my education and experience were so far away that I would either have to move or spend so much time and money commuting that the lifestyle I had come to Kentucky for would be jeopardized. Work that was close, like baby-sitting or paper routes, were so low paying that I couldn't live on the salaries. Besides, I would be taking a job away from someone who could do nothing else, and I did have other skills. From all this I learned what a minimum wage added up to in terms of an annual salary: not much. Suddenly, the statistic I often quoted in grant proposals—the average annual income for the county I live in being \$10,000—became a real number.

As the summer wore on and my search turned up few possibilities and my resumes returned with "We'll keep you on file" replies, I began to feel I was a drag on the community at home and I wondered if I was able to do anything. I knew all I needed to do was to ask my community for help, but something told me to pursue this situation as long as I could without asking to be bailed out. Perhaps God was revealing something to me.

Early on I found out I could not claim unemployment because I had quit my job. Further, the church does not pay into unemployment, so even if I had just been let go I couldn't claim unemployment pay to tide me over. I also found out the "contract" I had with the parish wasn't worth the paper it was written on. By archdiocesan policy employees of the archdiocese

other than those who work in the schools do not have contracts, but some kind of a loose agreement about salary with a job description. I thought of the several other staff members in my parish that the pastor had let go before me. What did they do? Where is justice in the church anyway?

I did qualify for food stamps. I had to ask one of my neighbors where the office was and realized how oblivious I had been of the realities of life of many parishioners. As a religious, I have been in such a protected, privileged and secure environment for all my adult life, truly removed experientially from the worries and insecurities of the people I ministered to, lived among, and recently pledged to be in solidarity with, according to our Direction Statement.

I made an appointment at the Human Services Office and showed up on the last day of the month, foolishly. I learned soon that was the worst day to apply because stamps are issued month by month. I was asking the case worker to fill out forms for me for one day's worth of stamps. This particular case worker was very abrupt and grumpy and told me over and over how busy he was as I stumbled over the questions he asked me: "Do you own a car?" "Well, I have the use of one, but I don't own it." "How much money do you have in the bank?" "None that is really mine." "When was your last paycheck?" I tried to explain the prison situation. As he got more and more irritated, and louder and louder in his exasperation with me so that others in the office could hear, I just backed down and said I really didn't need the stamps and left, quickly.

Waiting in line with me at the Human Services Office had been the mother of one of the children in the parish school of religion I had administered. My first thought in seeing her and greeting her was "I hope she thinks I am here to advocate for someone." My second thought was "I hope she isn't one of the parents I had sent a delinquent tuition notice to before I left the parish." When I was with my less-than-cordial case worker, I thought what must it be like for this timid mother to have to face the likes of him and not have the luxury to walk away without aid because it was the only way she could get food for her family.

When I went home that afternoon, I told the Sister I live with what had happened. She also had gone on food stamps when our pastor let her go in favor of someone "with more education," as he put it to her. She is much more of a fighter than I am and she convinced me to make an appointment with her case worker whom she experienced as a kind woman. I really didn't want to, but I did, again because I thought God was leading through this whole ordeal for reasons unknown to me.

My experience this time was much different. For one thing, it was now the beginning of the month. And for another, when I walked into this woman's cubicle I spotted a quote from St. Bernard on her wall. Her



work was truly a ministry. I began to relax in the knowledge that mercy was being given to me. I wound up with an envelope full of food stamps within a few days, finding myself very much appreciative of this government program.

While I sat in line in the Human Services Office this second time, even though I was still embarrassed at being in this situation, I felt I belonged there with the others in a similar situation. A picture of Christ standing in a soup line, which I first saw at St. Anthony's soup kitchen in San Francisco, came to mind and I really knew he was there with us. So much of being merciful for me had been providing for the needs of others. This was the other side of Matthew 25. I was being provided for; this was a taste of being one of the least. Really, it was being Christ in a new way. This hand-out was being done to Christ and this time it was me. I was blessed because, for a little while anyway, I was poor.

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## Now that I had the stamps I had to use them!

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Now that I had the stamps I had to use them! This was going to be even harder. In small town living everyone knows everyone else. I had listened to the local store manager complain about these people who "Don't do a lick of work" and come in with their food stamps while he put in long hours at the store and earns everything he gets. How could I go in now and pay with food stamps? I decided to go out of my way to shop at stores where I thought no one would know me. I thought of those who didn't have a car or enough money to spend on gas to go to the next town. Did they just have to submit to the judgements of the locals? Has this been going on so long in their lives that they became in their own eyes the "no-goods"? Had I looked at these people with this judgment?

This joblessness and living on food stamps, as I mentioned before, lasted only four months. God knew my limitation, I guess. It was a very hard time for me because I thought it might force me to give up a dream if there was no quick end to it. But it was a time of great grace, too, a realization that came more clearly into focus when I had the luxury of reflecting on it. I offer now some of these reflections on my "unemployment benefits."

### Theological Reflection on the Experience

I begin this last section by quoting a portion of our Direction Statement:

*Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's*

*passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources for the next four years to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world, especially women.*

For some years I have been wondering what "solidarity with the poor" meant because it just seemed to be impossible for me as a well-educated, well provided for American woman religious. And then the phrase appeared in our Direction Statement so I knew I had to do more than wonder about the meaning.

The phrase "solidarity with the poor" does seem to be a contemporary way of expressing how Jesus chose to live. That soup line image of Christ reproduces in graphic form Philippians 2:6-7 "Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of [a human being]." This is solidarity.

### The Benefit of Solidarity

Christ's identification with us was not a stiff and impassive standing alongside us. Christ's solidarity with us was intimate and transformative. In fact, I believe that redemption was effected not by his dying on the cross so much as by his kenotic incarnation.

In our early theological tradition there were two schools of soteriology which developed. The one which became dominant in the west (Anselm's juridical approach) explained that the death of Jesus provided satisfaction to the Father for our sins. The other which the eastern church espoused (through Irenaeus, for example) held that by the incarnation all of creation was transformed into the divine through mystical identification. By God taking on flesh the veil that obscured the magnificence of all creation, particularly the one which clouded human vision, was removed. All we human beings needed to do was to open our eyes and see the glory that is ours. In line with this theological perspective, the eastern churches celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration as one of its major liturgical commemorations. This eastern approach proposes redemption through solidarity. By Jesus' taking on created flesh all creation was divinized. By being "in line" with us, Jesus elevated to its true dignity what we thought was shameful and worthless. It wasn't so much that he paid for what we couldn't give because of our sinfulness but that he revealed our glory by being one of us.

I do not discount the gospel basis for being providers and dispensers of God's mercy to those in need. But my own neediness helped me see the other side. There is a salvific benefit of having to be provided for, to be the one who receives mercy. In fact, I think to be in solidarity in this way is a work of mercy itself.

One day recently I was standing in line at our town's food bank and one of the women who was a catechist at the parish I worked in was standing there



with me, waiting for the doors to open. In the course of our conversation she paid me one of the biggest compliments I had received so far in my Kentucky sojourn. I was sharing with her a worry of mine and she said, "You are like one of us, you know." That made me so happy. I felt very close to her and to God in solidarity and communion.

In a recent survey of the most desirable states in which to live in the U.S., Kentucky ranked forty-sixth. This probably says more about the criteria by which such ranking is made than about true desirability. Nevertheless, if I ever wrote my autobiography, I would entitle the chapter about my life in rural Kentucky, "Living on the Other End of the Bell-Shaped Curve." It has been quite a switch for me. One of the high school kids in the county said to me they hadn't won a football game for three years straight.

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I grew up winning, scoring at the top, enhancing my resume each year with degrees and positions, and here I am in a county in which less than fifty percent of the adults have graduated from high school. In many ways it is impossible for me to be in solidarity with the people I now live among. My little period of unemployment was just a taste, not a life-long fare. And there is a world of difference between the two. The community treasury was just a phone call away. Many of my neighbors do not even have a savings account. I have an education and the prestige and credibility of being a member of a religious community to put me in good stead in a pinch. Many of my neighbors can't get credit or a decent paying job or health insurance or even a phone. The land I live on and the little cabin I live in has been provided by donations from people who trust me and believe in what I am doing and from grants from foundations who responded to an appeal to help us in this good church work. I have the luxury to live on little income because I don't have a family and my community allows me to live simply. My neighbors have to work two jobs with long hours and little job security. In a very real way I am not in solidarity with the economically poor. I am not

like one of them even if I want to be.

There is another level of solidarity which has come from my desire to be like one of them, though. That is in knowing what it is like not to quite fit into society. I read once that a missionary is one who doesn't feel at home at home, nor at home in the mission. When she is at home she feels discomfort in having so much and wants to be with poorer people. But when she goes to live among these poorer people she discovers she can never be one with them or fully accepted by them because she is a stranger, an outsider, from somewhere else. She may even give off an unconscious aura of superiority that aggravates an already tender sense of inferiority on the part of the people to whom she comes to live among.

This has been true for me. In an effort to live more simply, I wound up in Kentucky. It didn't take me long to realize I would always be somewhat of a stranger here. The people from the next county aren't even accepted! But when I go back to my own regional community now, I also feel like I am from another place and am a stranger there.

A stranger is someone who is a little "strange". With this meaning of the word, I have a sense of solidarity with my neighbors. They are regarded by mainstream America as a little off track. They know that when a comedian wants to imitate someone who is uneducated or unrefined, he puts on a voice and vocabulary that is theirs. I heard someone in California remark during the last presidential campaign, "How could we ever have a president whose accent is like Ross Perot's?" I know some young men from my parish who were arrested on suspicion of drugs just because of their accent. Kids are trained, explicitly or implicitly, not to look at others straight in the eye because that would look like they are trying to be better than they were. When I first arrived in Kentucky I mimicked the people, even in their presence, not to be demeaning, but thinking I was funny. I soon noticed that although I always got a laugh from my own colleagues at home, my new neighbors never smiled. I thought at first they didn't get my humor (itself a judgment on a presupposed dullness) and then I realized they were ashamed of how they sounded because it was "strange". So although we are strangers in different ways, I can share a little bit in that experience which we know biblically is an irresistible drawing card for God's special attention.

#### **The Benefit of Self-Identity**

Faced with the reality of having no job, I had to struggle with the question of self identity. As meaning and purpose and sense of personal worth weakened and began to vanish as the days of unemployment wore on, I thought maybe it is true that I am what I do. There is dignity and even an injunction from James to earn my keep and a command from Jesus to give to others. Those motivations were and still are among my

deepest reasons for ministry. But without a well-defined external forum for ministry and without a check to be able to send home, I had to come to my deeper self. As the months wore on, I kept telling myself, "I am not my job. My chief work is simply to be. If I am made in the image of God, I, too, at my deepest simply am."

Simply being who I am in God is something I share with everything else that is, and in a special way, with everyone else who is. This is my fundamental solidarity with others. This is the "work" of a contemplative life—being, and being in neediness before the God who loves. A precious benefit from being unemployed was, therefore, similar to the grace which comes in contemplative prayer: communion with all of creation in naked awareness of God. This is who I really am: in God with all that is. And this includes my former pastor, the case-worker at Human Services and the woman at the prison. We are all brothers and sisters.

#### **The Benefit of the Beatitudes**

My final reflection centers on a question that has often come to me as I go about my ministry. It surfaced during my recent experience of unemployment with a new clarity. How do the Beatitudes and Matthew 25 (the parable of the last judgement) go together? The Beatitudes declare the poor and hungry and dispossessed to be blessed and first in the reign of God. Similarly, in Phillipians the humbling of Jesus as a human being, obediently accepting even death is the reason for God's highly exalting him and bestowing on him the divine name.

And yet it is clear in Matthew 25 that entrance into eternal life hinges on whether we have helped people in need. Doesn't Scripture say it is more blessed to give than to receive? (See Acts 20.25). It certainly is more satisfying to be the dispenser of

mercy, having seen it from the other side recently. It makes more sense to devote myself to giving to others in need than to choose to be one of the needy. We already have too many of those. I would never say to a mother weeping over her dead child, "How happy are you because you mourn." I would never dream of telling the person in line with for food stamps or at the unemployment office, "Be glad, this is a chance for you to really know what the reign of God is about." I can't see myself saying to persons I try to be a Sister of Mercy to, "Rejoice! It is far more blessed to receive than to give."

And yet, it is Jesus who stands in the soup line. It is Jesus who receives the cup of cold water we give in his name. It is by his self-emptying that he transformed us. The most precious benefit of my unemployment stint came in my sense of being identified with Jesus as I shared in the plight of people without work. It was a gift to be able to receive. Have I been able to see it as such a gift because I was removed from that situation in such a short time?

This question remains for me. How do we invite people who are in need, whose misery we do help to relieve, to find their true source of contentment and joy? How do we help others realize that the last illusion of the poor is that material satisfaction brings happiness? Maybe these questions can be raised and entertained only by those who are not poor. Maybe the poor already know the answers.

Perhaps the truth is that both those who give and those who receive are blessed and beloved. Perhaps we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are being led at this moment of our history, to make choices which place us in line with the needy. For the most part, we have been the providers, generously giving from our abundance. Does our call to "conversion of lifestyle" signal a change in this stance?

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# Mercy Values and Contemporary Culture

Mary Hembrow Snyder

(This text was originally an address delivered by the author at the Mercy Higher Education Conference in Pittsburgh, 1994)

In the prologue to his most recent book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, the preeminent biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, reproduces an imaginary dialogue he had with the historical Jesus which previously appeared in the Christmas 1991 issue of the *Christian Century*. The dialogue is pertinent to Mercy values and contemporary culture. The dialogue begins with Jesus remarking:

*I've read your book, Dominic, and it's quite good. So now you're ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?*

*I don't think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn't I, and the method was especially good, wasn't it?*

*Thank you Dominic, for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something.*

*Is it enough, Jesus?*

*No, Dominic, it is not.<sup>1</sup>*

While Crossan may not have falsified the message of Jesus to suit his own incapacity, I am wondering if the same could be said of us with regard to the Mercy charism and the institutions of higher education which we claim uphold it. Thus, let me rephrase the question: "Have we falsified the message of Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde to suit our own incapacity given the cultural milieu in which we are living?"

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**We spend our lives building barriers instead of bridges — political, social, psychological, emotional, and religious, — barriers that succeed in preserving our power, our prestige, our property, and our prejudices.**

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To respond to this question, first, I will present three characteristics of contemporary culture which I think may be contributing to our incapacity to be true to their message; second, I will offer three countercultural values that message gave birth to — values which I believe should permeate Mercy institutions of higher learning.

Initially, I submit that contemporary United States

culture worships, among others, the following values: 1) a contempt for the spiritual dimension of human beings 2) a preoccupation with security, and, 3) a punitive attitude toward the anawim.

One of the cultural corruptions resulting from the failure of the Enlightenment Project has been the deification of reason and, therefore, a sweeping rejection of all things connected with religion and the Spirit. Faith in science and technology thus replaced faith in God. The spiritual dimension of human beings, in ensuing dualistic thinking, was relegated to the world of women and clerics. Authentic religion and spirituality are just beginning to recover from the historical aberrations that led to such denigration and distortion of this aspect of ourselves, but its cryptic presence, particularly in academia, perdures.

Contempt for the spiritual dimension of human beings has also spawned a second value of our contemporary culture, namely, a self-absorbing preoccupation with security. We are an insecure people who have come to idolize a "predatory individualism."<sup>2</sup> We spend our lives building barriers instead of bridges — political, social, psychological, emotional, and religious — barriers that succeed in preserving our power, our prestige, our property, and our prejudices. We are afraid of differences and afraid of transformative change. Our colleges often reflect this by discouraging genuine dialogue, diversity, collegiality, and institutional honesty, in myriad ways. This is quite contrary to the expansive risk-taking and courage exercised by Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde, who unashamedly centered their personal and institutional security in God.

Finally, one does not have to be a devotee of Rush Limbaugh to recognize the pervasive, punitive attitude toward the anawim that has become culturally fashionably today. Eight years ago, in their pastoral letter on the economy, the bishops warned us not to succumb to this. It is blatantly anti-evangelical and blatantly anti-Mercy!

Biblically, the anawim refer to the widows, the orphans, the strangers - those without voice and without power - who live precariously at the edge of the community.<sup>3</sup> And it is these voiceless and powerless "non-persons" who have always been at the center of the Mercy charism.

Undoubtedly, these contemporary cultural values stand in direct contradiction to the message of Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde. Succinctly, that message was: union with God and service to God's poor, sick, and ignorant. Three contrasting values their message gave birth to include: 1) a contemplative vision of reality 2) a commitment to life long

conversion, and, 3) a radical compassion for the anawim.

Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde were deeply contemplative women. By that I simply mean that their lives were centered in God. And, like Jesus, their intimate relationships with the Holy One enabled them to grasp deeply what the reign of God was all about. The heart of their legacy to us, then, is the recognition that the deeper our union with God the deeper our consciousness of what the reign of God demands of us. Without this union we are vulnerable to betraying their vision. Being brilliant administrators and creative educators is not enough; good works alone will not sustain their vision. As women and men of Mercy we are responsible for more. And that more is the countercultural practice of the presence of God in all we undertake. Unapologetically, unequivocally, unashamedly.

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## **Conversion is a very complex phenomenon. It is a permanent process of both turning away and turning toward**

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The second countercultural value bequeathed to us by Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde was a commitment to life long conversion. This is the opposite of the self-serving security our society cultivates so extensively. Conversion is a very complex phenomenon. It is a permanent process of both turning away and turning toward. It is a turning away from all that intellectually, morally, and spiritually keeps one mired in abusive relationships characterized by domination, intimidation, fear, or dishonesty. It is turning toward the unlimited grace of God ever calling us to relationships characterized by mutuality, respect, courage, and truthfulness. The personal and professional commitments of Catherine and Frances reflected such ongoing conversion. Both constantly turned away from fear and refused to be dishonest or intimidating in their exercise of authority. They treated all people, whether beggar or bishop, with profound respect and dignity. When their vision of what could be was misunderstood, or perhaps incomplete, they were open to dialogue, challenge, and adaptation. They knew their mission of Mercy was not their work, but fundamentally the work of God.

Finally, a radical compassion permeated their ministries to the anawim. Sr. Carmel Bourke testifies to this when she refers to Catherine as, "a woman of great compassion of heart, whose compassion deepened as her work among the poor grew. . ."<sup>4</sup> And of

Frances Warde's compassion Sr. Kathleen Healy writes: "No woman founded personally more convents and institutions for the service of the poor, the sick, the illiterate, and all those in need. . . Perhaps no woman ministered more to suffering humanity in America."<sup>5</sup> Consequently I ask: does such compassion mark our Mercy institutions of higher learning in every respect? With regard to the kinds of students we recruit? The quality of the support services we offer them? The values we emphasize through our core curricula? to the way we negotiate complex issues between faculty and administration? as well as with regard to our policies toward the less professionally trained who labor in our institutions? Or, influenced by a culture that is increasingly corporate and classist, have we betrayed our heritage of compassion in the name of expediency and conformity to the conventional wisdom of the day?

Thus, as women and men committed to and responsible for the message of Mercy handed down to us, we must ask ourselves if our incapacity to be faithful to the spiritual legacy of Catherine McAuley and Frances Warde has led us to falsify their message? The cultural temptations to do so abound. I have only cited three. What are we going to do about this? Clearly, we must help one another be accountable. Otherwise we may betray their vision and dishonor their message because we have too uncritically accommodated ourselves and our Mercy institutions of higher learning to the unspiritual, self-serving, hard-hearted values of our age. If we do this we will have forfeited our opportunity to make a unique historical and spiritual contribution to our cultural context.

May we have the courage to embrace their breadth of vision and to cultivate their breadth of soul!

### **Footnotes**

1. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), xiv.
2. This term I discovered in an article written by the late Myron Bloy, Jr. See Myron Bloy, Jr., "Faith Communities in the Academic World," *Cross Currents: The Journal of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life* (Winter 1993-1994), 442.
3. Editor's note: the Hebrew word most generally refers to a quality of heart or attitude of humility and meekness. Occasionally it refers to groups of economically marginalized and poor. It describes the disposition of those God will bring back from the exile in Babylon, and those whose future will be restored after a time of disaster and oppression. The *anawim* are those who wait trustfully for God to act.
4. Sr. Mary Carmel Bourke, RSM, *A Woman Sings of Mercy* (Sydney, Australia: E.J. Dwyer, 1987), 73.
5. Kathleen Healy, *Frances Warde: American Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 221.

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# The Development of Mercy Tradition: Reflections Borrowed from John Henry Newman

Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

A day's ferry ride across the Irish Sea and one generation's difference in age separated the younger scholar Venerable John Henry Newman and the older woman of action Venerable Catherine McAuley. Although they probably never met, Newman knew the Sisters of Mercy in Birmingham, where for some years he served as their confessor. A kindred spirit bonded these two diverse personalities at a depth that transcended the space and time of the British Isles in the mid-nineteenth century. Catherine had what we now would call a holistic approach to reality—intelligence united with heart, fired with the vision of Jesus Christ in his suffering poor, and impelled to be the mercy of Jesus to those in need. John Henry Newman's brilliant theological reflections are imbued with a similar holistic approach.

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**Although he (Newman)  
explicitly stresses the theme of  
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lived Christian experience.**

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His *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*<sup>1</sup> bridges the two years (1843-1845) between his Anglican and Roman Catholic commitments. Although he explicitly stresses the theme of Christian doctrine, he applies his points throughout to lived Christian experience. He asks profound questions about the evolution of Christianity over the centuries and how it is possible to discern fidelity throughout such changing forms and diverse external formulations. His theory on the development of doctrine took almost a century to become part of the theological mainstream. He summarizes it:

*From the nature of the human mind, time is necessary for the full comprehension of great ideas....When an idea is of a nature to arrest and possess the mind, it may be said to have life, that is, to live in the mind which is its recipient...It is not merely received passively in this or that form in many minds, but it becomes an active principle within them, leading them to an ever-new contemplation of itself, to an application of it in various directions, and a propagation of it on every side. ...The development then of an idea is not like an*

*investigation worked out on paper, ...but is carried on through and by means of communities of men [and women] and their leaders and guides; and it employs their minds as its instruments, and depends upon them, while it uses them.*<sup>2</sup>

Newman proposes seven "notes" or criteria for discerning how to distinguish between authentic development, and corruptions of the true essence of the great idea.

*I venture to set down seven Notes of varying cogency, independence and applicability, to discriminate healthy developments of an idea from its state of corruption and decay, as follows:—There is not corruption if it retains the same type, the same principles, the same organization; if its beginning anticipates 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.*<sup>3</sup>

In this reflection I will apply Newman's seven criteria to our tradition as Sisters of Mercy. The "great idea" on which we focus is the mercy of God to the world, through and in Jesus Christ, through and in the apostolic community of religious women called Sisters of Mercy. By which signs do we discern that over these hundred and sixty-some years we have been faithful to our calling?

## CRITERIA FOR AUTHENTIC DEVELOPMENT OF A GREAT TRADITION

### 1. One in essence ("type") from beginning to now

The first criterion which "guarantees the healthiness and soundness of development" is the continuous preservation of its type or essence. This is readily suggested, writes Newman,

*...by the analogy of physical growth, which is such that the parts and proportions of the developed form, however altered, correspond to those which belong to its rudiments. ... Great changes in outward appearance and internal harmony occur in the instance of the animal creation itself.*<sup>4</sup>

Who could anticipate the delicate beauty of a butterfly by looking at its earlier life stages? Yet it is the identical individual life and the same species of being, the same "type".

*More subtle still and mysterious are the variations which are consistent or not inconsistent with identity in political and religious developments. ... An idea, then, does not always bear about it the same external image. ... for that very reason, UNITY OF TYPE becomes so much the surer guarantee of the healthiness and soundness of developments.*<sup>5</sup>

What then is the type, the essence, the inner life/spirit/energy of the Mercy ideal under its various external manifestations? Mercy is sheer gift, received from God, responding to every human need. It is, according to Thomas Aquinas, an effect of charity—*agape* or divine friendship—which overflows into human action in zeal, peace, joy, and mercy.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, mercy, the graced response to human need is the charism of this apostolic community of women.

Today, among the thousands of Sisters of Mercy engaged in hundreds of kinds of services worldwide, we can discern the same spirit and life-energy that impelled Catherine and her first small group to become “walking nuns” among the poor, sick and ignorant of Dublin. For the first seventy-five years of our history, the customs of the sisters were relatively stable. In pioneer situations in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina, the life-style was recognizable as being practically the same as its earliest Irish origins.

Then in 1918, with the codification of Canon Law, the Sisters of Mercy were categorized as identical with all other groups of apostolic religious women regardless of distinctions among original charisms. On the pattern of monasticism, we were given a modified cloister, a companion on visitations outside the convent, locks at sunset, severe restrictions on visitors (with peepholes in the parlor doors), and other accoutrements of protection for the weaker sex—all to be incorporated into revised Constitutions. For forty years until Vatican II this new pattern prevailed. Because this model was coupled with the Mercy charism, sisters lived the difficult dichotomy of a monastic community and spiritual life along with rigorous apostolic activity. Such an effort did not stifle the spirit of mercy which exhibited throughout this period what Newman called “chronic vigour” (his seventh criterion) but in some respects was not really an authentic expression of it.

“One cause of corruption in religion,” notes Newman, “is the refusal to follow the course of doctrine [or: of a great idea] as it moves on, and an obstinacy in the notions of the past.”<sup>7</sup> As we look back over our history, obstinacy seems too radical a concept to apply, for all was done with utmost good will. But we might now discern that we have sometimes carried “notions of the past” beyond their usefulness. In nineteenth century America, for instance, the immigrant sisters clung to some of their Irish cultural attitudes such as social class distinctions and implicit racism which were no longer relevant in a rough new world. In the community’s devotional life, we almost canonized the treasured prayer manuals of the last century far beyond their appeal to young women who came from a very different milieu. And since Vatican II, an effort to respect the individuality of each person, led to an emphasis on individualism rather than reliance

on a mature interdependence which assumes a fully developed individuality.

Another negative influence not expressive of the spirit of mercy came from the outside. If any taint of Jansenism or strain of Puritanical thinking infected the community of Mercy, it certainly did not derive from Catherine’s spirit. Historically, the Penal Laws which had closed all Catholic institutions in Ireland drove candidates for the priesthood to Europe for their training. Many of these went to the closest country, France, where even after two centuries some seminaries still bore the effects of this heretical tendency which denied the compassion and mercy of God. Providentially, however, the priests who were Catherine’s own mentors were unaffected by Jansenism. Sisters eventually did meet with some clergy who were not free of the taint, and whose influence sometimes caused a Puritanical outlook which was not compatible with a Mercy spirit.

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**... in all the individuality,  
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to which all were dedicated.**

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Finally, the criterion of “one in type,” the continuity of the essence as being recognizably identical with its origins, prompts a further reflection on individuality or individualism. At the beginning of the community and through its early days of expansion, it was quite clear that the diversity of personalities enriched the whole community. Catherine shows an extraordinary sensitivity in dealing with individuals. She encouraged the timid, teased the overly sober worriers, cheered the daring and valiant, and stood behind decisions made in local circumstances even when she herself might have decided otherwise. But in all the individuality, there was a clear common purpose: the mission of mercy to which all were dedicated. Active and creative obedience for the sake of this goal, carried out with initiative and enthusiasm, became the norm. Later, in the first half of the twentieth century, institutionalization dominated. Obedience became more passive and detailed, even in extreme cases to merely following orders. Then in the wake of Vatican II, renewed emphasis on the charism of mercy brought us back to its heart. In discerning ministries and living situations in which individual gifts could most effectively be instruments of mercy, there was some overreaction to the former structure. But basically, an essential factor of discernment in obedience is the communal dimension of who we are, our relationship to leadership and to the whole body, and a strong sense of mission.

So whatever the form, the essence of the charism

of mercy has endured through time and cultures.

## 2. One in its system of principles

*The continuity or the alteration of the principles on which an idea has developed is a second mark of discrimination between a true development and a corruption... The life of [great ideas] may be said to consist in the law or principle which they embody... A development, to be faithful, must retain both the doctrine and the principle with which it started.*<sup>8</sup>

What does Newman mean here by principles? With regard to Christian doctrine, he gives examples such as dogma, faith, theology, sacrament, mysticism, sin, and materiality (that essential part of us which as well as mind is capable of sanctification).<sup>9</sup> These principles of the early church are the same as those of the later. Various heresies which are not authentic developments violated one or another of those principles.

In an amazing range of fields, he gives other examples.<sup>10</sup> Finally, he reminds his readers, "Principles require a very various application according as persons and circumstances vary, and must be thrown into new shapes according to the form of society which they are to influence."<sup>11</sup>

What are the specific assumptions which ground our authentic development, which have various applications and are "thrown into new shapes according to the form of society which they are to influence"? I have chosen a few fundamental principles which seem to perdure throughout our history as authentic manifestations, in various forms, of the essence or type of mercy.

**a. Rule and Constitutions** The original Rule of 1841 expressed the life and spirit of the first Mercy community. Its approval by Rome signified the official acceptance by the church of this new group of "walking nuns." In the early twentieth century such rules were revised to include those portions of the newly codified Canon Law applicable to religious, resulting in an unintegrated juxtaposition of inspirational and legal language. Then various attempts were made in the wake of Vatican II to ground a fresh expression of the original spirit in our contemporary experience. Eventually there evolved in 1991 the newly approved constitution of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. This current text looks quite different from the first one. It not only restates the original concepts in contemporary terms, but includes completely new elements of theological, psychological, social and political notions which were unthinkable in nineteenth century Ireland. Thus integral to our Mercy tradition is a rule expressive of the spirit, which has developed and evolved through our history, within which the basic principles of Mercy life are stated.

**b. Apostolic activity** The works of mercy are the very *raison d'être* for the formation of the community, and have always been the underlying purpose of every

new foundation throughout the world. The original Rule states in its opening paragraph:

*The Sisters...should have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this Congregation, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor girls, Visitation of the sick, and Protection of distressed women of good character.*

The 1991 Constitutions elaborate in sections 1 to 4: *Catherine...founded the institute of the Sisters of Mercy to involve women as religious in the mission of the church in the world....We as Sisters of Mercy freely responding to a call to serve the needy of our time, commit ourselves to follow Jesus Christ in his compassion for suffering people....Through direct service and through our influence we seek to relieve misery, to address its causes....To this end we serve God's people through education, health care, and other ministries that further social, political, economic, and spiritual well-being.*

And the Direction Statement of the 1991 Chapter proclaims that we commit our lives and resources "to act in solidarity with the economically poor of the world, especially women and children, women seeking fullness of life and equality.. [to] work for systemic change..."

**c. Ecclesial community** Following on the merciful response to human needs is the principle of our being an ecclesial community. We are not just an assortment of individual women called to do the works of mercy; the community itself is gifted with the charism within the church. Catherine McAuley and her original band of women chose, in the providential context of their time and circumstances, to seek approval of the church for their new Rule and way of life. Their express purpose was the primacy of the apostolic principle: that the works begun with such graced promise would be able to continue beyond themselves, and to be works of the church.

**d. Vows** Another abiding principle is that of religious vows. While the theology of vows undergoes a remarkable development, and the social context of our lives even more remarkable changes, the structure of membership in this ecclesial community of mercy continues to be defined by vows. Jesus Christ is heart and center of our consecrated celibacy. What we mean by poverty and its implications for us in our affluent society is a matter for concerned communal reflection—but we do take a vow by which we not only commit ourselves to a simple way of life but, according to our Original Rule, to "see the face of Jesus Christ" in his suffering people. These aspects are for us inextricably interwoven. We vow obedience within the community, and here too we have much to reflect on. Finally there is our special commitment of service of the poor, sick, and ignorant—a clear reinforcement of the apostolic principle.



**e. Union and charity** When the early community first gathered and were adapting the Presentation Rule to their new situation, "praying over every word of it" as Catherine commented, they took as an interim guideline the chapter on Union and Charity. For seven years until the draft of the new rule was completed, "union and charity" was their sole law. Thus it became and continued to be throughout our tradition a core value, integral to the spirit of mercy.

The fundamental ideas of this Chapter 17 are both exalted and practical. Reflecting the last discourse of John's gospel, it reminds us that Jesus bade us love one another as he has loved us (Jn 13:34). He prayed that we may be one as he and the Father are one (17:11). Therefore, the Rule adds, "Such mutual love and union should especially characterize religious, so that it may be truly said that there is in them but one heart and one soul in God." The model for this love is the communion of the saints in heaven.

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**"One thing is remarkable,  
that no breach of charity  
ever occurred among us.  
The sun never, I believe,  
went down on our anger.  
This is our only boast. . ."**

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The practical ways in which such an exalted ideal is to be realized (and mercy is practical) are then laid out in some detail. First we are to "avoid in conversation, manners, and conduct whatever may in the least lessen our mutual charity and love." We should be "solicitous to repair the smallest offense by quickly asking pardon, which should be immediately granted without contention or reserve." Other ways of concretely carrying out our union and charity are mutual assistance, patience with each other's defects, neither arguing nor rashly judging. We put into practice St. Paul's injunctions to the not-so-saintly Corinthians (I Cor. 13:1-13).

In her prolific correspondence, Catherine kept in constant touch with the several communities and with individual sisters, and encouraged them to communicate with one another in the bonds of friendship. She sometimes corrected, always supported and encouraged, was pained by any breach of charity or unintentional misunderstanding. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to the realism of the basic principle of union and charity is her words to Sister Elizabeth Moore: "One thing is remarkable, that no breach of charity ever occurred among us. The sun never, I believe, went down on our anger. This is our only boast.

Otherwise we have been deficient enough."<sup>12</sup> To live this fundamental principle of union and charity, we must call ourselves to continual conversion.

**f. Prayer** We are clearly called to be women of prayer both as individuals and together as community, although the forms vary with the religious culture of place and time. It seems also, in a more specific way, that the prayer of a merciful person and a merciful community has had at least two lasting characteristics, whatever the particular spirituality of the person and times. First, there has always been a trust in God's loving providence, God who is first mercy to us and then through us to others. Second, reaching out to all those myriad needs of our fellow humans, only a very few of which we can concretely meet, there has always been the prayer of intercession for others as a spiritual work of mercy.

These principles—and there may be others—seem to be like interpenetrating dimensions expressing, from various aspects, one and the same reality throughout a history of variant shapes.

### **3. One in the power of assimilation**

*In the physical world, whatever has life is characterized by growth...taking into its own substance external materials; and this absorption or assimilation is completed when the materials appropriated come to belong to it or enter into its unity. ...Life is proved by this capacity of expansion. ... An eclectic, conservative, assimilating, healing, moulding process, a unitive power, is of the essence, and a third test, of faithful development. Thus, a power of development is a proof of life, not only in its essay, but especially in its success.<sup>13</sup>*

In applying this criterion to great ideas, Newman continues: "An idea not only modifies, but is modified, or at least influenced, by the state of things in which it is carried out, and is dependent in various ways on the circumstances which surround it."<sup>14</sup> The unitive power of a great idea enables it to preserve its own identity even while "absorbing and incorporating into itself its antagonists."<sup>15</sup> Initially, whatever is foreign to the present form of a life is antagonistic to it. But in its ability to assimilate what is useful from its environment, the living body transforms external matter into nutrient which becomes part of itself and is an essential condition of its growth. The healthier the body, the greater its power of assimilation.

Newman indicates that it is the enduring principles which form the basis of assimilative power. We can then apply his reflection to the principles of the community of mercy, and ask: how have they been modified, influenced, dependent upon the concrete milieu of the community in various times and places? What have we been able to assimilate that has nurtured and stimulated authentic growth? Are there any antagonistic elements which we have absorbed? If this happened, was the community healthy enough to afford

this, to survive and be brought right by its "inherent vigor"?

First, what of the assimilative power of the works of mercy? We work now in a world in which we are not the only or the primary givers of health care, education, or social services, as the sisters were in most instances of our early history. Our institutions exist in a highly competitive marketplace. We are faced with accreditation standards and demanding professional qualifications. So what have we absorbed and grown by?

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## **The power of union and charity to meet and to assimilate external factors seems evident.**

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The professional training of our sisters has enabled the community to be influential in local, national, and international leadership positions reaching far beyond the bounds of Catholicism and even Christianity. It has also enhanced the quality of our relationships in many directions. Our institutions no longer stand in opposition to their secular counterparts, but collaborate in extensive systems of health care and education, sometimes even merging to the mutual benefit of all parties. Some of us serve as influential members of boards of directors in various social service organizations, and bring back to Mercy life broader insights and programs to minister more effectively to the poor, sick, and ignorant. We belong to various regional, national, and international networks for social justice, theology, spiritual direction, women's issues in the church. In corporate stands our voice is heard. All of these elements manifest the assimilative power of the principle of the apostolic works of mercy. Because of this, are we as women of mercy better able to influence systemic change?

As to the principle of ecclesial community, the history of the Sisters of Mercy began with a very small single community of women. The first major expansion from Dublin was into a different diocese, and because of the religious and political situation of the day, Catherine made the critically important decision of setting up the new foundation as an independent unit without formal ties to the parent house, thus initiating the possibility for any further expansion to come from any one of the foundations. So the rapidity of growth astounded onlookers.

A new situation arose at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in America and Australia where the zeal of pioneers and the eagerness of bishops to have the sisters led to the failure of some of the small and

widely dispersed communities on the missions because of dire poverty, illness, and lack of vocations. The Holy See issued a call for such communities of like origin and spirit to amalgamate for viability. Such reorganization continues with the formation of national institutes as central governing structures, with the church's approval of new constitutions for these bodies, and the establishment of the original house in Ireland as Mercy International Centre. Questions arose about whether this very different form of governing was appropriate and in keeping with the original intent of Catherine's first communities: would she recognize it? Would it cause a loss of the warmth of family spirit which she cherished among the sisters? Only a reflection on our present experience can answer this.

What of the vows? what have we assimilated from new developments in theology, scripture, psychology, sociology? What has enriched our understanding and deepened our fidelity? Our unstable present society has no comprehension of permanent commitment: has this affected us for better, causing the community to stand as prophetic witness of hope? or for worse, snaring us into an attitude of dismissing vows as anachronistic or irrelevant in today's world? Are we looking at the vows as means to an end, as the special expression of charity, as Catherine and her companions clearly did?

The power of union and charity to meet and to assimilate external factors seems evident. First, the bonds with our natural families and lifelong friends has deepened. Then, from our pre-Vatican experiences of tightly structured local community form to our present much greater diversity of ministries and widely scattered individuals, we are finding new ways of bonding: convocation, circle groups, prayer groups, assembly form of chapter. In former times religious women were treated with extreme respect as if we were somehow above ordinary Christians; now we are publicly caricatured and our celibacy ridiculed. Union and charity in community should "strengthen us for mission" in this society, for whose sake we show a "personal and corporate willingness to share our lives and resources with the poor and afflicted."<sup>16</sup> Another challenge to the assimilative power of union and charity is our transition from small independent congregations in which women knew each other personally, to a large Institute of several thousand across two continents and farflung islands. Can the familial spirit so cherished by Catherine persist in this environment? There are already indications that it can, and the ideal stretches us to make it so. Finally, can we, as Catherine and the early sisters did, and as our pioneer founders in this country did, reach out in union and charity to our associates who are also gifted with the spirit of mercy? Again, there are both hopeful signs of positive assimilation, and some questions of how this bonding can most effectively be accomplished. This too is a challenge for us, but one which has potential

for real growth.<sup>17</sup>

What of the assimilative power of prayer? With great diversity of individual spiritualities and a plethora of both wealth and mediocrity from which to choose, and with the liturgical, scriptural, and theological developments in the church, the prayer life of the community has been greatly diversified and enriched. Catherine McAuley cautioned her superiors not to impose their personal devotions on the community—a stricture for which her later followers have been grateful. It is a long way from the Irish pattern of silently reading long individual prayers during Mass out of a standard manual, to some liturgical celebrations in the vernacular today. For instance, the prayer style of the brothers of Taizé attracting throngs of young adults to retreat centers, is permeated with the compassionate mercy of Christ and includes touching prayers of intercession for the needs of the world: a truly communal prayer of mercy. And we can now incorporate elements of devotion from many other cultures—Hispanic, Native American, various African, Asian, and Indian.

#### 4. One in its logical sequence

*A doctrine professed in its mature years by a philosophy or religion is likely to be a true development, not a corruption, in proportion as it seems to be the logical issue of its original teaching.<sup>18</sup>*

What seems to be the logical issue of the original Mercy idea? First, from its foundation in Ireland, it seems natural that the first expansion would be to nearby English-speaking countries—England and Scotland. Then accompanying the Irish immigrants, the sisters went to Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. Second, their first ministries answered both the immediate needs of the poor and sick of Dublin, as well as their more enduring needs for education and vocational training especially of women, and instruction in the faith. These developed naturally into continuing to respond to immediate needs: fires, floods, earthquakes, plagues; serving at military hospitals on the battlefields of Crimea, American Civil War, Spanish-American War and others; ministering to refugees; housing battered women and children, and many other works. At the same time, long range planning led to the establishment of educational institutions of every level, programs, and health care facilities and systems. Third, our contemporary milieu has elicited a merciful response not only to the ever-present human miseries, but also a desire to affect the causes of those miseries. Thus in a highly organized society which can perpetuate systems of injustice, it is logical that mercy strives to influence systemic change.

#### 5. One in the witness of its early phases to its later

*Since when an idea is living, that is, influential and effective, it is sure to develope[sic] according*

*to its own nature, ... Another evidence, then, of the faithfulness of an ultimate development is its definite anticipation at an early period in the history of the idea to which it belongs.<sup>19</sup>*

One anticipatory element seems to be the expansion of the community of Mercy beyond Irish boundaries to other lands and cultures. In Catherine's own brief religious lifetime, she established two convents in a foreign country (England), received members from there and from three other foreign countries (Scotland, Wales, and Portugal) and was daringly planning for a pioneer mission across the wild Atlantic in Newfoundland. From Ireland Mercy continued to expand: the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, the islands of Papua New Guinea; and from them to South Africa, Kenya, Guam and the Philippines, and various other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. More recently Sisters of Mercy have gone into other parts of the world. In the process of this international expansion we have changed from an Irish community to a multinational, multicultural one in which English is not the exclusive language, much less the base of a dominant culture. We are in the process of learning how to be one community embracing this kind of diversity and being enriched by it. Its seeds were in our origins, and the potential for fruitfulness lies in our future.

Another anticipatory element of our earliest beginnings was the relation of the community to lay people, men as well as women, who participated in various ways in the ministries of the sisters. There have always been individuals and groups around each of our convents assisting and encouraging and sometimes financing our ventures. Today that continues; but the special new aspect is the burgeoning of more formally organized groups like the Mercy Corps and Mercy Associates who are inspired by the charism and want to be with us in a special and publicly recognizable way.<sup>20</sup>

#### 6. One in the conservation which its later development extends to its past

*A true development may be described as one which is conservative of the course of antecedent developments being really those antecedents and something besides them; it is an addition which illustrates, not obscures, the body of thought from which it proceeds; and this is its characteristic as contrasted with a corruption. ... A corruption is a development in that very stage in which it ceases to illustrate, and begins to disturb, the acquisitions gained in its previous history. ... Thus a sixth test of a true development is that it is of a tendency conservative of what has gone before it.*

*This character of addition [is] a change that is at once real and perceptible, yet without loss or reversal of what was before, but, on the contrary, protective and confirmative of it.<sup>21</sup>*

What developments can we discern that are conservative of our Mercy past? First, there is a renewed interest in our own unique history as a religious congregation. There have been recent advances in archival preservation and research, publications by the sisters of historical and biographical works relating to the community, the establishment of professional groups such as the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology and membership in organizations for the history of religious women. With the founding in 1994 of Mercy International Centre in Dublin, it will be possible to gather our Sister scholars for more collaborative studies, to have a central location for the archival treasures we share, and to disseminate information about Mercy to all who come as pilgrims, retreatants, and guests.

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## **To ensure the authentic development of Mercy tradition, we are indeed being called to "continuous conversion in our lifestyles and ministries."**

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Second, Vatican II and theological developments since that time were most encouraging for each congregation to return to the roots of its original charism. In addition to theoretical study, workshops, and retreats on the charism, we have found a fruitful way of touching into this grace by our vocation stories, especially what attracted us to Mercy and why we stay. This mode of prayerful communal interaction is charged with vibrant life, mutual respect, and incentive for further prayerful reflection. Individual sisters, especially younger ones, have experienced a vitality in the resurgence of a relationship with Catherine as a person, mentor, and inspiration.

Third, we have always been adept and enthusiastic about celebrating anniversaries of founding and other significant events, and jubilees and feast days of individual sisters. A deep belief in the communion of saints grounds our celebration of the death-passage of sisters into the community in heaven. With liturgical and other rituals, we relive the events so that they continue as present influences on our consciousness, and heighten our awareness of relationships which reach deeply into a living past.

Finally, in drawing up the new constitutions of the unions of the Americas, Australia, and other smaller units of Mercy communities, we have consciously drawn on our Original Rule as we express in a new form our spirit and principles. Further, the inspirational sections of the Original Rule, especially its key

chapter on Union and Charity, are used in prayer services and retreat reflections.

### **7. One in its union of vigor with continuity**

*While ideas live in men's minds, they are ever enlarging into fuller development; they will not be stationary in their corruption any more than before it; and dissolution is that further state to which corruption tends. Corruption cannot, therefore, be of long standing; and thus duration is another test of faithful development.*<sup>22</sup>

Newman's final criterion seems to apply in a particular way to the great idea of Mercy. In earlier days there were pioneer hardships, adversity, opposition; now we have aging sisters, fewer vocations, lesser numbers, and financial insecurity. But the ministries continue to respond to current needs and to reach out into new places. Enthusiasm for the works is engendered by networking, sharing, interaction. The great idea of mercy has tenaciously persisted through many phases of development. It has exhibited the power of duration, "vigorous action from first to last."

Thus Newman's seven notes distinguishing the healthy development of a great idea from its corruption should give us as Sisters of Mercy both great encouragement in the "chronic vigour" of our precious charism, and food for reflection on our human failures to be consistently faithful to the spirit/Spirit which is our very life. To ensure the authentic development of Mercy tradition, we are indeed being called to "continuous conversion in our lifestyles and ministries."<sup>23</sup>

### **Footnotes**

1. John Henry Newman, *Essay on The Development of Doctrine*, (1845) Second edition 1878, reprinted: (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, Inc., 1968).
2. *Ibid.*, 29-30, 36, 38.
3. *Ibid.* p. 171.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 174, 178.
6. *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2, q.30, a.4.
7. *Essay on Development*, 177.
8. *Ibid.*, 185, 178, 181.
9. *Ibid.*, 326.
10. *Ibid.*, 181-185.
11. *Ibid.*, 58.
12. Letter to Elizabeth Moore, 13 January 1839, in Angela Bolster, *Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1827-1841* (Cork and Ross: Sisters of Mercy, 1989), .84.
13. *Essay on Development*, 185.
14. *Ibid.*, 39.
15. *Ibid.*, p355.
16. *Constitutions*, #19.
17. See Mary Celeste Rouleau RSM, "A New Paradigm for Mercy," *MAST* (Journal of Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology) 1 (Fall 1990) 5-10.
18. *Essay on Development*, 195.
19. *Ibid.*, 195, 199.
20. *Directory of Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* (1991),

#6.1: "Regional communities may invite men and women who are committed to another state of life to share in various aspects of our Mercy life and ministry."

21. *Essay on Development*, 200, 199, 203, 420.

22. *Ibid.* 203, 205.

23. Additional bibliography:

Iam Ker, forward to *Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); also *John Henry Newman: a Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

Bruce Martin, *John Henry Newman: His Life and Work*

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Richard Penaskovic, "Newman's Essay on Development," *Catholic World* Jan-Feb. 1990 [special issue on legacy of JHN], 34-36.

Meriol Trevor, *Newman: The Pillar of the Cloud* (Vol.I), *Newman: Light in Winter* (Vol.II) (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962).

Jan H. Walgrave, *Newman the Theologian* (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

## Discussion Questions: Institute Direction Statement

1. What are the factors which cause a loss of "first love" passion? How can that passion be rekindled in us?
2. If the Sisters of Mercy are to work from a theology of chapter and decision-making, what for you are the elements of that theology?
3. What are the particular "everythings" that Catherine would give, do, or forego today for the sake of justice and mercy to those in need? Am I hesitant to give, do or forego these things? Why?
4. How can we as an Institute develop a multi-cultural sensitivity and international level of awareness?
5. How do you relate Christian feminism to Mercy charism and our Direction Statement?
6. How does Dorothy Day's radical commitment to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy resonate with your experience of the Institute's charism?
7. What are the standards in community by which we measure the quality of our work: number of hours, type, compensation, social setting...?
8. If you have ever been unemployed or in work transition, what was it like for you? If you have worked in a church-related institution, what is your experience of justice regarding employment?
9. What people, initiatives, and strategic planning promise to keep a concern with the marginalized and poor alive in your college community?
10. Given #7 of John Henry Newman's criteria for authentic development of a great tradition, "union of vigor with continuity," what in Mercy life or institutions seems clearly vigorous to you?

## Contributors

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**Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M.** (Baltimore) holds the Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. In addition to teaching theology at Vanderbilt, she has taught at Loyola College of Baltimore, Salve Regina College of Newport and the University of Notre Dame. In 1992, Mary Aquin left Notre Dame to establish the Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women in Baltimore, Maryland. The direct inspiration for the Center was the 1991 Direction Statement of the first chapter of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

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**Elizabeth McMillan, R.S.M.** has been teaching philosophy and theology since 1992 at the seminary of the Fraternidad Misionera de Marfa in Guatemala City. She has done corporate health care ethics at the Catholic Health Association and taught philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago and Carlow College in Pittsburgh, where she also served as Dean. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Louvain (Belgium) and an M.A. from Marquette University.

**Janet Ruffing, R.S.M.** (Burlingame) is Associate Professor in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University (NY). Author of *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Narrative Aspects of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist, 1989), articles on Elizabeth LeScur, and a number of articles and addresses on religious life, she is currently writing up her interview-based materials on kataphatic mysticism. She received her Ph.D. in Christian Spirituality from the Graduate Theological Union.

**Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.** (Merion) is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Ministry at the Toronto School of Theology. She is registered at Regis College and is engaged in ministry at Regis as a half-time staff person in the Continuing Education Department. She was Novice Director for the Merion Regional Community for twelve years and served in this same role in the Institute Collaborative Novitiate.

**Marilyn King, R.S.M.** (Burlingame) received her Ph. D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Systematic Theology and Spirituality. She has extensive experience in parish ministry and is currently the Archdiocesan Mission Religious Education Consultant for Rural parishes in Kentucky. With another sister, she has developed The Laura where they continue to complete the present stage of building their complex.

**Mary Hembrow Snyder** is an Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Mercyhurst College in Erie, PA. She has taught in Mercy institutions for almost twenty years. She is the author of *The Christology of Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Twenty-Third Publications) and co-editor of *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Orbis Books).

**Mary Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.** (Burlingame) earned her Ph.D. at St. Louis University and after finishing a recent teaching stint in philosophy at the University of San Francisco continues her research, writing, and presentations on Catherine McAuley, her life-long hobby. She has written the article on Catherine in the French *Dictionnaire de Spirituality* (1978) and other articles on religious life in various journals.

# What is MAST?

- **What is MAST?**

- MAST is the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology.

- **Can I belong?**

- Any member of Mercy who is interested in scholarly writing and speaking about theological concerns is welcome. Remember: Theologians and scripture people need scholars in other fields (history, sociology, philosophy, english, etc., etc., etc.) to keep them in the real world! So, if you are in another field and are inclined to interdisciplinary work with theologians, please consider membership in MAST.

- **When does MAST meet?**

- The annual meeting is held just after the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the location is determined by the city in which the CTSA is held.

- **Are there dues?**

- Yes membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Janet Ruffing, MAST treasurer, 2043 Hone Avenue, Bronx, NY, 10461.

- **When and where is the meeting this year?**

- This year, MAST will hold its annual meeting in New York from Monday, June 12th to noon Wednesday, June 14th.

- **What goes on at these meetings?**

- Plenary sessions and special interest sessions are arranged based on participants' ideas gathered at the previous meeting. An executive committee plans each year's meeting sending out an agenda to those on the mailing list in April.

- **How do I get on the mailing list?**

- Call or write: Maryanne Stevens, RSM  
Executive Director  
9411 Ohio Street  
Omaha, NE 68134  
(402) 280-2505



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