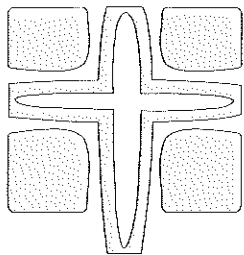


The **MAST** *Journal*

The Journal
of the Mercy
Association
in Scripture
and Theology

Vol. 9, No. 2
Spring 1999



Walking into the Future
Reflections on Religious Life

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Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

The final version of *Vita Consecrata* (On Consecrated Life, 1995) reflected a resolution of a tension between two statutes in Canon Law. Dominating the first two drafts was the centralizing orientation of Canon 590: "Institutes of consecrated life, inasmuch as they are dedicated in a special way to the service of God and of the entire Church, are subject to the supreme authority of this same Church in a special manner." Following the Synod attended by President Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., the final version was re-oriented according to the spirit of Canon 577: "In the Church there are very many institutes of consecrated life which have different gifts according to the grace which has been given them." The first two drafts provoked complaints from members of religious communities about what should be the leitmotif. As communities faced steady decline in numbers, along with the aging and loss of ability to sponsor institutions as before, an emphasis on obedience to papal authority seemed to miss the mark.

The third version of *Vita Consecrata* was a document transformed by a spirit of trust, respect and encouragement for religious communities in all the diversity of their charisms. The curmudgeonly, centrist, authoritarian voice of the earlier drafts gave way to a voice of pastoral affection, celebration, and support of differences. Unfortunately, the revision came too late. It did not have its desired impact because women had stopped reading.

In the context of the current issue of *MAST Journal*, organized by Mary Daly, R.S.M. (Connecticut), the third version of *Vita Consecrata* should be revisited, freed from a pre-occupation over how the Holy Father is the superior of every individual religious. It is important to grasp the significance of the shift from centrism to communion, with obedience understood in the context of mutual dialogue. What happens to women's self-understanding when the most characteristic feature of that communal life is the splendor of diverse charisms inspiring women to dedicate themselves to God?

A document, no matter how enlightened, does not resolve the behavioral tensions. Communion is more complicated than authoritarian rule. The spirit of centralizing authoritarianism lives within women as a simple reflex of gender construction. The rule of the fathers has governed family, society, and church and shaped women's sense of themselves and their expectations of other women. The call to communion can be felt as an alien spirit. It urges women to commune with family, society, and church as creators of rules and decisions. Communion is not men chatting in the drawing room, while women whisper in the kitchen. Communion is the transformation of these boundaries.



To become "experts in communion" as *Vita Consecrata* commends, women living the vows will certainly develop expertise in the languages formerly spoken only by men, all the sacred and secular sciences. But education is not enough to achieve spiritual emancipation. Nor will "experts in communion" emerge simply because enlightened legislation guarantees women an array of rights in the workplace, the home, and the political structure. Lay women and vowed women commit themselves to communion within their own souls. Communion requires intellectual and emotional power, taking of initiative, and expression in public actions.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., Editor

Introduction

Summer of 1999 brings us in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas to another milestone in our journey together. Catherine McAuley spoke often in the metaphor of journey. "Each day," she said, "is a step which we take towards eternity." "We hope to get on, taking short, careful steps, not great strides." So it is with us. The chapter is a moment on a journey begun well over a hundred and fifty years ago, indeed, in a sense it is part of the long journey of humankind, a journey into a future each age strives to make more loving than the last, more shaped to what we perceive as the vision of God than we have made it in the past.

The articles in this issue of *The MAST Journal* were chosen to help our reflection as the Institute moves toward its future. Julia Upton reviews some of the relevant literature from the perspective of its elucidation of a theology of religious life rooted in the desire for God. Celeste Rouleau and Margaret Farley bring us reflections that challenge us to live our commitment to the multicultural and diverse reality of our lives together. Three Sisters who have recently pronounced their vows in the Institute reflect on what that has meant in their lives while Rowshan Golshayan, an associate, speaks of how mercy in one regional community attracted her to associate with it. Mary Aquin O'Neill raises pertinent considerations for the Institute around issues of membership. How we resolve them will shape our future. My article recalls Catherine's grounding of mercy in the desire for union with God which is expressed in our charism of union and charity.

We hope this issue provokes some thought, some prayer, some questions around how and where we as Sisters of Mercy and Associates are called to take our small steps and where we will place our feet. Each of us is on the journey. Each of us and all of us together must ponder, pray, discern and step out, walking toward the God who calls us in the age old tradition of "Mercy, the principal path taken by all those who down through the ages have followed Christ."

Mary Daly, R.S.M.

THE MAST JOURNAL is published three times a year (November, March, and July) by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Srs. Katherine Doyle (Auburn), Doris Gottemoeller (Cincinnati), Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt (Burlingame), Patricia Talone (Merion), and Mary Sullivan, R.S.M. (Rochester). Subscriptions correspondence to Julia Upton, R.S.M., Center for Teaching and Learning, St. John's University, Jamaica, NY 11439; editorial correspondence to Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., MAST Office, 1121 Starbird Circle, #4, San Jose, CA 95117. Layout, design, and printing by BIBAL Press, an imprint of D. & F. Scott Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 821653, North Richland Hills, TX 76182.

Shaping a Theology of Religious Life

Julia Upton, R.S.M.

Much has been feared, discussed, analyzed, and written about religious life during the years since Vatican Council II. Sociologists, seeing the precarious decline in the numbers of men and women embracing this form of life have been engaged in serious research to identify and redress the causes of the current situation that appears to have begun tolling the death knell.¹ Others with their attention also fixed on those statistics have written extensively on the subject urging religious to refund, reform, reframe—to do something before it is too late. The titles of many of these books echo the authors' desperation,² but what is often missed in their discussion is an understanding of the theology of religious life.

It was interesting for me to discover that those who wrote about religious life in years immediately following Vatican Council II, before declining numbers drew attention away from the heart of the matter, did focus their attention on the theology of religious life.³ Although today their language might sound stilted or offensive particularly to those with contemporary feminist sensitivities, when you get beyond the text to its meaning, you find a deep reservoir of theology that is the core of religious life.

Surprisingly, the lives of women religious seem to be of great interest even to non-nuns today. Three significant books have been published recently and a fourth is on its way. While still not dealing with theology of religious life directly, their lines of sight bring a unique perspective to the discussion, and assist in shaping a theology of religious life. When men and women religious look at themselves, the result is often a flat one-dimensional picture. For better or worse, they cannot see themselves as the world sees them. The contribution of non-religious, even when their ideas differ radically from ours, fills out the picture with shadows and highlights we would not have without them.

*Sisters in Arms*⁴ is a monumental work. In it, historian Jo Ann Kay McNamara presents the history and world of religious women, all too often either ignored or caricatured by historians of the monastic life who "refused to see anything but their cloister walls and enveloping veils." Following in the tradition of Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*, McNamara introduces numerous founders of apostolic religious communities. Through her, we meet strong women with deep devotion to God and mission; wise women able to deal effectively with the constraints placed on

them by ecclesiastical authorities; charismatic women, many of whom continue to attract others to the mission centuries after their deaths. Their numbers are legion!

By way of contrast to McNamara's backward glance, in *Poverty Chastity and Change: Lives of Contemporary American Nuns*, Carol Garibaldi Rogers⁵ introduces us to living women religious. She presents the oral histories of women that reveal both the pain and the satisfaction that have accompanied the transformation of religious life from 1960 to 1990. Many of the women who tell their stories would be familiar to readers of the national press: Sister Rose McGready, D.C., president of Covenant House, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., writer and international spokesperson for church issues; and Sister Rose Thering, O.P., who holds a preeminent place in the field of Jewish-Christian studies, to name just a few. While more familiar to us, their stories are far from the most engaging ones in this volume. Rather, the reader meets women whose lives have been shaped not by the lure of fame and fortune, but by the fire of the Spirit. To a one, they have been led down roads they could not have imagined the day they entered their religious communities.

For a public whose only understanding of women religious is measured by the nostalgia of their 1950s experience in Catholic schools or the ludicrous stereotypes created by Hollywood, Rogers has done a profound service. With careful craftsmanship she takes her readers behind the convent walls and into the hearts of women who have promised their lives to God.

Soon to be published is Margaret Susan Thompson's book on the history of nineteenth-century American nuns. As founder of Sister-L, an Internet discussion group of over one thousand participants interested in the history and concerns of women religious, Thompson, using technology, has found a way to broaden the research into and conversation about the lives of women religious beyond anything previously imaginable. Thompson also developed an elaborate home page, Sister-Site, with many links to other valuable resources.⁶

With a completely different and some would say a decidedly more negative approach to the issues of religious life today is Ann Carey's *Sisters in Crisis*.⁷ The book was summarized with Carey's approval in an article in the March 1997 issue of *New Oxford Review* entitled, "Suicidal Sisters: Why Rank-and-File Catholics Don't Love Women Religious Anymore." The title alone gives you a sense of both the article and the book. After reading the article, I thought I had no need to read the book.

However, I later began to see the wisdom of knowing the rest of the story, not simply to refute it if necessary, but rather to understand another approach to the subject at hand and how it also contributes to developing a theology of religious life today.

Carey concludes that two distinct models of religious life for women have evolved in the U.S. Between ten and twenty percent of the orders of women fall into what she calls the traditional category, with the rest described as *change oriented*. She states that the official church hears the more strident voices of a leadership that does not reflect the attitude of the majority of Sisters. And the media regularly carry

These scholars and journalists have provided us with excellent resources on both the history and the lived reality of religious life. Missing from their work, however, is any sustained discussion of the theology of religious life. This is somewhat paradoxical, because what makes the lives of women religious so intriguing to others, I believe, is exactly what constitutes an authentic theology of religious life today—that religious have given their hearts and lives to God. "Holy Scripture," Fr. Haring writes, "is explicit in stating that God created us in his Word; God uttered us; God calls us. Such is the origin, the foundation of our life. We become fully alive as persons to

**From the earliest days of the church,
there were those who went off to deserted
places to live more fully in the presence of
God.**

an image of the sisterhood not based on the works and beliefs of these faithful Sisters, but rather based on an image projected by a handful of militant rebels. The first mistake I think Carey makes is to create a false dichotomy. Living things change; dead things do not change except to decay. Therefore, any living community must, of identity and necessity, be change-oriented. The authors' second mistake is to toss around the term *tradition* too lightly.

the extent that we understand ourselves as a calling, as being called, and are ready to give a total response."⁸ Of course, the author is speaking about all humanity being called, but religious hear and respond to being a calling by putting their entire lives on the line, radically and intentionally.

From the earliest days of the church, there were those who went off to deserted places to live more fully in the presence of God. Over the course of time, the way in

which people did that changed shape. One form of religious came to be recognized as “apostolic” and the other “monastic.”⁹ As time pressed on, religious came to be more associated with attire and legalism than with passion and presence. We could recognize men and women religious by their distinctive clothing: Franciscan brown, Dominican white, generic black, all with identifying collars and wimples. They traveled in twos, were not permitted to eat with lay people, and seemed to be more ruled by bells than human need.

Vatican Council II recognized how far consecrated life had traveled from its foundation and called for renewal in “two simultaneous processes: a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community; and an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times.”¹⁰ In the ensuing years, there followed wonderful explorations into the origins of many religious communities, explorations that have remained a blessing for the church. As the years went on, though, religious life became thought of more as a canonical form of life than a charismatic form of life and it came to be treated more as service than sign. The implications of this were nothing short of cataclysmic. The increased emphasis that was put on the relationship of religious life to the mission of the church overshadowed to a

large extent its relationship to the mystery of the church. Spirit was gradually dwarfed by law.

In *Fire in These Ashes*, Joan D. Chittister attempts to restore the balance. She demonstrates that religious life is a gift given to the church to make the gospel life present across time in bold and tangible ways. “Religious life was never meant to be simply a labor force; it was meant to be a searing presence, a paradigm of search, a mark of human soul, and a catalyst to conscience in the society in which it emerged.”¹¹ She rightly observes that when mission is the sole focus, then when the service is accomplished, the life runs the risk of becoming an anachronism.

“To live religious life takes all the life we have—the heart of a hermit, the soul of a mountain climber, the eyes of a lover, the hands of a healer and the mind of a rabbi. It requires total immersion in the life of Christ and complete concentration on the meaning of the Gospel life today.”¹² Essential is the cultivation of certain habits of the heart: common prayer, suffused with contemplation and *lectio*; community and communion; and companionship. They constitute the *habitus*, the habit of being that undergirds and supports the spirituality of religious life. *Habitus* forms us as a community, provides us with the opportunity to participate “in a tradition that allows us to act unconsciously, with ease and delight, out of a deep

sense of what is natural to us and to our milieu.”¹³ It will be interesting to see how the introduction of *Morning and Evening Prayer for the Sisters of Mercy* reshapes the community over time.

Kathleen Norris is a writer who has been particularly successful in grappling with this issue.¹⁴ With her eyes open to the realities of everyday life, her ears attuned to the struggles of the common folk, and her mind returning home to God again and again, Norris brings the heart of the poet to this task and gives readers a vocabulary of faith that is both simple and profound. She draws us in to the love of God and the service of others that is faith in Jesus Christ, and in doing so provides us with a rich resource for teaching, preaching, and living. “It is a paradox of human life,” she concludes, “that in worship, as in human love, it is in the routine and the everyday that we find the possibility for the greatest transformation.”¹⁵

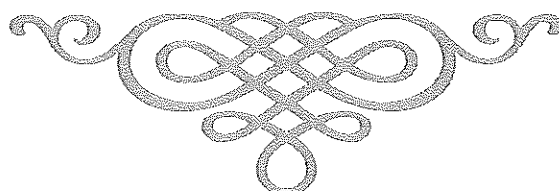
“The revitalization of religious life does not lie in the redefinition of its form; it lies in the rekindling of its sense of purpose, its claim to meaning in the face of new concerns and present realities.”¹⁶ One does not enter religious life to be religious, but to seek God. The search for God is a life-long process of shaping the soul, not a short-term routine of religious exercises. Religious life is about the unleashing of spiritual presence in a world lost in the

mundane. Concentrating solely on what religious do diverts attention from the theological issue of why they do it. They are consummate God-seekers!



Notes

- 1 See David J. Nygren and Miriam D. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Patricia Wittberg, S.C., *Creating a Future for Religious Life: A Sociological Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).
- 2 Tony Flannery, C.Ss.R., *The Death of Religious Life?* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 1997); Robert Faricy, S.J., *The End of Religious Life* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1966).
- 3 See in particular J. Galot, S.J., *Les religieux dans l'Église: Selon la Consitution Lumen Gentium et le Décret sur la Charge Pastoral des Évêques* (Paris: Editions J. Duculot, Gembloux et P. Lethielleux, 1966); Bernard Haring, C.Ss.R., *Acting on the Word: The Challenge to Religious Communities in an Age of Renewal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968); Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961, 1974).
- 4 Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). See also *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992) and *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 1983).
- 5 Carol Garibaldi Rogers, *Poverty Chastity and Change: Lives of Contemporary American Nuns* (New York: Macmillan, 1996).
- 6 Presently located at <http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/1114/>, in the year and a half since its creation on March 18, 1997, Sister-Site has been visited by 48,321 people.
- 7 Ann Carey, *Sisters in Crisis: The Tragic Unraveling of Women's Religious Communities* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).
- 8 Haring, p. 123.
- 9 For a discussion of this distinction see Julia Upton, R.S.M., "The Perils of Polarity," *Review for Religious* 52 (January–February 1992) 118–33.
- 10 "Perfectae Caritatis," no 2, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed., Walter Abbott, S.J. (New York: America Press, 1966).
- 11 Chittister, p. 2.
- 12 Chittister, pp. 92–93.
- 13 Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 10.
- 14 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998); *The Cloister Walk*, (New York: Putnam, 1996); *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994); *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and "Women's Work"* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998).
- 15 Norris, *Quotidian Mysteries*, p. 82.
- 16 Chittister, p. 4.



Learning From Eastern Wisdom

Celeste Rouleau, R.S.M.

“Y2K”—a technological nightmare of cosmic proportions? Or a spiritual jubilee to be celebrated in firm hope that the energy of the Spirit of Christ will flow more freely throughout creation? In spite of uneasiness about what impact our PCs may have on a superficial aspect of our works, we as Christians share a gifted vision for the whole earth. And we as religious are called to concretize this vision in a special way, bearing public witness in our particular time and place to the love of God in Christ Jesus. For this challenging task we have need of all the resources at our disposal to reflect on a grounding theology

Institute in 1991 and reaffirmed in 1995, we proclaim: “This commitment will compel us to develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective.” No doubt we are seriously trying to do this. The Westerners have an increased respect for the minority cultures among us—Latina, Filipina, Afro-American, Caribbean, Aymara and others. This is a beginning. Some of you must remember in Buffalo, on the night of the election of the new leadership team, the delightful spontaneous party in which ceremonial gifts were presented, symbolic of our diversity—from the Philippines, Guam, Jamaica,

initiated into a community whose structure and customs are basically Western. Are we still assuming that this is a one-way process, that “they” should be assimilated, without asking what is the responsibility for receptivity on the part of the dominant majority?

I believe that the Synod of Asian bishops convoked last spring (April–May 1998) has something significant to say to our Institute as we strive to fulfill the directive to “develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective.” As I read with fascination the documents of this historic gathering, foremost in my consciousness was my Jesuit uncle’s extensive research on the Chinese Rites controversy of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Matteo Ricci and the first Jesuits to bring Christ to Cathay were given *carte blanche* to adapt the form of catechesis and the liturgy, using Chinese language and Chinese symbolic colors, respecting the beliefs already held by the people, building on concepts such as “Lord of Heaven” and the honoring of ancestors (saints). After fifty years of true inculturation in China, a delegate cardinal arrived from Rome who had no understanding of the language and customs of the people. He told the missionaries

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of religious life—a common and universal base which can focus the growing diversity of our experience of cultures, beliefs, reflections, and expressions of the spirituality of Mercy.

In our Direction Statement at the founding of the

Peru, Belize, and other countries? But not from the U.S.—an embarrassment to Americans. And we ended with joyful dancing, led by the non-Americans, in the true McAuley spirit!

But all these wonderful women, our Sisters, have been

that they had to conform to Western (Roman) ways of preaching the gospel. The emperor condemned this interference and ordered all foreigners out of his realm. This was a disaster for Christian evangelization.¹

Seven years ago, Karl Rahner wrote a reflection entitled "Rites Controversy: New Tasks for the Church," in which he expressed his belief that our work of inculturation today is very difficult. The profound theological problem is whether the Church can exist in different cultural milieux. It must have a visible unity in worship, law, and faith, and the whole must continue to derive from the concrete historical Jesus. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jesuits and Dominicans would have acted against their own nature if they had not discerned the spirits and followed their own ways in China. But—and this is decisive—one of these ways is precisely a loving openness, a desire to learn from others and to exchange ideas. Dialogue is essential with equal partners. The Church of East Asia can share with westerners an Eastern spirituality which it has assimilated and made truly Christian. The present situation of a unified humankind demands that every people be a missionary for other people. It is not a one-way street: What we need today is a real exchange, wherein each one gives and receives.²

Janet Malone, C.N.D., reflects on the "price" of being

an international congregation. She asks what attitudes are necessary, what characteristics mark an international community. It is a conversion process for all of the cultural groups represented, in which all are equal and interdependent. Internationality is synonymous with mutual respect, acceptance of differences, and dialogue regarding the cultural diversity and richness of group members. It is a challenge to be prophetic, to have a global vision of charism and mission, and to learn and accept the different worldviews, values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors within the cultures and nations represented. Dialogue will take place according to a model of communication that is nonhierarchical, collaborative, and mutual.³

As I read the Synod documents, I thought of the Chinese calligraphy for the word "crisis"—danger + opportunity. Is there danger that another eighteenth century disaster might happen now? The highly centralized Roman authority presented to the bishops a tentative agenda ("*lineamenta*") for the synod, having the frightening potential for total westernization of the Eastern church. Yet I believe that the response of the Asian bishops in rejecting this agenda and pleading for a hearing for their own concerns is a sign of great hope, an opportunity for a truly catholic-universal body of Christ. Although the final document of the synod does not adequately reflect what the

bishops presented, yet this important episcopal gathering from almost fifty countries which have over 60 percent of the world's population, was publicized throughout the entire globe. It has sparked the awareness of Christians everywhere. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)—a gathering of representatives of the national and regional bishops' conferences—has been working together for over thirty years to implement Vatican II in their respective cultures. What do they have to say to the Western church? And what might this mean for religious communities of the West, and of our Institute in particular?

The Asian bishops Speak

Before and during the synod, the bishops stated respectfully but in no uncertain terms that they must shed an appearance of being carbon copies of churches in Western societies if real evangelization is to take place in Asia. From the richness of their presentations, I selected several major concerns and emphases which I believe speak to us as religious.

1. **Concern for women**, because of the real oppression and discrimination against them, is "a common anti-evangelical problem among the countries of Asia," state the bishops several times. They requested the participation at the synod of women observers who were well acquainted with the problem.⁴

This concern has been from the beginning an essential element of our Mercy charism, and there is abundant evidence that as an international community we are actively engaged in many ways in bettering the status of women.

But is there a subtle way in which, looking outward at our good works of mercy, we can ignore an unwitting discrimination against minority women within the community? Elizabeth Johnson re-

each woman her own integrity and life story.⁵

A question for a communal examen of conscience might be to ask ourselves how well we really know one another—our backgrounds, perceptions, feelings, sufferings, wisdom, and joy—our concrete reality.

2. A second concern of the Asian bishops is **solidarity with the poor**, “addressing the problem of poverty with all our strength.” “The work for

mean it? The passing over to the poor is one of the most difficult crossings over for a religious congregation.⁷

We have strongly affirmed our solidarity with the poor, both in our constitutions and in the Direction Statement. If the majority of us are not working directly with people who are poor, then how do we practice “solidarity” with them? The bishops state first that the spirit of compassion with the suffering is a most important element: the attitude of standing by the side of the weak and powerless. Then they suggest both a personal and communal policy of “non-storing”—that is, not keeping what we do not need, fighting against consumerism, living with a spirit of renunciation, detachment, and simplicity. This has very concrete, practical consequences. We speak about “simplicity of life,” but is this really evident among us and to those we work with? As Christians, we have something to learn from Eastern asceticism about the evangelical practice of poverty.

3. A **theology of wholeness** is integral to the tradition of the Far East, while in the West we have traditionally emphasized differences. God and the universe, although distinct, are not separate: God permeates the universe, lives in us through faith, receives all people in divine embrace. Surely in our growing consciousness of environmental issues, the awareness of a God-permeated universe is a most fruitful basis for reverent action.

Is there a subtle way in which, looking outward at our good works of mercy, we can ignore an unwitting discrimination against minority women within the community?

flects that as women learn to trust their own interpreted experience, and as feminist theological work has matured in the United States, this becomes a real challenge. The dominance of European-American women’s experience, values, and perspectives are assumed by many such women to be common to all. But, she notes,

... this experience lacks the suffering visited upon minority women . . . it misses the cultural strength of belonging to “my people” and an extended network of family; it operates from a position of privilege assumed by the majority.

Thus it becomes a subtle kind of dominance, a “great cover for oppression.” The importance of difference, by contrast, lies in the way it allows

social justice as an integral part of the Christian mission,” writes a commentator, “is stressed repeatedly in the Asian responses to the *lineamenta*, but this emphasis is largely absent from the synod’s working paper.”⁶

Many local churches in the so-called Third World are striving to shift away from a triumphalistic model of the church to a church identified with the social conditions of the people, a church of the poor . . . Without a sense of the poor, there can be no following of Jesus in Asia. Hence, candidates for religious life should be trained to have both affective and effective commitment to the poor. All religious congregations today emphasize preferential option for the poor. But the question is, do they really

Further, the bishops complain that Western Christianity, nurtured in Europe, has been preaching too masculine a God. The Asian church recognizes the need to stress the more maternal traits of God, so that Christianity can take on a warmer, more approachable face there, with the God of universal love, infinite tenderness, always ready to forgive. Perhaps our feminism has helped us here.

A theology of wholeness also aids in overcoming the assumed dichotomy of matter and spirit, the body/soul division inherited from centuries of Western theologizing. "Asian people, influenced by American and European ways, have learned to take an intellectual and logical approach in announcing truth. But, in his heart, the Asian places great importance on the body, on existence, on what is practical, on nonlogical expressions and symbols."⁸ "In the East, the person is more heart, and knowledge is more intuitive in character."⁹ We have learned, I think, to incorporate into our liturgies and communal prayer much that is a valuable expression of this wholeness. If some have identified this as feminine thinking, well and good.

4. The **goal of dialogue** among people of differing faiths is described by the bishops of Asia as "**creative harmony**." They reject completely an attitude that would strive to "convert" everyone to one way of thinking. They requested that representatives of the traditional religions and

experts in dialogue with other religions be present as participating observers at the synod. The bishop of Honolulu, an American of Italian descent, speaking about Asian immigrants in American culture,

The Asian church recognizes the need to stress the more maternal traits of God . . . with the God of universal love, infinite tenderness, always ready to forgive.

stressed the need to understand the Asian cultures and their impact on religious experience. He spoke of the need to learn more about non-Christian religions which are part of their heritage, and what their impact is on the Catholic experience.¹⁰ For us as religious, do we too not need to learn from our Sisters who have a non-American culture of their own? Have we truly been in dialogue with minority Sisters, with true respect for differing cultures, and with a sincere attitude of desire to learn from them? They can teach much if the dominant majority is willing to listen, to elicit as most valuable treasures their perspectives on God, Christ, faith, sacraments, the church, and expressions of devotion.

5. Most important of all, the bishops of Asia stress **personal witness** to the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. This is a witness of personal transformation, of the gospel clearly embodied in our own lives. For this witness to be a credible proclamation of the

risen Lord, each person must have undergone a deep God-experience,¹¹ bringing the kind of Jesus that will be a light to the people we serve. Times of silence and of contemplation, so counter-cultural to the

contemporary Western milieu, are critical to this experience. Spirituality must be "based not on a Christ whom we grasp only in our minds, but who speaks to us in our hearts through his loving presence and activity."¹² "In the eyes of Asian people," declares the bishop of Macau, "the primary role of the consecrated person is to bring holiness to those they encounter, by word and example, even at the cost of heroic self-denial."¹³

Asian Sisters Speak

In Asia, except for the Philippines and Lebanon, Christians are less than 5 percent of the population. Do we know what is the percentage of minority women in our Institute? Christianity was introduced into Asia mainly as a foreign religion to a people with centuries of belief in culturally established Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, Confucian thought, and primitive animism. The minority women in our Institute,

including Afro-American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian and others, carry in their bones a rich heritage as an essential aspect of their persons. One Sister writes, "Realizing that the same Spirit works in all people and all cultures, we need courage to go back to our heritage as Asian Christians."¹⁴ Daily living within a dominant white majority, in a thoroughly Western congregational structure, how are they being respected and listened to? Is there true dialogue with equal partners?

I asked a few Asian Sisters who have lived in a Euro-American culture for their reflections on Western religious life, especially in light of the synod's declarations.¹⁵ One friend from Taiwan wrote that she finds that the Euro-American sense of individualism, freedom, discipline, and community life are quite different from Asian understandings and practice. A Mercy Sister in Australia states that religious life there has been dominated by the Western model with a patriarchal structure, yet the communities there have also carved out their own position in supporting the independence of women.

From the Philippines, another Mercy Sister writes:

Our Filipino religious life has already been influenced for centuries by the Spanish culture, therefore, centered around sacraments and the clerical church. This foreign culture has tried to eliminate our Folk Religiosity which to

them was superstition. This foreign clerical church has dominated so long that even with Vatican II, it is hard to reconcile the two cultural practices.

She continues to proclaim that religious life, according to her "folk religiosity" should include the whole of Creation—respect and reverence not only for human life but also for other forms of life. It should be a comprehensive Holy Eucharist!

A Sister in Taiwan, although she has not lived in the West, developed her Christian faith in the framework of Western thinking and ways of expression. "There was a time of identification," she writes;

I did my best to obey, to observe all that was indicated to me, to make myself a faithful Christian. But then there was an echo deep inside me: It is Jesus, the God-Man, and not the Western culture that I want to follow, to grasp, to absorb. The culture domination became keen in my consciousness. There isn't anything wrong, just different, and this difference must be taken into account for me to live a real Christian life.

This sense of conflict between two cultures, between Japanese sensibility and the foreign form of Christianity given them, is most eloquently expressed by the novelist Shusako Endo. He says that he felt the gap between his Catholic self and the self that lies underneath. There was always a feeling in the heart that Christianity was something borrowed. The huge success of

his novel, *Silence*, reflects this dilemma.

Another Sister raised in China but now working in the U.S. indicated that while the Chinese family structure in which she grew up was a patriarchal system, still the mother had tremendous influence. When she entered a religious community where there were few Chinese vocations, she found the semi-cloistered aspect of not being able to have free contact with her family very difficult. But the contemplative dimension of the life was very compatible with her roots. "Silence of thought and word is a pre-requisite for contemplation, especially contemplation-in-action," writes another Taiwanese Sister. "The way of the Spirit first drives Jesus into the desert. Our words and actions to be effective, must be rooted in a strong spirituality of silence."¹⁶

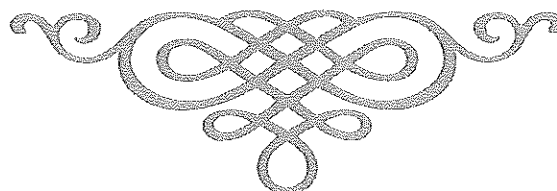
Heraclitus's statement seems relevant here for international congregations: "Whatever are opposites, cooperate; and from the divergent proceeds the most beautiful harmony." The theme of the Asian bishops, Creative Harmony, might well be adopted by ourselves as we strive to "develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective." When Pope John Paul II wrote his "Message to the People of God" after the synod, he told all Catholics to "listen to what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev 3:6)¹⁷ The Westerners have much to glean from the treasures of Asian wisdom. We can listen to the bishops speak

their concern for women, and learn a new concern for the minority women in our own community. True dialogue with them on an equal level will bring many riches from their double heritage. In solidarity with the poor, we ponder the implications for simplifying our individual and communal lives. A theology of wholeness, practically carried out, can be healing in all our ministries. And most importantly, our primary role as consecrated persons is to bring holiness to all whom we encounter. This is truly a challenge to us to work toward "creative harmony" in fulfilling our Direction Statement "to develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective."



Notes

- 1 Francis A. Rouleau, SJ, "Chinese Rites Controversy," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) 3:611-17; "Maillard de Tournon: Papal Legate at the Court of Peking," Rome: *Archivi historicum societatis Iesu*, vol. 31 (1962) 264-323.
- 2 Karl Rahner SJ, "Rites Controversy: New Tasks for the Church," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 22 (New York: Crossroads, 1991) pp. 134-39.
- 3 Janet Malone, C.N.D., "Internationality-at what price?" *Review for Religious* (Jan-Feb.1992) 109-15.
- 4 Japanese bishops' response to the *lineamenta*, *National Catholic Reporter* (March 27, 1998) 9-12 [complete text]. Their request was not acknowledged.
- 5 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (Ottawa: Novalis 1998) p. 38.
- 6 Gary MacEoin and Thomas C. Fox, *National Catholic Reporter* (April 17, 1998) 15.
- 7 Bishop Arturo Bastes, Philippines, "Asian Formation for Religious Life" *Origins* 27 (May 7, 1998) 780.
- 8 Archbishop Leo J. Ikenaga of Osaka, Japan, "Asian Ways of Expression," *Origins* 27 (May 7, 1998) 769-70.
- 9 Sister Vandana, R.S.C.J., *The Formation of Asian Religious* (Taiwan, 1975) p. 16.
- 10 Bishop Francis DiLorenzo of Honolulu, "Asian Immigrants in American Culture," *Origins* 27 (May 7, 1998) 780.
- 11 Cardinal Darmaatmadja, Jakarta, Indonesia, "A Church with a Truly Asian Face," *Origins* 28 (May 28, 1998) 24-28.
- 12 Japanese bishops respond to the *lineamenta*, p.10.
- 13 Bishop Domingus Lam Ka Tseung, *Tripod* (Hong Kong, May-June 1998) 37.
- 14 Sister Vandana R.S.C.J., p.27.
- 15 To all these Sisters, I am most grateful: Maria Stella Chen, S.M.I.C., Marie Chin, R.S.M., Corona Chung, S.M.I.C., Anne Curry, P.B.V.M., Agnes Lee, S.M.I.C., Guadalupe Lumantas, R.S.M., Caroline Ong, R.S.M., Patricia Pak Poy, R.S.M., Victoria Siu, R.S.C.J.
- 16 Vandana, p. 21.
- 17 *Origins* 28 (May 28, 1998) 17-22.



ersity and Community

Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M.

community as a whole. In a way, what I want to do is to tell three stories: first, the story of how diversity has become a theoretical and practical problem in our world; second, the story of this problem in our own communities; and third, the story that God may be trying to make happen in Christian communities of faith.

Diversity, Society, and the Church

Diversity, as it appears in the wider concerns of our society today, has to do with the concrete differences of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, age, abilities, economic and political status, and other differences that are part of the world in which we live.¹ While many of these differences can be understood as God-given aspects of creation, lending beauty and energy to our world, they nonetheless frequently cause fear and discord among us. Instead of contributing to community, they pre-

experience of difference; and some compelling insights have fueled social critiques and social proposals. One way to understand these proposals is to consider what has happened in the contemporary women's movement.

When this movement began to gain momentum in the 1960s, it was a movement for the equality of women with men. It opposed discrimination on the basis of gender. Its arguments were that women are as fully human as are men. The appeal was to "sameness" between women and men, the commonality of shared humanity. But the charge was that "humanness" could not be understood adequately if it was construed only or primarily on the basis of men's experience. Maleness could not be "universalized," made generic, for the whole of what it means to be human. Thus, for example, women argued that the ways in which women and men may be different have been inaccurately drawn (the

Then, however, the critique that feminist theorists had lodged against false universalization from men's experience to "human" experience was turned on feminism itself, with the charge that the experience of some women—white, middle-class, Western, heterosexual women—was being falsely universalized to represent all women. Women of color, lesbian women, working-class women, women from across the world pressed the question of whether or not there is anything common in women's experience, or whether the delineation of "women's experience" might simply be repeating the situation in which those with power privilege their own voices while silencing others.

The issue became one of whether or not women as women do have anything in common. It was the issue of whether gender analysis without class, race, and cultural analysis can only, once again, be distortive. This coalesced with "postmodernist" theoretical challenges to any overarching universal understanding of the "human" and with calls to *pay attention* to the concrete cultural and historical contexts of each person.

What is important for us out of this debate is the practical call to pay attention to concrete differences. We need not dismiss a concern for the genuinely "human" as long as we acknowledge that individual and group differences are important—especially important for truly respecting, and

loving, persons in their concrete reality. If any given theory does violence to persons and groups because it runs roughshod over their particular needs and aspirations, or fails to take account of the social, historical shaping of their convictions and commitments, then it cannot be accepted as a theory able to be truly universalized. We are familiar with analogous concerns in Christianity as a world church, coming to maturity in an effort to understand the necessary "inculturation" of liturgy, of theology, of some

country to safeguard "sameness." "Difference" in the eyes of many persons has become a bad thing, of negative value. As an example, there is a growing backlash against the entrance of new peoples into this nation. Politicians are at work to create new barriers to immigration; new welfare legislation punishes immigrants and their children; oddly enough, in a nation of "foreigners" and their descendants (with the exception of Native Americans), fear of the economic and cultural impact of immigrants escalates. At the

What is important for us out of this debate is the practical call to pay attention to concrete differences.

Christian practice: one church, but not a monolithic church; one church, but not only a Western-European and North American church.

The issue, then, is an issue of "sameness" and "difference" in which a focus on "sameness" is essential; but it is potentially misleading if it does not take account of "difference." In this construal of the issue, "difference" is to be valued as significant and good; but it is not to be used as a reason to exclude persons from the human or the political community.

Ironically, simultaneously with theoretical pressures to take positive account of concrete differences have come political pressures in our

same time, there is a backlash against women's efforts for respect and protection of their rights, as well as against persons of color, poor persons, disabled persons, gay and lesbian persons, and just about any marginal group that can be named.³ Political, economic, and even religious reasons are given to prevent these groups from gaining anything like equal status in this society. Their differences outweigh, so the argument goes, any commonality they may have with the rest of the nation's people. Permission for intolerance appears everywhere in the political sphere of the United States. Cultural pluralism, it seems, can extend only so far.

In the churches, a similar temptation to treat difference as opposition exists—or continues. In our culture, the barriers created by the daily practice of white racism, for example, have long been recognized as a church-dividing issue. When the World Council of Churches made a stand against apartheid by providing humanitarian aid to liberation struggles in Africa, member churches began withdrawing funds and threatened withdrawal from the Council.⁴ Recent studies have shown astonishingly similar levels of intolerance in Catholic parishes and dioceses. Local parishes can be just as divided as denominational and ecumenical bodies over issues of racism. Urban parishes are sometimes inhospitable to persons of color who live in apartments crowded around their doors; suburban parishes are sometimes inhospitable to persons of color who do not (because of economic barriers) live near their doors. Neighborhood parishes often do not address the resistance to group homes for persons with AIDS or intellectual disabilities in their area. In predominantly white, affluent, communities, churches look around and declare they do not have a problem with diversity, instead of recognizing that their economic and cultural isolation is a part of the problem.⁵

In Protestant traditions, theological doctrines of election (of a “chosen” people,

who alone among all humanity are saved) have frequently been interpreted in ways that reinforce intolerance of those who are “different.”⁶ In the Catholic tradition, problems are sometimes covered over because of a kind of assumption of “catholicism” in which all can be included. “Solidarity” can be assumed without ever testing it in practice, so that a myth of nonproblem is made. Thus the church goes on, segregated in astonishing ways. Students in Catholic high schools engage in gay bashing; Catholic workers perceive persons of color, or new immigrants if they are culturally different, only as competitors for the territory they themselves have so recently won; pleas to national organizations in the church for resources to support Black Catholics, or Hispanic Catholics, and others, receive all too often only token responses.

But if diversity is both a problem and a possibility for community at the societal and church levels, what does it mean within religious communities of women? I turn now to a second story—our story, if you will.

Diversity and Religious Community

Questions of diversity are for religious communities a marvelous opportunity both for new understandings and for salutary challenges to community as we know it. This opportunity has already been seized by our communities in

different degrees and respects, whether through studies of diversity (particularly issues of racism); or commitments to cross-cultural and international efforts at community building; or programs for learning about diverse religious traditions; or studies of issues in ministry (such as welfare reform) related to questions of social diversity. In fact, insofar as we think diversity is not all that much of a problem for us, we may tire of any more efforts to address it, considering them in our case superfluous.

Yet it remains an open question as to whether or not we have addressed the problems of diversity and community not only in our ministries but at the core of our individual and communal lives. Many of us, both young and old, came to community out of contexts in which class, race, or ethnicity were significant barriers to our full respect for others, and we were seldom challenged in these presumptions once we were in community. Within community, we were socialized in a way that allowed us to live together with as few frictions as possible; we have had common standards of social refinement, physical bearing, use of language, habits of eating and walking and playing, levels of cleanliness and neatness, and so forth. One does not have to probe too deeply, however, to find prejudices among us; for example, against ethnic groups—not just Black or Asian or Latin American or

white (though that, too), but Irish in relation to Italians and French, Polish in relation to Germans and Irish, city dwellers in relation to those from rural areas, and so forth. Moreover, for all of our socialization to equality, we have long lived with judgments of privilege in terms of different levels of education, forms of ministry, disabilities, and perhaps most recently, differences in ideology, of lifestyles within a lifestyle, of age and mobility. As long as we maintained rules of silence, many of our problems with difference remained hidden, though they tended to manifest themselves nonetheless in opportunities (or not) for advancement in the community, and in hidden disdain or envy of those who were different, or who did things differently from the rest. My point here is that such problems can be structural problems, not only personal.

Religious communities have in many ways been marvelous models of human acceptance of difference, of mutuality among those who are different, of respect and equality and deep understanding of "sameness" as well. Yet there are starker stories, too, wherein healing has not yet reached a denouement. And there are as yet unrealized possibilities that can bear witness to others of what religious community can yet achieve.

It has not served us well, however, to gloss over either our problems or our

possibilities with a simplistic notion of "inclusivity" that allows no critique or limits. Hence, for example, we must acknowledge the kinds of difficulties inherent in "difference" when we are considering not just tolerance and cooperation in society, not just welcoming in the church, not just acceptance into community at a general level, but living together in a local house.

As long as we maintained rules of silence,
many of our problems with difference
remained hidden.

Here human limitations are real (and sometimes must simply be accepted)—limitations in capacities to dwell with those of vastly different temperament, behavioral style, timing, energy. Yet even here, we must be clear about what is a genuine limitation of capacity, and what is a prejudice to be overcome; what is racism and classism, and what is the inevitable human condition of difficult blending of lives; what living arrangements can be life-giving, and what cannot; even what limitations we are responsible to overcome and which ones we may only bear, hoping for mercy from one another and from God.

Religious communities have an enviable history of mutual commitment, sharing of life, other-centered love of one another, and dedication to ministry. The issue before us is whether our hearts can be

stretched even more, our insight into one another made more sensitive, our patience deepened and broadened so that we bear witness to the call of discipleship that demands love beyond all telling. But this suggests a third story, an interpretation of the story of what God may be trying to make happen in and through communities of faith.

Diversity and Discipleship

Flannery O'Connor once said that we can know a people by their stories. What are the stories Christians tell that have anything to do with our problem of diversity and community? We know them well. Among the biblical stories, there is the one in John's gospel (4:1-42) about Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well where Jesus refuses to let the barriers of difference (between Jew and Gentile, man and woman) prevent him from encounter and respect. There is the parable in Matthew of the banquet where those who were invited did not come, for whatever reason; and the invitations went out to the highways and byways, without regard for status (22:1-10). There is the story in Mark of Jesus and the

Syrophoenician woman (7:24–30) where the norms of acceptance were overturned, even for Jesus (who was taken aback, apparently, by the woman's response that if the food is for the children of the family, nonetheless even the dogs receive crumbs). There is the story of Paul persuading the apostles that the good news is for the gentiles and not only for the house of Israel (Gal 2:1–10). There is Paul's claim that in relation to Jesus, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28). There is Jesus' response in Mark's gospel to James and John regarding questions of privilege: "Can you drink the cup?" (10:25–40). There is the story of Paul's reminder that God does not choose for labor in the vineyard the "wise" or "great," but the "foolish," those with no claim to status (1 Cor 1:17–31). There is the narrative of the Spirit's overwhelming the apostles so that they can speak in tongues to all who will hear, hear not in spite of but precisely from within their diverse histories and diverse languages (Acts 2:1–13).

But what can these stories mean? Let me suggest four things they say to us that may help us with our own discernment of how we are to live with diversity in community. The first is fundamental, perhaps what makes everything else possible. That is, if a community of faith is to welcome those who might otherwise be strangers, the community does need to have an identity

of its own.⁷ If a Christian community has no sense of its identity in Christ as the center of its life, it will not be able to share with others a life and a hope. Insofar as it has a center, inclusivity will not be meaningless, vague, or empty. As Martin Buber has described it: community forms when persons relate to a common center; in the first instance, their relationship is through the center, not on the periphery. They are brought together (as when spokes form a wheel) precisely because they find themselves relating to a common center.⁸ Insofar as the community is alive and whole, all are in an important sense at the center. And what is the center, according to the biblical stories? It is, of course, Jesus Christ. But if we look to the story of James and John (Mark 10:35–40), we see something very specific in this regard: "Can you drink the cup?" What cup? the cup of *suffering*; the cup of *Jesus*; the cup of *everyone's* suffering; the cup of suffering that *does not have to be and that cries out not for death but for change*. Within the church, and within our ministry, inclusiveness means that no one's suffering is beyond the circle of our concern. Within community, it means that we can welcome those who share our common commitment to drink the cup, and who do so in a way that is consonant with an ongoing faithfulness to, yet ever new, discernment of our particular call.

But secondly, the more we are unified in relation to the

center, the more we can welcome diversity. This means that we not only can but must respect diversity—respect and "attend" to particularities of history, cultural context, capacity for the various small or large tasks of discipleship and ministry. We are, then, freed to hear and to imagine the memories of the "other," individuals and groups. If we abstract from all of this, we miss the concrete reality of the other. We are thereby diminished, and we also risk failing to respond to particular needs and possibilities.

There are many examples of situations in which "difference" is ignored, out of good will but also out of ignorance and failure to attend to the concrete. Here is one: A small group of nuns living in an "intercommunity" house was brought up short by an event that occurred about ten years ago. A friend of theirs, a member of yet another community, came to stay with them while looking for a place to live. She had just taken a position in the area, but felt that she should find her own residence. She received advice from many persons regarding various neighborhoods, and the Sisters in this house where she was staying urged her to look in their neighborhood. It was among other things, they said, a safe area where a woman could live alone. Hesitating in the face of their urging, she finally told them why this would not work for her. She was an African-American woman, and she knew that as such she would neither be accepted or

safe in that particular neighborhood. These nuns, all white women, recognized with chagrin the truth of what she was saying. But part of their chagrin was the recognition of their own failure even to be aware of this danger to her. After all, they had thought, this woman is a nun just like us.

Third, the biblical stories tell us that it matters who sets the agenda for sharing lives and tasks with diverse others. The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is one in which Jesus realizes that even his agenda can and should be modified in terms of the social location and agendas of others.⁹ What he had previously understood and planned in terms of his task and even his goal was challenged and changed when he stepped into relation with this woman. The meaning of this story became dramatically clear some years ago to a group of white women who worked together for a long time to establish and support the Women's Theological Center in Boston. From the start, these individuals were committed to engaging women from diverse backgrounds in this project—diverse in terms of race, class, religious tradition, and nationality. Since most of the founders of the Center were white, they worked toward a goal of including an equal number of white women and women of color on their board. When they came close to this, however, the women of color on the board objected to what they perceived (quite

accurately) as the white women continuing to set the agenda for the board and for the Center as a whole. As the women of color found their voices, the plans and programs, and the "imagination," of the Center had to change in important respects. So, too, in the projects carried out by women's religious communities, and in our desires to welcome women different from ourselves into our community lives, it is not enough to wonder why diversity is difficult to achieve. We must wonder more specifically whether we are open to new voices in the setting of our agendas.

Finally, a fourth insight to be drawn from these biblical stories is that unity does not mean uniformity. Jesus related to individuals in terms of their own social location, their own cultural histories, their own selves formed differently from disciples he was otherwise used to. Can we imagine, for example, that Jesus kept some followers on the margins because they laughed more loudly than others (an example suggested by the experience of a Latina theologian who once pointed out to other women theologians that her voice was sometimes ignored by them because she is from a culture in which the volume of voice and of laughter is different than it is for most whites).¹⁰ More than this, in the biblical stories Jesus seems not to require uniformity of expression, even in terms of belief. Can we imagine that he applied an orthodoxy test (in the way we are prone to do

today) to his disciples prior to his serving them at the Last Supper? What Jesus does ask for is singleness of heart, as firm a commitment as we can manage (even if it is not yet complete, as Peter came slowly to learn), and trust in the power of God's Spirit.

The scriptural stories, then, give us a view of Christian community, whether the church or our particular communities within it, that 1) is anchored at a center; 2) leaves us therefore free to attend to others in their concrete particularities; 3) allows us to relinquish at times our control of agendas, even our agendas of ministry and of life together—thereby enabling us to understand better the fullness of the good news and the scope of its hearers; and 4) distinguishes unity from uniformity, promising community in and through diversity. Thus these stories give us a view of community that is ever new—anchored in God, anchored in Jesus who is the word of God, alive by the Spirit whose life extends to those of many histories, to those whose memories are multiple and whose tongues are beautiful.

There is a remaining problem, however. That is, the more faithful we have been, sometimes, the more weary we are of yet more demands being made on our hearts, let alone on our labors and our time. Women's experience sometimes reflects a saying on the frontispiece of one of Doris Lessing's novels: "I am so tired, and tired even of the future before it comes." This

is a familiar experience for too many of the dedicated women we know. Hence, if any new call is to come to us regarding new attitudes of heart, new openings in hospitality, it cannot be heard as imposing yet one more burden. Rather, it will have to come as an unfolding of the call we have always heard. We shall recognize in it a profound continuity with what we have already tried to be. Then we can relax our hearts, knowing that whatever life we have together—in society, in the church, in our communities—is a free gift, not a privilege, and therefore easy to share. We have, after all, long known that with all of our differences, and the differences of those to whom we may still open our hearts, it is possible for us to weep over commonly felt tragedies, laugh over commonly perceived incongruities, yearn for common hopes. And across our lives in time and space, it is possible to condemn commonly recognized injustices and act for commonly desired goals. It is possible for us together to drink the cup that is a cup of suffering but also and more deeply a cup of covenant, a cup of beauty and of love.



Notes

1 I am indebted to Letty M. Russell for this particular formulation. See her “Practicing Hospitality in Time of Backlash: A

- Christian Feminist Perspective,” unpublished lecture delivered to Presbyterian Women, Churchwide Coordinating Team (Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 1, 1998) p. 3. See also, Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p. 158.
- 2 For a fuller treatment of these developments, see Margaret A. Farley, “Feminism and Universal Morality,” in Gene Outka & John P. Reeder, eds., *Prospects for A Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) pp. 170–90.
- 3 See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991) esp. pp. xviii–xx.
- 4 See Russell, *Church in the Round*, p. 152. See also Michael Kinnamon, *Truth and Community: Diversity and Its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) p. 64.
- 5 Russell, *Church in the Round*, p. 152.
- 6 See Russell, *Church in the Round*, chapter 5.
- 7 This, of course, is a traditional argument for “sameness” in community, and for exclusion of those who are different. Whatever difficulties there are with such arguments (and their practical consequences), there is an important truth to them. That is, just as when an individual person has no sense of her own identity and self-worth, she will have little to share with another; so, if a community has no sense of its identity (and if its members as members do not share that sense of identity), it will have little to share with others, even with those it “includes.”
- 8 See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958) pp. 45–49.
- 9 See Sharon H. Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story,” in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) pp. 65–72.
- 10 Letty Russell notes the relevant and even more poignant story of Gladys Moore, an African-American woman who was ordained, called to a largely white church, and in her leading of services reprimanded for “swaying back and forth.” As Reverend Moore tells it, “I was the problem, they thought, not racism.” See “A Case Study by Gladys Moore,” January, 1991 (mimeographed and available from the Working Group on Faith and Order, National Council of Churches USA, Room 868, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115), cited in Russell, *Church in the Round*, pp. 153–56.

The Quality of Mercy

Rowshan Golshayan

There are no patterns, no norms that determine the ways in which God touches our lives. I believe it was in childhood that the seed of mercy was first planted in my heart. The memory of the words spoken by a very young, unpolished Portia in a school performance of *The Merchant of Venice* still moves me. I had to read her speech for myself, relish the sumptuous luxury of its images, mull them over, make them a part of my being. Since then, the word “mercy” and the mere mention of Shakespeare’s name have always conjured up those eloquent lines:

*The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from
heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice
blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him
that takes.”¹*

But, a seed needs time to germinate and grow. It requires maintenance and patience. That it shaped my beginnings there can be no doubt, yet its roots and small shoots lay dormant for many years. Its singular significance had eluded me.

Just over four years ago, the need for educational credentials led me to Trinity College of Vermont and my initial encounter with the Sisters of

Mercy. Trinity is a living community, a place of interaction, communication and learning; it has a soul. Such a community owes its life and its spirit to its foundresses; hence, the relevance of the biblical criterion: “you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:16). It was that very fruitfulness of spirit that summoned my potential into actuality, giving me a sense of dignity, setting me on a course of intellectual awareness and a mysterious inwardness that allowed me to be hoisted from my myopic certainties into the freedom of infinite truth.

know that the structure of the mind and the reactions of the heart must be held in delicate equilibrium. I began to comprehend theology not merely as scholarly expressions of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), but as an encounter with and experience of the human face of God. And as mercy stirred and found its dwelling place within, I came to see that there is, indeed, a “quality” about mercy.

But how can one frame this quality in words? There is no adequate human utterance to capture its reality, for mercy calls on a strength that is not

Drawing from the reservoir of insights so freely offered by my professors, the Sisters in particular, I came to know that the structure of the mind and the reactions of the heart must be held in delicate equilibrium.

The seedling was reawakened and began to grow. The watering and sustenance it received allowed it to seize the wonder of every challenging moment. Drawing from the reservoir of insights so freely offered by my professors, the Sisters in particular, I came to

its own. Its quality reaches beyond what is intelligible or sensible. I only know that it is real—that there is something deeply moving, changeless, and absolute at the heart of mercy. What this reality is we cannot fully know. This is in no way an attempt at abstraction

in the rarefied air of theological heights, it is simply an affirmation that forms and orients my faith. In order to reduce this quality to words that may be perceived and heard I have repeatedly asked myself: What is the shape of mercy? What values does it insist upon? What worldview does it create? What attitudes does it encourage? What activities does it propose? What is its essence, its color and texture? I can but hope that a measure of my musings will reveal the subtlest reflections of its truth.

The Shape of Mercy

The concept of mercy is often misinterpreted or misconstrued. At its most derogatory, it is equated with humiliation, condescension, and a manner of weakness. And yet, the word itself is rooted in an exquisite

of its spirit. His explanation is, I believe, carefully qualified:

The term *mercy* must be correctly understood. The word has good and authentic connotations, but it can also have inadequate connotations, even dangerous ones. It suggests a sense of compassion. The danger is that it may seem to denote a sheer sentiment, without a praxis to accompany it. It may connote "works of mercy." Here the risk is that the practitioner of such works may feel exempt from the duty of analyzing the causes of the suffering that these works relieve. . . . It may connote parental attitudes, but risk paternalism.²

To be sure, "*mercy* must be correctly understood," for it reflects a way of being whereby the heart penetrates the erratic beat of despair and soothes it with the restorative balm of comfort and redress. Within the human realm,

Within the human realm, mercy is the blessing of engagement.

Latin term, *misericors*: *misereri* meaning "pity" or "compassion" and *cor*, the heart . . . heartfelt compassion, an empathy that emanates from the heart. In the opening chapter of *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, Jon Sobrino articulates the importance of fully apprehending the contours of mercy. He provides a critical framework for grasping its shape and locating the source

mercy is the blessing of engagement. It is a life-giving touch, a healing word, a shared prayer for peace. It is the hand that reaches out in the darkness and allows movement towards light and love. It is a passion that is God-filled in its cry for justice. Mercy is a love that understands, a love that is put into action. It is doing small acts for love. It is a gesture that is neither forced nor "strained," a ministry

carried out for love not duty. "The hem of love's garment touches the dust. It sweeps the stains in the streets and alleys; it does so because it must."³ The hands of mercy feed the hungry with compassion as well as bread, its arms enfold the unemployed with warmth as well as fabric, its soul draws the homeless into hope as well as shelter. Its being is of God.

Mercy has an experiential basis that penetrates life contexts. It has an understanding of where God is today, a God-centered awareness that enkindles our sensibilities in the face of human degradation and injustice. Those who actualize it, who read into and enter its deepest reality, creating a relational dynamic, are the channels of mercy. "Mercy as re-action becomes the fundamental action of the total human being. Thus, this mercy is more than just one phenomenon in human reality among many. It directly defines the human being."⁴ It dawns when there is a tender and graced willingness to love unconditionally. This willingness is not wrapped up in the expectations of instant change nor is it encased in tight mechanisms of control. The willingness must arise utterly unadorned.

The act of mercy is like the breath of God, a giving and receiving, the permeable response and openness to be fully present as a gift for the other, to be fully alive with God. The important theological reason for reciprocity lies not in dogma, but in the

theology of blessing and of blessedness (Matt 5:7), for mercy is more than us. It releases a power of healing that comes not through the language of reproach, blame, or indifference, but through the language of solidarity and hope and shared grief. In mercy, we stop being part of the problem and allow God to make us part of the solution. It frees us from our own unreal and impossible dreams for this world and makes us dream God's dreams and see God's visions. It reveals the light of hope at the end of God's tunnel, that glowing ray of peace "which surpasses all understanding" (Phil 4:7). This is the light that the prophets saw, and I believe, the one that Catherine McAuley saw.

"Mercy" was a word of predilection with her. She would point out the advantages of mercy above charity. "The Charity of God would not avail us, if His Mercy did not come to our assistance. Mercy is more than Charity, for it not only bestows benefits, but it receives and pardons again and again, even the ungrateful."⁵

The Essence of Mercy

The essence of mercy is not a reduction of life to the spiritual, but rather, an integration of all aspects of human life around its most essential characteristic—that of being made in the image and likeness of God. This intrinsic dimension of the human personality is

most profoundly experienced as permeating the unfathomable depths of the human spirit, the act of being godwardly drawn. In mercy, an experience of God is being enacted, a communication is being made both visibly and invisibly. And this enactment, so searching and enriching to the spirit, is carried out by means of gestures and textures—words spoken and unspoken—that offer the giver and the receiver an entry into worship. Gestures become something sacred, while words convey an ascent powered by the subtle verticals of faith and made credible by the horizontal groundedness of its human expressions.

God has created a divine and holy space in God's self for every human being. Here, mercy is a silent place, drawing the person to the inmost

re-membering, the bringing together of a fragmented life. This re-membering makes Jesus present, as present to us as he was to the man on the adjacent cross: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). The words do not formulate a request for a calling to mind, they express rather, a desire for wholeness: a re-membering of an existence beyond any physical reality, a union with Christ and in Christ, an at-one-ment with God. And Jesus replies: "Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43) . . . today, you will live in my heart. This is God's justice: the promise of love, salvation and mercy.

"Justice and mercy and love," these are "the weightier matters of [God's] law" (Matt 23:23). The most beautiful expression of justice can only be

In mercy, we stop being part of the problem and allow God to make us part of the solution.

center within, which is fulfilled only as she acknowledges and yields all of life to this deepest integration with suffering humanity. This is a place of re-membering, a deep and loving response to absence: recalling those who are in need, framing their faces in the mind's eye, making them present despite the barriers of distance. Ingesting the reality of another's pain is also a

one that is freed on the wings of mercy, mercy as forgiveness, reconciliation and love. Mercy soars beyond the peripheral realm of human justice. It flees the confining cages of narrow-mindedness, fear and discrimination.

*But mercy is above this
sceptered sway,
It is enthroned in the heart of
kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,*

*And earthly power doth then
show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*⁶

To have mercy is to understand reality, to experience it directly, to be ever so fully human. Mercy's form of justice calls us towards the pursuit of a truth that is pure and free, the kind of truth we call God. It calls us to bring that quality which is of God into the courtrooms of our lives: the chambers of human justice, human reason and emotion, human responsibility—the courts of human possibility.

Color and Texture in Mercy

The God we know in Jesus is the God of love who is “moved with compassion” (Matt 9:36) and “has mercy upon whom-ever he chooses” (Rom 9:18): making the coral sun rise on

share God's strange sense of values or dappled sense of priorities. After all, there are the vast problems of the world that need solving. We want to eradicate the hopelessness of poverty and unemployment, the threat of war and nuclear disaster, the suffering of hunger and disease, the evils of oppression and discrimination. And yet, what ultimately counts with God is how we react to “the least of these” (Matt 25:40): the rejected and dejected . . . the despised. The merciful deed may be no more than a cup of sparkling water given in Jesus' name (Matt 25:35), no more than wearing the yoke of gentleness.

And far from being of help to us, our religious achievements can be counter-productive, for the God of love “desire[s] mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13) . . . hesed, steadfast

piety.”⁷ Standing before Jesus with the rich young man in the gospel story (Mark 10:17–22), we too, anxiously stress our religious achievements, hoping they will be worth something. But the request remains unchanged: rid yourselves of everything, count it as refuse (Phil 3:8), and follow me. This leaves no room for being first, nor for being last in order to come first (Mark 10:31). Our lastness must come not for our own sakes, but for the sake of others. It means becoming poor that others may be rich, becoming “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22) that others may be blessed.

Mercy is not a single concept, but an ongoing process. It evokes a story with a fluidity of remarkable significance and beauty which can be experienced as an opening to God. It is the story of Catherine McAuley whose singular legacy of wisdom and knowledge, responsibility and caring, hope and love, stands in place of a divine and merciful compassion which cannot be erased. It is the story of the Sisters of Mercy of Vermont and all who may be the forerunners of a new story. Mercy is not a standpoint, but a movement. It speaks of a generosity of spirit that invokes God's message through Zechariah: “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien or the poor” (Zech 7:9). The being of mercy emits the sense of a pulse. At times, it rises and falls, but mostly, it is just there,

It can be difficult to share God's strange sense of values or dappled sense of priorities.

the evil and the good, sending the glistening “rain from heaven upon” the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45), playing havoc with our narrow standards. This gift does not depend on our worthiness or merits; they are not even taken into account. It is given without measure, freely, unpredictably, and at times, outrageously. It can be difficult to

loving kindness, “and knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6). Catherine McAuley was privy to this insight: “the spirit of prayer and retreat should be most dear to us, yet such a spirit as would never withdraw us from these works of mercy; otherwise it should be regarded as a temptation rather than the effect of sincere

beating quietly, softly, and in that softness, giving life. It is the practice of the rhythm of Jesus. Perhaps, it is the being in motion that allows us to be moved . . . the participation in the heartbeat of God that allows us to feel the immense tenderness, the overwhelming and life-giving love.

The Quality of a Merciful Love

The very act of living is dependent on love. The world exists in that it is loved and its existence witnesses to the God who “so loved the world” (John 3:16). Love is the only power capable of synthesizing the richness of every human life. And the quality of mercy flourishes and delights in that love, the essence of its being. The shape of mercy is haloed in the blessedness of reciprocity and hope. Its tints and hues radiate with the iridescence of sun-filled drops of rain smoothly textured in the softest gentleness.

*gentleness swabs the crusted
stump
invents more merciful
instruments
to touch the wound beyond the
wound.*⁸

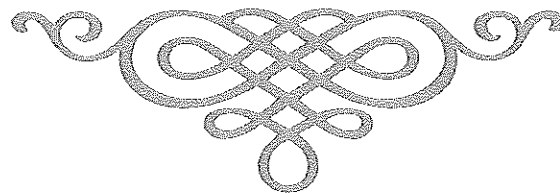
But the purest, deepest quality of mercy, its most translucent color and finest texture, is the limitless love ensouled in the crucified one. Jesus accepted the cross, and in so doing, gave an ineffable expression to mercy from within himself . . . with unfathomable compassion and utterly selfless giving. The cross united the valley of suffering and the valley of mercy into the same cry, the cry of merciful love crucified. And it is precisely because it was crucified that its quality is most sublime.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:15–6).



Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanowich, Inc., 1980) IV, I, 184–87.
- 2 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994) p. 16.
- 3 Mother Theresa, *Heart of Joy: The Transforming Power of Self-Giving*, ed. José Luis González-Balado (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1987) p. 99.
- 4 Sobrino, p. 17.
- 5 Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) p. 117.
- 6 Shakespeare, IV, I, 193–97.
- 7 Catherine McAuley, *The Letters of Catherine McAuley, 1827–1841*, ed. Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M. (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) p. 389, cited in Sullivan, p. 252.
- 8 Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1978) p. 64.



Walking Newly in Mercy

Three Reflections

Choosing to be a Sister of Mercy

Ann McGovern, R.S.M.

With incredible joy and peace in my heart, I professed first vows as a Sister of Mercy on August 15, 1998 in the Connor Chapel at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut. My family and friends for the first time truly came to realize why religious life was for me

1987. Shortly thereafter, I entered a diocesan-sponsored ministry training program and in time became the coordinator of religious education in my parish. I discerned leaving the world of corporate America and sought employment with a not-for-profit organization, feeling that this is where God was leading me. I joined the March of Dimes National Headquarters in

community, the more I came to experience and recognize a sense of being at peace internally. I had discovered the "more" that I was searching for through all my moving about (or tripping about as Catherine would have said). I also fell in love with Catherine, our beloved foundress. Hearing her story told, I began to resonate with her faith journey, with the Mercy charism, and with her passion for service.

The Sisters of Mercy invited me to see and recognize God in myself and in all around me.

the most honest way to live out my baptismal call. To quote my brother "I literally saw you bloom in front of my eyes." I responded "Yes, with the love and support of my Sisters." Another cousin remarked "I have never been in the presence of so many obviously contented women in all my life. What joy and love there is between you." Two very revealing quotes!

As I share my story, perhaps it will remind you of someone that may be waiting for an invitation to "come and see." What impelled me to say yes to Mercy? I am in my 40s, originally from New York. I moved to Connecticut in

White Plains, NY where, for five years, I worked in their program and public health education department, traveling extensively, promoting our different campaigns and working with the communications department to develop various public health education materials. In 1992, after being invited to "come and see," I became a Mercy Associate. I was still listening to and trying to decipher where God's presence within was inviting me.

I eventually discerned a call to enter the Sisters of Mercy and pursue vowed membership. The more I was in the presence of the

The Sisters of Mercy invited me to see and recognize God in myself and in all around me. I saw the gospel messages of Jesus lived out through their love of one another, through their embrace of the poor, the unloved, and through their commitment to being prophetic in today's world and in our Church. They breathe life into a stirring feminine image of God that was and is calling me to wholeness, to growth.

As a woman, I have struggled over the years to understand and live Jesus' words proclaimed in Gospel passages. Often I felt excluded and jolted by the language we use in prayer both in terms of women and when referring to God. I know that words can often screen or block, rather than illuminate, and I know that God is beyond gender and language. Yet I struggle to

remain faithful. I am encouraged by new awarenesses emerging regarding the integrity of all creation and our need to rediscover the feminine image of God while being more inclusive for the sake of our planet and our church.

In community, I saw how I could weave my faith, my spirituality and desire for quiet and prayer into my everyday living. Community for me has satisfied a longing, a restlessness, and a desire for the “more.” I have been invited to dance in harmony with all of creation, loving all, and seeking peace, justice, and equality.

During my novitiate and with the reflection time afforded me this past year, I fleshed out our vows and publicly professed them for me to mean:

- Celibate chastity; a journey to get to know my deepest self; a gifted and graced response to God’s incarnational love and a desire to pursue a life-long relationship with God that passionately speaks of inclusive love and contributes to all creation.
- Religious obedience; an authentic listening and dialogue with self, community, Church, and the cosmic world to discern my individual and communal call to love and serve others as a Sister of Mercy and a disciple of Jesus.

- Religious poverty; a recognition that all is gift and that God is the source of my being; a call me to live a lifestyle of simplicity with an openness to ongoing conversion in which I honor my global reality and responsibility and choose to be in solidarity with those who are poor.
- Service: a heartfelt desire to offer my gifts, known or underdeveloped, to be about the works of mercy to those in need.

religious women. I desire to grow into my most authentic self so I desire to share of myself: my brokenness as well as my wholeness, my joy as well as my pain. My novitiate experience has gifted me with communications skills that empower me to walk deeply, share mutually, and live authentically in community. I desire to do so with you, my Sisters in faith, in Mercy. May we open our hearts to permit us to explore together what is within. Then, rooted and supported in God, we can walk

My vows challenge me to let go and give in to the freedom they promise me so that I can joyfully grow into all God created me to be.

My vows challenge me to let go and give in to the freedom they promise me so that I can joyfully grow into all God created me to be. I can think of no greater example of such freedom than Jesus, and I see our vows challenging me to live authentically as a disciple of Jesus. I see the vows as connected and intertwined, providing steps to a wholeness of self.

Our life in community supports and challenges me. I see us called to be counter-cultural and challenged to simplify our lifestyle, to slow down and nurture our contemplative spirits in order to remain centered in God and focused on who we are—

this journey in right relationship and discern anew where God is calling us to minister and live. Catherine’s words describe our life together well: “Behold your entire community assembled together and joined in bonds of unity; the example of one sustains another, the zeal of one communicates itself to another, the prayer of one seconds the supplications of another: all form a single heart.”

Engraved on my ring as my motto is a portion of Catherine’s quote: “We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God

for whom alone we go forward or stay back." I chose "Centered in God" to remind me of my need for daily prayer. On the inside is engraved "Catherine, may we dance," reminding me of the creative balance I need, for dance speaks of being in step with another, and yet depicts a certain sense of freedom. The vows I professed call me to ongoing personal growth, to life and freedom. I've learned that to dance in life one must indeed be free, free to express what one feels, free to let go of inhibitions, free to love unceasingly. My faith has called

I've learned that to dance in life one must indeed be free, free to express what one feels, free to let go of inhibitions, free to love unceasingly.

me to such freedom. My vows and life in community provide me with a rhythm for living into such freedom.

With the support of my Sisters, family, friends and my faith community, I am ready to walk humbly with God: to be a vessel, discerning my spirit, along with Her spirit, yielding, stretching; to continue on this life giving journey as a faithful friend of Jesus and Catherine.



Learning to Love

Claudia Silke Warde

Service is very much a part of my life, at times probably too much. Catherine's passion for the poor is at the core of who I am, and what I feel called to be about. Catherine's response to the call of ministry to the poor is embodied in community and is lived out in each of our lives. As religious, we/I am called to be a living and public witness, dedicated to the service of God, to be about the reign of God, which is rooted in the gospel message. One of the biggest lessons I have

learned from my canonical novitiate year is how much I value and need my quiet time, my connection with God and my inner self, to be attentive to what truly is at the heart of who I am and how that unfolds in my journey of life.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Service could not occur without such love and compassion for one another, for our self. Loving one self, serving me, being attentive to my needs, for prayer, for contemplation, for inner work, grounds me so that I can be attentive and responsive to the

needs of others. Learning how to balance my contemplative desire with my passion for service will always be a challenge. My life in Mercy, however, challenged me to be attentive towards this balance of life of service, of prayer, of wholeness. I hear Jesus' mission of God to be that we be holy, healthy, and happy. We as religious must be about his way of life! Community feeds and fuels my passions and helps me to be responsive, so that I can be about the works of mercy.

Community life has often been a time of loneliness and solitude. Finding the balance of being alone and in relation with others is what I think a part of the vows are all about. I very much value and need my quiet time, to be still, to move introspectively so that I can truly be in touch with God's love and direction for me. I can also be easily distracted, especially by doing things, that are supported and valued because of the ministry and service we are about. However, what is at the heart of service? What is the plan that God talks about? When I allow myself to be in a reflective and prayerful mode, centered and grounded, I feel so much more balanced and at peace because then I truly know who is in control, who or what leads me to be Mercy, to be Sister, to be life. Obedience requires me to listen to that inner voice, to be attentive, and to respond. This can not take place if I am busy about many things! Sometimes that does not mean

journeying alone, but rather together in community, so that I can be attentive and open to the Spirit of God and to the dreams of God. It requires me to truly follow my heart, to listen to that inner depth, whether that be revealed by members in community, by spiritual direction, by counseling, or by seeking other's input. I must be constantly discerning the will of God to be happy, healthy, and holy, for the sake of the mission. Listening so that God reveals God/self to me, that is obedience. Living to our fullest potential, fulfilling our true way to be. Is that not the will of God? Obedience requires me to always trust that God's Spirit will give me the wisdom, the strength, and the courage to respond in love to whatever is being asked of me.

I am very passionate about many things and what has been so life giving for me is the support, encouragement, and invitations that I have received and continue to receive from my Sisters, from community, and from the people I minister with, all essential ingredients to help me balance and integrate my dreams/visions as I journey towards responding to God's plans, towards bearing and nurturing the fruit of such a life. This love, support, and affirmation, this interconnectedness and life in community has and is what nurtures me and feeds me to be Mercy, to be in relation, to love, and to be loved.

Wilkie Au says that humanness is achievable only in relationship, in love, in the opening of myself, in the sharing of myself, in the warming of my heart. I must be human, willing to risk, to engage, to share and/or let down my walls, to be vulnerable or messy, and to love, so that I too may be loved. In this humanness, I have to be able to accept my limitations, that I am not all together, and that I don't have to be all together! I am learning that I don't have to be perfect, nor should I think that anyone else is either. We

**I must be constantly discerning the will of
God to be happy, healthy, and holy, for
the sake of the mission.**

are all human, we are women with our own rough edges, all on the same journey, to respond the best we can, in Mercy, to God's plan for each of us. It is indeed a relief to begin to truly internalize and believe in my heart that "you are precious and cherished, you are loved just the way you are!" That means I don't have to do anything. Plain and simple, I am loved. Period! I am okay just the way I am, true to who I am and to whose I am.

Celibate chastity

In love we become vulnerable. According to Karl Rahner, we are created by love to love

nothing else. There is no other reason for our existence. Celibate chastity is our way of immersing ourselves into the pain and ecstasy of life which loving ourselves entails. And, this is a journey! God calls a few to be the empty spaces for God. It is not a holier or emptier state of life. The celibate is God's way of reminding us of that space of providing love, of that being occupied with God—*vacare deo*. I am reminded of something that Joan Chittister said about celibate chastity, "The function of celibacy is not to be loveless;

the function of celibacy is to love without limitations, to lay down my life in loving commitment to more than those who love me." Jesus models that healthy balance of relationship with oneself, God, and his friends, so that he could then give and serve, to truly be present in love and compassion with and for others. C. S. Lewis's *Shadowlands* taught me the importance of moving from my intellectual and heady perspective of love, of God's love, to that of the experiential dimension and perspective of feeling and allowing myself to be loved. As Catherine noted in her *Retreat Instructions*, how can we teach

the love of God if our own hearts are cold? I believe our/my journey, in faith, is meant to be shared, hence, requiring relation. Celibate chastity is about learning how to be in mutual relationship with one another, to love well, to love grandly, to love freely, with open hands, not clinging—and expecting nothing in return. For me, what is at the heart of celibate chastity is inclusivity and mutuality, no strings! And like Jesus, I too must often go and seek my quiet space, go to the “other side” in order to be alone and

fruits of God. The poverty lies in the fact that I can’t do this alone, without God, without support from community, friends, or wisdom figures. God is the source of my energy, and it is from God alone (not from me, although often I like to believe that I can do it all) that I can be totally nourished and comforted. This radical dependence, rooted in living and responding in faith to the vows, enables me to be a responsible steward, to let go of my excess baggage, to let go and let God, so that I can more freely enter into the mystery,

has enough” is how Barbara Fiand puts it.

I think life is meant to be spicy, rich in flavor! “You are the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world” (Matt 5:13–14). There are too many hardships, cruelties, and injustices in this world. Jesus challenges us/me to make a difference, to be about bringing hope, to be about adding flavor/life to God’s creation. My journey in response to this challenge has led me to Mercy. In Mercy, I have been supported and invited to grow, to be life, to be hope, to be caring and compassionate, to be energetic, and to always shoot for the stars, to dream. Mercy has given me the passion, the energy, and vision of knowing that together, as faith community, centered and rooted in God, we can and do make a difference.



How truly freeing it is not to be possessive; not to be clinging to people or things, to be free to grow and be more available, receptive, and open to whatever God asks.

still. It is in this contemplation of community and friends that I am sparked and charged/re-charged so that I may be able to respond in and with love to the needs of others.

How truly freeing it is not to be possessive; not to be clinging to people or things, to be free to grow and be more available, receptive, and open to whatever God asks. It is in this letting go, in simplifying my life, in standing naked in the presence of God that I truly am connected to the love, to the passion, and to the

experience the divine, and move towards a fuller and more meaningful relationship with God and with others.

I see my vow of poverty as allowing myself to be transformed. I can’t do it alone. If I’m trying to be in control, then I’m not allowing God to transform me. It’s the openness, the self emptying of self to allow God to be with me that transforms me. We are poor when we can embrace our own darkness. Poverty is not something we do. It’s what we are. “Do with less until everyone

Breaking in New Shoes

Mary Ellen Shuckerow

As I begin to write this vow reflection, I have just celebrated my sixth year of formal relationship with the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and have been in temporary profession for a year and five months. As I mused about what I might have to share with our Institute members, I realized that the vows I publicly professed on June 28, 1997, were like a new pair of shoes. The soles were smooth,

unmarked by wear, the leather was pristine, the fit snug and supporting.

Today, the shoes remain relatively new, yet, the soles are marked by the journey. The leather has distinctive grooves, identifying the places of tension as well as ease and the shoes are likened to a familiar friend, comforting while remaining sturdy.

My shoes and I have recently returned from an Institute temporary professed gathering in St. Louis, Missouri. In a sense, it was like a homecoming since I spent my canonical year there at the Mercy Collaborative Novitiate. Stepping off the plane, the warm sun greeted me. It was a welcome sight after the autumn chill I left behind in Connecticut.

The gathering St. Louis in some ways resembled a reunion for our Institute's newer members, but it was much, much more! It is the much more that I hope I can express in this writing.

Some of the "much more" is contextualizing the tradition of our four vows against the backdrop of a new millennium, a culture driven by impermanence and an Institute that has been birthed and is now moving well beyond its infancy. The approaching Institute Chapter will be the impetus of a new reality for the Sisters of Mercy. We will take a large step in collectively choosing a preferred future. It is our rootedness in God that

will imprint this step and map out our destiny.

Our temporary professed gathering focused on community life. It has always intrigued me that the vows are not spoken about readily by our members. Community life has been the subject of many Institute gatherings, regional chapters and theological reflections. Perhaps, the vows are implicit in our way of life.

The "much more" of our temporary professed gathering had the elements, of meaning-making. The gathered arrived in a spirit of seeking, seeking support, seeking understanding, seeking a collective voice. Ultimately, the

nucleus and the foundation on which we will navigate the change.

One might ponder, if Catherine were a member of our Institute today would she consider the vows a foundation for a viable future? In her time, her charism emerged out of a passion to respond to the societal disparity of poverty, out of a deep passion to love her God, as a Catholic woman, making a life commitment to serve the poor, the sick, the uneducated, especially women and children. In a sense, the vows were imposed on her by the hierarchical church and social mores of her time. In effect, Catherine

In choosing to be women religious, we choose to proclaim the vows as our way of making meaning of our lives.

gatherers came seeking interior freedom to continue to say yes to the call to mercy, ayes that was asked of each vowed member last summer in a letter from our Institute leadership team!

In choosing to be women religious, we choose to proclaim the vows as our way of making meaning of our lives. We have professed vows to an Institute, whose lived reality is on the pinnacle of transformation, emergence and perhaps permanent change. The tradition of the vows and our charism are the constant, the

wrapped the vows around her charism, her meaning-making.

Looking to our future, it is likely that vowed members will be fewer in number. Association, alternate forms of membership and temporary commitments will comprise the greater membership of our Institute. The charism can be enfolded in all of these forms of membership. So why would the vows be essential and relevant to our future?

For me, the vows represent a time honored framework to live a particular witness as a member of the

universal church. The vows connect us in a distinct way to the church. This connection bears a voice (particularly a voice of women), an identity, a responsibility to be Emmanuel people to the world, to be "God with us" in all that we profess and proclaim.

As Emmanuel people, we are able to articulate a witness in society that is rooted in gospel values and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Our identity as an Institute and relationship with the universal church will enlarge our ability to witness in an ever-changing chaotic

new landscape our ability to be Emmanuel people will foster care of the earth, of all creation and will manifest a witness that responds to the seasons of our times.

On my profession day, I proclaimed to all assembled a traditional vow formula, one simply stating a promise to live chastity, poverty, obedience, and service to the poor, sick, and uneducated. The words I spoke were an echo of many Sisters who professed these same vows since Catherine spoke them in December of 1831. How do I live

restored relationship of union and charity.

I live poverty in living with a sense of gratitude, gratitude for the wonder of creation, for simple pleasures, a nourishing meal, clothes that are enough and not more, a community home that is mindful of ecology and the cosmos, that is open to the stranger and the needy, is generous with all it holds in common. In living poverty, I am ever called to letting go, to holding nonpossessively, to recognizing the seduction of consumerism and responding from a counter cultural identity.

I live obedience in the ability to listen. My prayer life, my time with God, is sometimes a silent endeavor, a screaming encounter, or a gentle voice. The interior listening of my prayer is the greatest tenor of my true self, which can be clouded by the clamor of life's demands. In prayer, I am assured that God never tires of my need to chat or to just be silent. In the patient waiting of listening, I come to greater freedom within myself to truly be who God wants me to be.

Obedience calls me to a responsibility to listen to others, to be open to hear differing opinions, struggling to come to mutual understanding. It means responding to leadership when their collective wisdom is not fully comprehended. In ministry, listening to the heart of those I minister among and creating a voice for the voiceless is

As Emmanuel people, we are able to articulate a witness in society that is rooted in gospel values and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

worldview. In essence, the life of Jesus Christ was a life of witness. The disciples principally lived from a stance of witness. Since the Second Vatican Council, the church has encouraged all Christians to embrace an element of witness in their lives.

In recognizing a commitment to vowed life in the universal Church and by embracing the meaning-making of the charism of Catherine, we will provide a solid foundation by which a changed reality for our Institute can take shape incorporating a broader witness within the landscape of the world order. Placed in this

the four vows in the twilight of the nineteenth century?

I live chastity by learning to love. This requires me to explore my ability to be in relationship, with my community, my ministry, my family, my friends, myself, and with God. Chastity challenges me in times of longing and loneliness and gifts me in times of deep affection, true intimacy, and generosity. Chastity has held great joy for me in deepened relationships where I have felt loved for who I am and has equally borne great pain in broken relationships. Chastity holds a precious gift of hope for forgiveness, for the

faithful obedience to God. In a society that is driven by independence, obedience invites me to move more centrally towards interdependence.

I live service to the poor, sick, and uneducated by choosing to minister among the poor, to advocate for justice and build communities of inclusion. In vowing to serve the poor, I commit myself to exploring my own prejudices and to open myself to soften the boundaries of relationships within my ministry. The vow of service calls me to responsible involvement in being a public witness in all arenas of my life:

- It calls me to witness at the state legislature on issues of welfare reform.
- It calls me to sign my name on a statement against the death penalty.
- It calls me to demonstrate to end violence in the city where I minister.
- It calls me to write a letter to our senators to close the School of the Americas.
- It calls me to phone a congressional leader to raise the minimum wage to a living wage.

The vow of service draws me to respond to the needs of the times, acting out of witness rooted in gospel values. In defining the vows as I have in this

reflection, I have described the framework by which I am living my life. I could not live this life, in this manner, without the structure of community, a community that encompasses my local living, my regional affiliation and my identification with the Institute. Since the day I professed my vows, I have tried to live them and identify their meaning for the making of my life. The essential elements for me to continue to say yes to a life in Mercy is the essence you may quell from this article. The most striking elements are:

- The ability to make meaning in life with others who share common values, hopes, dreams and visions, of truly being Emmanuel people, God with us!
- The continued call to be a witness in every aspect of our world landscape, as an individual and with those who share an identity with mercy and the universal church.
- The commitment to a countercultural lifestyle that is grounded in prayer, the charism of Catherine and the gospel values.
- The fostering of a model of mutual dialogue through facilitation as a preferred form of communication in all arenas

of community life and Institute systems, including discernment, goal setting and decision making processes.

- The sustaining of a passionate energy for being a seeker and a gatherer, ever moving towards wholeness as an effective change agent, continually bringing our Institute reality to fruition.

While at the temporary professed gathering in St. Louis, I spent my morning prayer walking the labyrinth at Mercy Center. I began on a wooded path and entered the labyrinth in a clearing. Underfoot, the walk of the labyrinth changes from straw to gravel to wood chips to grass to dirt and then back again. In the meditation of the journey to the center, the textures felt by my feet resemble the steps I have taken in the journey of my vowed life. The labyrinth is an ancient prayer space that is once again emerging as a guide to help us find God at the center of our being. It is Catherine who gave us the guiding mission to stay "centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back." May my own footsteps and those that are choosing to say "yes" to the journey of the "much more," walk ever humbly with our God!



Women of Mercy for the Future

How Shall We Direct Them?

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

In the fall of 1996, personnel from the four regional communities that comprise the East/Southeast Regional Incorporation collaboration effort (Baltimore, Dallas, Merion, North Carolina) decided to undertake an intense reflection on an adult feminine model of incorporation.¹ I was invited to present a paper and facilitate the initial meeting. Little could I know that accepting such a challenge would mean spending the next two years engaged

decisions to be made about these issues ought not to be made by the incorporation personnel or the leadership alone. They are, further, not issues that should be decided by regional communities in contradiction to each other. Incorporation decisions affect who and what the Institute will be in the future. If we don't decide together now, through Institute Chapter processes, it is unlikely that we will be unified in the future.

Carolina will have some experience beyond the teenage years and some education beyond secondary schooling. Though that (informal) requirement seems clear, there is no clarity regarding the upper end of the age spectrum. That is, considering actual practice, there is no discernible age beyond which one is no longer eligible to enter the Sisters of Mercy.

In point of fact, incorporation personnel find themselves increasingly dealing with women whose lives have been substantively formed in a context other than religious life and, often, other than devout Catholic family and parish life. The challenge of incorporating an adult into a life-form became one of the first considerations. Equally challenging is the task of preventing regression from occurring during incorporation.

Since adulthood is not just a matter of age, the group developed a consensus on what being an adult means. There was agreement that an adult will demonstrate most of the following basic capabilities: starting and directing projects given into her hands; making prudent decisions; taking responsibility for self and for others; making a home and offering hospitality; demonstrating the readiness to make

In point of fact, incorporation personnel find themselves increasingly dealing with women whose lives have been substantively formed in a context other than religious life and, often, other than devout Catholic family and parish life.

with them in articulating questions and insights of great significance for the future of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

In this article, I will review the content of our work and analyze the issues that arise from it. Contrary to the usual order of things, however, I would like to put one conclusion right up front. The

The Context

Though no one seems to know exactly how and when the decision was made, it is clear that all four regional communities involved no longer accept young women into the incorporation process right after high school. The expectation is that women entering the Sisters of Mercy in Baltimore, Dallas, Merion, and North

a commitment; showing the willingness to take risks, to enter into conflict, to invest oneself; thinking and acting interdependently; exhibiting the flexibility necessary to continued evolution as an adult person.

There are two corollaries to this work. 1) The application and interview process should be consistent with this understanding of adulthood, especially regarding the information sought in the application form. And 2) any community incorporating adults must manifest most of the same characteristics. As part of the preparation for the initial presentation and facilitation, I reviewed the application forms and handbooks of all four regional communities. The "subtext" of the application forms was quite contrary to the values set forth in the discussion of adulthood.² Furthermore, the handbooks that extol "mutuality" as a desired outcome in incorporation give no indication that the one being incorporated had any right to know about the strengths and weaknesses of her prospective community. In other words, a close examination of the actual processes shows a lack of consistency between what we say and what we actually do.

An Adult Model

The work on identifying characteristics of an adult was followed by an examination of adult models of incorporation extant in United States

culture. I identified five: the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults; Alcoholics Anonymous and similar self-help groups; the military; orientation programs for new employees; and marriage. Each model was assessed for its pertinence to the work of Mercy incorporation. The group considered the following points:

- attitude toward previous tradition (e.g., RCIA respects previous faith traditions, yet may be critical of previous ways of living)
- assumptions about the skills, knowledge, control of self, and decision-making powers of the person being incorporated (e.g., AA does not assume self-control and good decision making powers)
- the purpose of instruction (e.g., information, values formation, habit formation, etc.)
- the role of questioning (e.g., the military does not easily tolerate questioning of its ways)
- the self-understanding aimed at through incorporation (e.g., marriage requires a new self-understanding that will affect most areas of life)
- understanding of and locus of loyalty (e.g., does the body into which you are being incorporated automatically assume priority in your life?)

- the kind of language used to seal the commitment (e.g., contractual language, oath of allegiance, language of covenant).

Several things became clear in these discussions. First, that there is a desire on the part of some to have entrance into the Sisters of Mercy take on a "therapeutic" dimension. These voices argue that the state of a person's health, physical abilities, and even her freedom from addictions should not prohibit membership in the Sisters of Mercy. The same holds true for commitments to living children and responsibilities for living parents: they should not limit a woman's freedom to enter. What was paramount for those arguing this position was the good of the individual and how membership in the Sisters of Mercy could benefit her life. When the focus shifted to the mission of the Sisters of Mercy, it was apparent that there is no consensus on what that mission is and how such a "therapeutic" development might affect it positively or negatively.

The second realization is that, by accepting women who have other continuing responsibilities and commitments, the body runs the risk of undermining a previous assumption that membership in the Sisters of Mercy made that commitment a priority in one's life. Moreover, there may be an implicit promise that the Sisters of Mercy share in the responsibilities of the

member. When you add to this the desire of some that women unable to work because of disabilities or addiction become members, then it becomes difficult to imagine how all that will be sustained into a viable future for the Institute.

Finally, the group saw that in each model examined above, incorporation initiated the person new to the body into a "culture," a way of seeing the world and acting in it that eventually influences the whole of one's life. This led to questions about our Mercy "culture." Do we understand ourselves in similar ways? Do we have a discernible way of living, of praying, of working together toward a common goal? The questions become

Finally, the group saw that in each model examined above, incorporation initiated the person new to the body into a "culture," a way of seeing the world and acting in it that eventually influences the whole of one's life.

especially acute when worship is under consideration. Let me quote from the minutes of that meeting:

What is it that we still hold in common: prayers . . . devotions . . . rituals . . . or are there any? How have we adapted to do all this in new ways? . . . What is our primary community for worship? . . . It was much easier when the R.S.M. community

was the worshipping community. The shared spiritual life of the congregation . . . helped us to know who we were. How do we "create" something now, appreciating the past for the community and new members that says "who we are" not "what we do"?

Clearly, the issue of the "culture" of the contemporary R.S.M. community is a neuralgic one.

A Feminine Model³

I thought we could get a fresh angle on a feminine model by thinking about the way in which all human beings are incorporated into the human community through the body of the mother. Essayist Nancy Mairs has called attention to a

purpose of bringing to birth another, not a clone of herself. And so the miracle of diversity in the human family goes on.

Of course, sometimes children are added to a family through adoption another model to be considered. In this case, the parents are examined as strenuously (perhaps more so) than the child is. The community into which the child is to come must be proven to be a healthy one for the new member.

The final dimension of this reflection was on raising children. Though not the sole province of women, it yet has been a responsibility entrusted primarily to our hands. What characterizes this challenging task is a willingness to deal with the child's developing self.

Clearly none of these experiences applies to Mercy incorporation insofar as the ones we incorporate are adult, not embryo, fetus, or child. Yet there is wisdom to be won from meditating on what these womanly ways reveal about taking another into the body. First, the purpose of incorporation is not to clone the existing make-up of the community. The one who enters the Sisters of Mercy is an other and her process of individuation is essential to her holiness and to the holiness of the community. Second, the language of mutuality used in incorporation handbooks demands that the health of the community be assessed as well as the fitness of the candidate. Third, the community needs to be clear about what we

distinct feature of the woman's body.⁴ Under most circumstances, the human body rejects what is foreign to it. But the immune system of a woman is capable of marvelous adaptation, by means of which she can receive what is foreign to her system and make it a part of her body. The woman's body gives shelter and nourishment for the

expect from new members as they move through the stages of incorporation. And, fourth, there must be those in the community willing to care for, share time, and suffer with the new members as they make their way through these stages. I include here stages imposed by the policies and practices of the community and those that arise as a person tries to develop into a Sister of Mercy.

A Gospel View of Incorporation

To be consonant with our vocation, any adult feminine model of incorporation devised must also be grounded in a Christian understanding of discipleship. In a final effort, then, I interpreted with the members of the East/Southeast Regional Incorporation collaboration the example of Jesus as revealed in the Gospel of Mark. By tracing the questions that the disciples ask Jesus and the responses Jesus gives, one can track the progress they make from self-centered and uncomprehending followers to disciples whose only concern is that they will fail the mission Jesus has entrusted to them.⁵ One can also see that, along the way, Jesus corrects and challenges them. He also shocks them by his daring, his uncompromising commitments and his unusual take on reality. Jesus, too, was dealing with adults, but he clearly calls them to something not of their own making. He demands

that the mission take priority over other commitments. And he molds them into a body of persons who do not want to fail him. He does this primarily by interacting with them on the road, on the sea, in "seminars" after the crowds have dispersed, at the table. The incorporation is interpersonal. It is face to face. It is mission oriented. It requires sacrifice. It is sustained by talk of God and prayer to God.

There is no doubt that adult women will have questions when they engage the incorporation process required of them. It is equally sure that new questions will emerge along the way. The difficulty arises when we ask, "who will answer them?" Individual ministers of incorporation can give individual answers, but they report a feeling that the community does not have commonly held understandings of some of the realities most central to their work. Would Sisters say basically the same thing if asked about the meaning of each of the vows? Is there a commonly held understanding of how Sisters of Mercy ought to live, of the "way" that constitutes the Mercy way of religious life? What sacrifices do we expect new members to make in order to develop into members of this body? What is the mission of the Sisters of Mercy? What characteristics, abilities, state of health are required for that mission? These are essential questions that arise with urgency. The incorporation personnel are deputized by

the community to interact with the new members as they search for answers. But those deputized often need answers that represent the community, that are based on a communal understanding.

The Metaphor of Quilting

The Sisters who engaged for two years in this discussion found the metaphor of quilting a very attractive one. It comes from the tradition of women, is an interdependent model, and allows for individuation and creativity. Yet all quilts, no matter how unusual, require a "backing" and a "frame" for working. This became the metaphor for what the incorporation personnel are seeking from the greater community. What is the backing for incorporation, the elements of continuity and similarity that make for a Mercy incorporation tradition? What is the frame? In other words, however varied the composition inside the frame, what constitute the boundaries for Mercy incorporation?

In an effort to inform and to consult the regional communities, the four directors of incorporation put together a workshop based on the theme of quilting. In and through this workshop, Sisters were presented with the challenges I have detailed in this article. First and foremost, the Sisters charged with the responsibility of incorporation wanted to know if the Sisters of the region support the collaborative

effort to identify and develop an adult feminine model of Mercy incorporation. Regional communities allotted varying lengths of time for the workshops and, as a result, the depth of conversation on the topic was not uniform. Nor did each workshop yield a clear answer to the central question about support for an adult feminine model. I would say, however, that there seemed to be general consensus that the concerns being brought forward by the incorporation personnel and by the new members should be the concern of the whole Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. They go to the heart of our identity and of our future.

The prospect of developing corporately held understandings, however, raises other interesting problems. First, there is at least an informal assumption that incorporation (or formation) belongs at the regional community level and that any attempt to create principles governing it represents an infringement on subsidiarity. Second, the new Institute does not have much experience bringing issues on which there is widespread confusion, disagreement, or difference in tradition to a forum where they can be discussed with a view to finding common ground. Third, to work toward such a common ground, there must be some commonly held belief about what is normative. If I read the experience of the recent theological reflection rightly, we have in the Institute widely divergent attitudes

toward church teaching, canon law, the analyses of feminist thinkers, and the tradition of religious life for women in the Catholic Church. The theological reflection to which the last Institute Chapter invited all the Sisters revealed a spectrum of theological opinions. But it did not move to the stage where we try to reconcile some of our differences.

This is the challenge for the next Institute Chapter. The work of incorporation is raising issues of identity that directly impact on the future of the Sisters of Mercy. The issues relate, not only to how we will incorporate individuals as new members, but also to what kind of body the Institute will become as we make decisions related to incorporation issues. That is, will we be an aggregate of widely divergent traditions held together by organizational bonds or will we open our traditions up to each other in such a way that each regional community might undergo change and development? Imbedded in those issues are questions about our faith, our hope and our love.



Notes

- 1 The four directors of incorporation that spearheaded this project are Sisters Marina Culp (Dallas), Mary Vernon Gentle (Baltimore), Mercedes McCann (Merion) and Carolyn McWatters (North Carolina). A number of other Sisters participated in the discussions, since the collaboration includes vocations ministers and new members. Sisters Mary Waskowiak and Marie Chin served as facilitators at different times.
- 2 Since we began this work, the East/Southeast Incorporation group has revised the application form.
- 3 There has since been discussion about whether the term "feminine" is the best one to use. It is my understanding that the term "adult feminine model" was picked up from the meeting of the Institute Conference and Vocation and Incorporation personnel in Auburn, California, 1994.
- 4 Nancy Mairs, *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Women) Writer*, (Boston: Beacon, 1994) p. 42.
- 5 I am indebted to Peter Fisher for the idea to trace the questions the disciples ask. He struck on that technique in a paper written for one of my theology classes at Loyola College, Baltimore, in 1977.

The Prophetic Role of the Institute in Light of Luke 4:18

A Personal Reflection

Judith Schubert, R.S.M.

The third Institute Chapter marks a very important event for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. It signifies a communal preparation for the next millennium. At this time, members consider ways in which the Institute, as spiritual heirs of Catherine McAuley, can bring Mercy into the future. It is important to keep in mind that Catherine's beliefs and dreams were firmly based on the Jesus of Scripture. In so many ways, Catherine mirrored the mercy and compassion of Jesus as he is depicted specifically in the Gospel of Luke. For this reason I have chosen to discuss some issues within the third Gospel in the hope that decisions flowing from the Chapter will be based on Catherine's foundation of decision-making, namely, the words and actions of Jesus.

One of the most prominent ways that Luke presents a picture of Jesus within the Gospel is that of a prophet. As prophet Jesus proclaims "good news" to a people beset with "bad news." In addition to his words of comfort, the Prophet Jesus brings freedom through his healing and merciful response to those in need. Likewise, Catherine's voice and good deeds in the nineteenth century brought relief to an oppressed Ireland.

In many ways, her life exemplified that of the Prophet Jesus in his special concern for the marginalized. Through the discussion of some Lukan stories, my aim is to consider how the evangelist portrayed Jesus as Prophet and how that role may affect our future decision making for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy.

Throughout this past year, we, as members of the Institute, have been engaged in theological reflection on the issue of our preferred futures. As we face these hard questions with courage and in truth, we mirror the strength of our prophetic foundress. Catherine shaped the future of Mercy by being steeped in

In response to this question, I invite you to consider some of the special Lukan stories that are found within his gospel. I have chosen a conflation of the prophetic quotes of Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6, which are found in Luke 4:18-19.¹ Luke places these Isaian texts within Jesus' inaugural speech at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30).² By doing so, the evangelist recalls the words and works of the Isaian prophet as well as prepares the reader for the words, action, and outcome of Jesus in his role as prophet.³

The combined Isaian quotes in Luke 4:18-19 serve as a reminder to all that Jesus indeed is a prophet. It reads:

In so many ways, Catherine mirrored the mercy and compassion of Jesus as he is depicted specifically in the Gospel of Luke.

the ways of Jesus. The Lukan Jesus functions as God's mouthpiece as he proclaims "good news to the poor." How, then, do we, as daughters of Catherine McAuley, faithfully follow the example of the Prophet Jesus as she did?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to send forth the oppressed into freedom

For this discussion, I shall use each phrase of these combined quotes from Isaiah to elaborate on how they function in other Lukan stories throughout the Gospel. Thus, these Isaian phrases will serve both as a catalyst and as a summary of how, as daughters of the Prophet Catherine, we are called to make our decisions for the future in light of the past merciful attitude and actions of the Prophet Jesus. As you ponder the article, I invite you to read the corresponding biblical passage before you read each section.

It would be well to remember the astute listening skills of Mary, as well as her readiness to risk her comfortable present moment for an uncomfortable unknown future.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”

For Luke, the Holy Spirit functions as the Spirit of prophecy as did the Spirit in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew bible. Traditionally, prophets were one of the groups that God’s Spirit was known to permeate. The Spirit imparts the source of strength and courage for the prophets as they worked in their present state to change the future of God’s people. In Luke’s gospel, the Annunciation scene (Luke 1:28–38) presents Mary in such a position. When Mary is called

upon to make a momentous future decision, she hears God’s messenger announce that “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (1:35).

The Annunciation (Luke 1:28–38)

From the moment that the angel Gabriel enters Mary’s life until the messenger departs from it, the portrait of Mary cannot be mistaken. Mary functions as a free and autonomous woman throughout the story. Unlike her cousin Elizabeth, who is paired with her husband Zechariah in the

preceding Lukan story (Luke 1:5–25), Mary stands alone as she hears God’s plan, questions and ponders the outcome, and responds with conviction. The crucial topic of this scene is the topic of the future. As the reader immediately senses, however, Mary’s decision goes far beyond her personal future; rather, her answer will affect the future of Christianity. In this moment, then, the future of God’s work depends upon Mary’s response.

As we ponder this story, what do we discover from the attitude and response of Mary that will help us in our decision-making for the future? Notice

how Mary behaves when confronted with a unique, difficult, and surprising situation. Although she is shocked and “troubled” by Gabriel’s announcement, she listens carefully with her heart. She courageously asks the right question about the situation before she makes the difficult decision that will change her entire life.

Ultimately, Mary’s unwavering “fiat” in 1:38, “Let it be with me according to your word,” demonstrates her complete trust in the Divine. She believes that God is always with her, especially in the times when important decisions will institute dramatic future changes. Mary meets the challenge of life with the gift of her own life. Mary’s “yes!” empowers her to go forward in her own life. As Mary lovingly lets God empower her, she becomes a rich source of empowerment for others throughout the centuries.

It would be well to remember the astute listening skills of Mary, as well as her readiness to risk her comfortable present moment for an uncomfortable unknown future. In the continuation of decision-making for the next millennium, it is vital to ask the pointed and challenging questions that face the Institute for the future. Moreover, it is imperative not to be afraid to act on the answers to such questions. If Mary had not acted with her courageous “fiat,” where would Christianity be two thousand years later?

“He has anointed me”

To be anointed here means to be called as a prophet. Luke himself considers anointing to be prophetic. For example, when the evangelist narrates the Baptism of Jesus in Luke 3:21–22, he omits the baptism itself, any mention of water, and the name of John the Baptist. Instead, Luke emphasizes the prophetic descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and the powerful voice from heaven, which affirms Jesus as God’s Son and Prophet.

The Baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21–22)

For Luke, the baptism of Jesus serves as a clear indication that Jesus’ endowment with the Holy Spirit calls him to be a prophet. Moreover, Luke’s unique presentation of the scene prefigures the Pentecost event in Acts 2, where the resurrected Jesus, having ascended into heaven, dispenses the Spirit upon the community. Consequently, the disciples now function as prophets of Jesus.

This brief baptism scene in Luke also describes Jesus at prayer. Throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus prays before all the important moments of his adult life. For Luke, prayer provides the opportunity to become receptive. When prayer is effective, the person becomes open to the experiences in life, both for the present and for the future. After Jesus prays in this story, “the heaven was opened” (3:21).

The divine and human worlds now have the opportunity to link with each other when “the Holy Spirit descended upon” Jesus (3:22). Through divine affirmation, Jesus has the courage to risk, to begin his prophetic ministry with valor. As a result of the descent of the Spirit, Jesus is empowered to minister to others both in the present and the future.

**When prayer is effective, the person
becomes open to the experiences in life,
both for the present and for the future.**

Preparations for this third Institute Chapter include prayer for the descent of the God’s Spirit upon us. In this way, like Jesus, we shall have the fortitude to search God’s word, to listen attentively as God speaks, and to begin or continue our ministries into the twenty-first century with renewed zeal.

“To bring good news to the poor”

Isaiah announces that the prophet is called to bring “good news” to the poor. “Good news,” as we know, provides a refreshing respite from the countless daily opportunities to hear “bad news.” Jesus brought this desirable change to people he met throughout his ministry as prophet. As he preached and brought physical, emotional, and spiritual strength to them, Jesus

demonstrated a special affection for the poor. Often in the Gospel, the poor are those who are marginalized from society for one or several reasons, for example, by their poverty, their gender, their illness, or their religious beliefs etc. In essence, they are people who truly need God.

Two Lukan stories demonstrate this point. The first,

the Widow of Nain in Luke 7:11–16, typifies a miracle story found only in Luke, while the second, the Persistent Widow in Luke 18:1–8, represents a Lukan parable that embodies the need for courage and fortitude in prayer. Both stories about women in need demonstrate the gift of “good news” that is brought to the poor. The prophet Jesus blesses those who are open to him or those who seek justice.

The Widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–16)

The Widow of Nain in Luke 7:11–16 represents a woman whose life is about to change dramatically for the worst. When Luke describes her as a widow, who processes with the townspeople to bury her only son, he signals a descriptive “red light” to the reader. In ancient times, a widow without

sons was left with no means of support. As a woman, she was not permitted to earn money herself. Therefore, her only alternative was to rely on the generosity of others. Consequently, many such women became beggars on the street, where they remained defenseless and often exploited.

At the commencement of the scene Jesus, the outsider, involves himself with the woman's dreadful situation. In 7:13, Luke states that "when the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep'" Jesus comforts the woman during one of the most difficult moments of her life. He openly demonstrates his concern for the woman in her sorrow with his words of

Jesus' commitment to this unknown woman serves as a reminder not to be afraid to be involved in the unknown. Jesus could not anticipate the reception of the widow or the townspeople; yet he risked their unknown response to help her. By doing so, he brought needed healing and hope to the situation. We, like Jesus, need to bring ourselves to risk so that we can bring hope to one another both with and without our communities. When hope is given, new life is born. Then, the one in need can return to a life with God.

At the Chapter, we are called to make decisions prophetically in our preference for those in need, especially women. In this way, as Jesus

poor. Often and repeatedly the "poor" experience discouragement from their unheard pleas for justice. Luke addresses this experience by his words of encouragement that precede the parable, namely, "Pray and do not lose heart!"

In this parable, two characters of opposite descriptions interact with one another. The first character is described as a "judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people" (18:2). In his position, the judge would most likely be considered among the wealthy of the city, own substantial property, have great political influence and possess tremendous power from his judicial office. Luke describes this authoritative figure in the parable as dishonorable in that he lacked respect for anyone, including God. In this situation, no one, especially a poor person, could anticipate a just verdict.

Luke describes the second character in the parable as a widow. As noted above, a widow was often left without any financial resources for survival. Unlike the judge, this woman probably lacked any real financial resources, possessed little or no property, and had no power because of her status. In the parable, the unjust judge had not given any fair verdict against her opponent. The courageous widow, however, would not let this judge treat her unfairly. Poor as she may have been, this widow persistently returned to the judge with the cry "Grant

At the Chapter, we are called to make decisions prophetically in our preference for those in need, especially women.

hope. Moreover, in 7:14–15, Jesus "touches the bier . . . and said 'Young man, I say to you, rise!'" When Jesus tenderly touches the one who is dead, new life comes both to that person and to those associated with the dead one. The widow and her son are not the only ones whose lives Jesus transforms; the townspeople have been changed also. They exclaim in a harmonious choral response that "A great prophet has risen among us! God has visited the people!" (7:16).

tenderly touched the widow with compassion and love, we shall also touch others with our legacy of Mercy. Then, those with whom we live and minister will receive life and God can again "visit the people."

The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8)

The parable of the persistent widow also exemplifies the point that the prophet is sent to bring "good news" to the

me justice against my opponent” (18:3). In the end, the unjust judge was worn down from her plea for justice and granted the widow her wish.

Jesus comments on the parable by saying “Listen . . . will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him?” (18:6–7). We need to continue with our prayer and action for justice, both as those who are poor as well as those who are ministers of the poor. Like the marvelous widow in the parable, we are called to be fearless when we seek justice. Like the widow in the parable, we need to work unceasingly to right a wrong. Persistence for the accomplishment of justice will truly bring mercy to those in need. The experience of such Mercy is “good news” indeed!

“He has sent me to proclaim freedom/release (*aphesis*)”

The term “freedom/release” functions as the object of the verb “proclaim.” Here Jesus announces that his mission is to free the oppressed. Freedom comes in many forms, such as physical, emotional, and spiritual. Freedom allows a person to regain dignity, as well as enter into a life of joy, confidence, and worth. In Luke, the term translates into forgiveness. One of the most merciful ways that freedom can be given is to forgive another of a wrong-doing. The Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:11–32 illustrates this point.

The Lost Son (Luke 15: 11–32)

The Parable of the Lost Son encompasses many feelings in life, such as pride, ignorance, loss, adventure, worry, sorrow, shame, jealousy, anger, openness, love, joy, and celebration. The parable typically contains three main characters, namely, the adventurous immature son, the loving father, and the older son, who appears outwardly faithful but inwardly jealous and resentful. In the story, the younger son makes mistakes in life that need forgiveness. For the purpose of emphasizing “freedom,” I shall highlight the exchange between the lost son and his loving father. This parable exemplifies true forgiveness.

**Like the marvelous widow in the parable,
we are called to be fearless when we seek
justice.**

In the parable, the son leaves his father’s household, squanders his inheritance, experiences destitution, repents of his past doings, and decides to ask for forgiveness from his father. As he comes near his home, his father saw him and “was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (15:20). This moment of joyous embrace and forgiveness characterizes the deep love and mercy of the father

towards his wayward son. The welcoming embrace asks for no public apology or degradation on the part of the son. Even when the son acknowledges that “I have sinned . . . I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (15:21), the father calls for joyous celebration, rather than public repentance. Here the father “frees” his son from his wrong doings and restores him to his honored position as son. Such freedom allows the son to rejoin the community and to rejoice in all the blessings that the father has bestowed upon him.

This parable of forgiveness and celebration offers reflective lessons in preparation for decision making in the Chapter. First of all, dark moments from the past need to be released and forgiven. Such

forgiveness offers “freedom” both to the victimizers and to the victims. Moreover, the need to show love and compassion to those with whom we live and work is essential if we are to embody the hospitality of Catherine, as shown by the father in the parable. Finally, in preparation for the next millennium, it would be beneficial to celebrate the opportunities that we have to grow with others.

“To bring recovery of sight to the blind”

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus bestows sight on many people who are blind in one way or another. The Story of Zacchaeus exemplifies blindness on various levels and how one can be brought to light with an open heart.

The Story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10)

Luke places this effective narrative in Jericho, where he intimates that Zacchaeus’s position of chief tax collector

must stay at your house today” (19:5). At this moment, Zacchaeus gained more sight, that of “insight.” The crowd, however, became very resentful and they began “to grumble” (19:7). These so-called sighted followers became blind to this special moment of God. On the other hand, Zacchaeus grows as he begins to realize both his tenuous past and hope-filled future. Therefore, he joyfully responds to Jesus that “half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four

becoming like the grumblers in the story threatens our clear sightedness as prophets of Mercy.

“To send forth the oppressed into freedom (aphesis)”

In this second Isaian text (Isa 58:6) of the Lukan conflation, the word “freedom” again appears. For Luke, the oppressed may well be identified as a person in need of forgiveness. When forgiveness is received, the person may display a marvelous freedom in giving to others. One of the Lukan stories that exhibits this theme is that of the Woman with the Ointment in Luke 7:36–50. Since this Lukan account indicates different levels of development within one story, I shall address the final section (7:44–46).

The story of Zacchaeus reveals that one who seeks God will experience divine vision in life, despite any blindness from past actions.

made him very rich. The wealth may have been acquired both by legitimate payment and by bribes. In any case, the position of Zacchaeus would have been despised by the so-called sighted and faithful Jews because tax collecting was a position under the Romans, the enemy of the Jews.

When Jesus came to preach in Jericho, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but could not because his view was blocked by a large crowd. As Zacchaeus climbed the tree to see, Jesus called to him and chose to eat with this despised tax collector: “Zacchaeus . . . I

times as much” (19:8). In reply, Jesus can say “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:9).

The story of Zacchaeus reveals that one who seeks God will experience divine vision in life, despite any blindness from past actions. Although ostracized by his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus encounters Jesus because he truly wants “to see.” We, too, need divine insight so that through the results of needed change, God will “stay in our house today.” When blindness is allowed to prevail, close-mindedness dominates. Then, the possibility of

The Woman With the Ointment (Luke 7:44–46)

Within the multi-layered version of the story, Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner. Upon his arrival, however, Simon neglects to offer Jesus the usual greetings of expected hospitality. In the meantime, a repentant woman enters uninvited, seeks forgiveness by taking on the role of hostess with Jesus. The woman showers Jesus with all the hospitality that Simon did not offer. Jesus responds to the scenario by addressing the host:

Simon, do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven; for she has loved much . . . and he said to her . . . go in peace (7:44–47, 50).

Resentment creates a silent and angry disposition. It brings death to oneself and to others because it finds strength in an unexpressed negative attitude.

Hospitality appears to be an obvious topic in this scene. Beneath it, however, lies the issue of freedom, which relates to hospitality. Simon, the Pharisee, possesses wealth, education, power, and influence; yet he is not free. His judgmental attitude, selfishness and insincere ways keep him oppressed. Clearly, Simon displays resentment towards Jesus. In antithesis to Simon, the woman with the ointment lacks power or credibility; yet, very generously she attends to Jesus. Her gratitude towards Jesus affords the woman notable freedom.

Resentment creates a silent and angry disposition. It brings death to oneself and to others because it finds strength in an unexpressed

negative attitude. Gratitude, on the other hand, embraces the quality of hospitality towards others. It opens a person to God's liberating power in the situation at hand. In the gathering for Chapter, it is important to leave any resentment behind and to come together with grateful hearts. Only then will a spirit of freedom prevail so that both peace-filled discussion and decisions for the future may dominate the event.

Notes

- 1 The evangelist combines and reworks these texts in order to emphasize the key Greek term, *aphesis*, which appears in both texts and can be translated as release/freedom. For Luke, Jesus the Prophet brings "release/freedom" to people in many ways, especially through the "forgiveness of sins" (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47).
- 2 This speech is often called the "gospel in miniature" because it encompasses the function and fate of the Prophet Jesus.
- 3 For further discussion on Luke 4:16–30, see "Jesus as Prophet," in *Bible Today* 35, 6 (Nov. 1997).

The selected stories from Luke offer the reader a way to take a prophetic stance in present and future situations. Catherine's legacy of Mercy stems from such examples of the attitude and actions of Jesus. Through the inauguration of the third Institute Chapter, may we also follow the Prophet Jesus by our continued commitment:

- to bring good news to the poor
- to bring release/freedom to the captives
- to offer recovery of sight to the blind, and
- to send forth the oppressed into freedom.



An Ardent Desire

Reflections on a Mercy Sense of Mission⁴

Mary C. Daly, R.S.M.

Throughout her life, Catherine McAuley wrote in journals. Unlike the journals kept by many people, Catherine's journaling is not the record of her own inner life. Other than her letters, we have no such record. Rather, her journal is the keeper of those texts that Catherine held dear and valuable for her own nourishment and for the formation of her young religious order. Into her journal she copied selections from such spiritual books as are found today in the archives at Baggot Street.¹

Catherine, in her life and work, partaking in the mission of Jesus, makes visible to us and to those she served, the goodness of the God with whom she remained in union.

In writing texts out in the early hours of the morning as was her custom on Baggot Street, Catherine undoubtedly wrote them into her heart, into her very bones. Something about the rhythm of writing does that, forming the letters and the words, moving them from the original text into the copy book. Journeying through the eyes and fingers of the copyist, somehow they pass en route through the heart of the writer:

Catherine, in copying, joined a long tradition of monks and nuns who devoted lives to copying texts. Even her Rule, which describes a new and original kind of religious life, is for the most part copied from another. She alters the text but little, adapting it here and there to fit her purpose and experience. She makes similar adaptations in a portion of the text of Alonso Rodriguez's *Practice of Perfection* to produce the document we call "The Spirit of the Institute."² In much of Catherine's formal writing, it would seem that her starting

point originated in the thought of others, was shaped as it flowed through her experience, and found expression in her copy book, in her Rule, but above all, in her life and in the Institute she founded. Her journal writing may be seen as an image of how she sought to shape her life, her ministry, and the Institute she founded. Perhaps we can understand the mission of Catherine in the image of the copybook writer.

Mission in God

We often think of being missioned or sent as our being sent forth on our way with a task given to us by a sender who remains behind. We learn something from the insight of Thomas Aquinas when he considers the missions of the divine persons in God.³ Thomas teaches us that indeed in God one person is sent forth from the other but always remains in union with the one who sent forth and is a faithful image of the sender. He gives as an example the way flowers appearing on a branch are sent forth by a tree and express in a new way something of the tree.

Catherine, in her life and work, partaking in the mission of Jesus, makes visible to us and to those she served, the goodness of the God with whom she remained in union. Catherine sought faithfully to transcribe the text of God into her person and life.

Mission in the Prophetic Tradition

In the opening paragraph of Chapter 3 of the original Rule, a section she did not copy from the Presentation Rule, Catherine expressed her sense of the mission of the Order she was founding.

Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master who has said, "Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me."⁵

In all her writings, Catherine makes clear that the Sisters of this Institute are about the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy, that the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel are the guiding scriptural insight for their lives and ministry. Catherine's view bears a similarity to the call and mission of the prophet which echoes in the words of Luke's Gospel describing the mission of Jesus:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the down trodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor (Luke 4: 18-19).

From the time they first appear in Scripture, the prophets insist on right and just human relationships. It is the mission of the prophet to show the connection between one's relationship with God and living in the human community with justice and integrity. The God of the Israelites is revealed consistently throughout Scripture as a God of compassion. The prophet says, "Do God. Live out in your society, this name of God. Make

visible in your lives and structures the presence of the compassionate God who gives life and dignity to every human person." The prophetic mission is to announce who God is in the circumstances of the time and call forth a response in the people's hearts.

The Mission of Jesus

In this prophetic mission Jesus stands. The Spirit is poured upon him that he might bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives. His life is spent as the itinerant preacher, miracle worker, and friend of sinners and outcasts. His death results because of his love for and association with these outcasts of society, for such love undermines the privileged status of the powerful.

It is the mission of the prophet to show the connection between one's relationship with God and living in the human community with justice and integrity.

Contemplation of the sending forth of the Second Person into our world pushes our understanding of mission deeper than the doing of good to others. The mission of the Second Person makes manifest in his humanity the hidden reality and presence of God's inner dynamic life among us and invites us to participate in this. In the intimate depth of the divinity, the hidden dynamic of God's very Being is

spoken and God's love is poured forth in the Oneness and Threeness of God that we call Trinity. In the mission of the Second Person as Incarnate God, that Being is made visible and that Love is poured forth into our hearts.

Mission in Catherine: In union with the One she called Father

Like all the baptized, Catherine participated in the mission of Christ who originates in and from the One he called Father. So also, mission in Catherine is marked by her deep union with the One she knew and loved as a provident and caring Father. She trusted confidently that God would provide in all the circumstances of her

life, which she knew fell under God's care. From this confidence in the providence of God came a profound belief in God's generosity to her, to the community of Mercy and to the poor.

Her letters often address God in terms which speak of God's desire to support her with tenderness and love. "Bless and love the fatherly hand which has hurt you." "Your heavenly Father will

provide for you." One who dies returns to "Her Heavenly Father's Bosom." This was the God she recommended to her Sisters, the God who cared for the poor, the One to whom the poor belonged.

Her union with God enabled her to face the realities of her life. While she might hide from the bill collector at the Baggot Street door, and dismiss the Doctor's grim pronouncement in her last illness, there was little else that she fled from. Her union with God was not an escape from the hardships of her world. Rather, in and from this union, she found her sending forth in service; she found her illusions stripped away. Thus,

She exhorted them to bring to the poor the unwearied patience and mercy of Christ, and called them to be united with one another in the union and charity of Christ, to be grateful and loving because they were assisting Christ in his labors.

she had little concern for the comforts, conveniences, and offerings of the society surrounding her. She rejoiced at the English postulants who gave up this comfort and prestige for service to the poor, seeing in them the fire Christ had come to cast on the earth.

Her union with God was also the basis for that humility of hers remarked on by her contemporaries. She fostered an ease and naturalness in relationships which flowed from

a deep awareness of the dignity of all in God.

Her well known letter to Sister M. De Sales White captures aptly her sense of mission.

We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back. Oh may He look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feelings.⁶

It is her union with God that sends her "joyfully on to the end of [her] journey."

Participation in the Mission of Christ

If Catherine's sending forth is rooted in her union with God as a supporting and provident Father, her mission is shaped by her union with the One that was sent forth, Jesus. If there was any mystery of faith that grounded Catherine and her vision for the Sisters of Mercy, it was her keen perception of the reality of God in the Risen Jesus. The faith that sent

Catherine through the streets of Ireland's cities and towns was grounded in her love and union with Jesus whom she recognized in the poor to whom she went.

In her Rule, Catherine expressed this sense of participating in the mission of Christ. She believed the Sisters met Christ in the streets and homes of the poor. She exhorted them to bring to the poor the unwearied patience and mercy of Christ, and called them to be united with one another in the union and charity of Christ, to be grateful and loving because they were assisting Christ in his labors.⁷ Because she believed the work essentially was Christ's, Catherine exhorted the Sisters to place full confidence in him and his assistance as they labor with him remaining always conscious to labor as he does with patience and humility.

Catherine had a tender devotion to Jesus from her childhood. The Psalter of Jesus was her prayer in her youth and one that sustained her in her adult years. Her letters contain many references to her devotion to Jesus as Savior, as Redeemer. Her desire was that she be shaped into the mystery of Christ. Catherine constantly repeated, "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."⁸

Her trust in God enabled and empowered her to move outward to meet life. The Institute she founded did not have the traditional protection of the cloister. It was a life lived in service with God outside the convent wall as well as within, in the homes of the poor and in the sick beds of the cholera victims. Those applying to live this life must have "an ardent desire to be united with God." This ardent desire must stand to foster that union in place of the monastic cloister.

The Cross of Christ

Catherine's life, as does any life, met countless difficulties and deaths. She saw the difficulties that came to her as crosses from the hand of a God who loved her and continually formed her through the painful hardships of life. Catherine seems to view these crosses as part and parcel of life lived on this earth. She neither seeks them nor runs from them. Rather, she approaches them and meets their challenge, confident of the blessing that will be hers.

The cross of Christ was for her a source of strength. She saw it as a mark of God's providential favor, recognizing in its presence the sign of God's approval. She wrote to Mary Ann Doyle, "You are on the secure high road of the Cross—have the most strong and lively confidence that your convent will be firmly established for it certainly will."⁹

As Catherine formed the life of the fledgling institute, sickness and death among her Sisters and family members challenged her faith. She felt the early deaths of the Sisters were an indication of her failure in fidelity to God's inspirations.¹⁰ In response, she sought to reshape her life and the life of the Institute along the lines she deemed God might desire. A favorite prayer of hers, one written on the cover of her last copybook, reflects this spirit: "Mortify in me, dear Jesus, all that displeases Thee, and make me according to Thine own heart's desire."¹¹

In facing pain and hardships in the accomplishment of her mission, she felt God sustained her and, indeed, joined her to the life-giving

chaplaincy controversy and the closing of the house in Kingstown. In a poignant letter to Frances Warde, she asks, "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble before He calls me into his presence."¹³ Yet, her confidence in God tells her to "bless and love the fatherly Hand which has hurt" her, knowing that God "will soon come with both hands filled with favours and blessings."¹⁴

Suffering then is a mystery in life that perhaps she did not understand but that she certainly did not back away from. She urged others to expect suffering and to embrace it. She pledged to stand

The cross of Christ was for her a source of strength.

mystery of Christ. She understood the difference between an angry cross with its divisiveness and the cross of Christ that united her to the suffering of Christ.¹² When others met trials, she supported them out of her own faith that they too, by knowing God's presence in suffering, might remain faithful and know the merciful hand of God that came with blessings.

These crosses caused her no small amount of pain, as we know in the matter of the

both with her Sisters and with the poor in their sufferings. In embracing the cross, Catherine showed forth the fidelity and love of God revealed in the suffering crucified Christ.

Her Sense of Service

The mission of Jesus is to be in his humanity the revelation of who God is. Jesus makes visible a God of compassionate service. Catherine's participation in his mission sends her to

make the compassion of God visible in those places where God might seem to be most absent, to those persons most needing God's compassion, those marginalized by society.¹⁵

The intimate connection between God and the poor is expressed in one breath in Catherine's letter to the Reverend Gerald Doyle in 1837. "What is 'generally' requisite, for a Sister of Mercy" she says, "is an ardent desire to be united with God and serve the poor"¹⁶—one ardent desire, showing forth the origin and purpose of the mission in which she was engaged.

She is one with the poor, warning her Sisters not to serve them as if their benefactors.

Union and Charity

Catherine's union with God in Christ is expressed in her desire for union and charity with all she met. This desire for union and charity characterized her outlook, her efforts, her work, her relationships with others and the institute she established. It undergirds her spirituality, her sense of mission, and shapes the manner of her ministry. She sees all things in the oneness of God in Christ. She is one with the poor, warning her Sisters not to serve them as if their benefactors.¹⁷ She rejoiced that the only boast the new found institute could make was that the

"sun never went down on our anger."¹⁸ She took care that her own affectionate nature would not be a source of division. Writing to Mary Elizabeth Moore in Limerick, she says, "May our Blessed Redeemer dwell with you in such a manner as will shield you from everything could be any drawback, above all from particular attachments, or aught that could produce jealousy, coldness or party-spirit. I have no fear for you on the subject, but I have a conviction on my mind of its fatal consequences."¹⁹ Writing to Frances Warde three months before her death, she notes, "It is quite

impossible for any one in my situation to think of pleasing themselves. My pleasure must be in endeavouring to please all."²⁰

Her pleasing affectionate nature was manifest in the warmth of the openings and closings of her letters, in the sensitivity she brought to her service of the sick, in her simplicity, in the natural ease and manner that she fostered among the Sisters. All these speak of Catherine's own spirit and prizing of union and charity. After the death of her nephew James in May 1841, she wrote to Frances Warde, "I have nothing now to draw me

for one hour from my religious Sisters, where all my joy on earth is centered. Every year's experience of their worth attaches me more strongly, and I am as ardent for new ones as if I was beginning. I suppose it is the spirit of my state."²¹

Joining the Mission of the Church

The texts Catherine copied in her journals were the devotional texts of the Catholic faithful coming to her in and through the church of her time. They nurtured her piety and that of the young order. She was formed in and by this church. But her membership in it cannot be taken for granted. After all, her mother, brother, and sister all left the Roman Catholic church of their ancestors for a church more socially and intellectually acceptable to the social circle of their time. Catherine clung to the church of her father. It was a church in which she could ground her faith. Perhaps its recent history of persecution and its continued association with the Irish lower classes touched a cord in her heart. Perhaps like Dorothy Day she chose it because it was the church of the poor.

For whatever reason, Catherine sought from the church advice and approval for her work and for her new order. She listened carefully to Archbishop Murray when he suggested the founding of a religious order so that the work she had undertaken

might continue. She looked to the church to concur in that sending forth in Christ through approval of the rule for the new institute. Her mission originated not only from her own heart's union with God and her own sense of how that sent her forth, but also in the sending forth of the church.

This fidelity to mission entailed for Catherine an ongoing struggle to integrate her own sense of God's call with the authority and decision-making arena of the local church. Questions were raised by both clerics and laity as the house on Baggot Street took shape and opened its doors to serve the poor and house the small group of women committed to this work.²² The tensions are evident in her willingness to hand over the work to another order if the Archbishop desired that, in the chaplaincy controversy, in the allusion in her letters to the desire of the English bishops that she remain home at Baggot Street to tend to the formation of the English novices, in her quandary and anxiety over whether or not the Rule was approved.

Yet the church was her home and to it and through it she gave the gift of her charism, both of service to the poor and of union and charity. It would seem that for Catherine, the mission which shaped her life was not hers alone. She had a profound sense of the Risen Christ present in the Church gathered in and expressing this mystery.

Her Ardent Desire

In her letter to Gerald Doyle, Catherine had put forward what she looked for in a Sister of Mercy. "What seems requisite," she said, "is an ardent desire." It was not just that a candidate would seek to be united with God and serve the poor, but that this be her ardent desire. Perhaps this is a stock phrase. Yet in the context of her life and writings, we

see Catherine's love for such words as ardent, excite, animate, lively, dance! They indicate a passion for God and for life. Catherine's own life with God, her own spirituality, seems characterized by the qualities which these words express. It is this that she looked for in others.²³

She often lamented the cautious outlook of Mary Ann Doyle, the superior of the Tullamore foundation, wishing she could hear that Mary Ann was raising money for her works of mercy or preparing for new foundations. Catherine did not have much patience for slow cautious behavior, for what she called creep mice or creepy-crawlies.²⁴ She prized the lively spirits of new

members as well as old. In January of 1841, amidst the cold and poverty of the new foundation in Birr, she felt exhilarated by the spreading works of the Order. "Hurrah for foundations," she said, "makes the old young and the young merry."²⁵

Her playful spirit not only schemed against "the powers that be" in order to enjoy a visit with a postulant at one of the houses²⁶ but also saw in

Her mission originated not only from her own heart's union with God and her own sense of how that sent her forth, but also in the sending forth of the church.

her own declining health, the playfulness and humor of circumstances. Arriving exhausted and pain racked at the change of coaches on her return from Birr, she laughed to hear the coachman ask his replacement, "Has this little man come for this little woman?"²⁷

Ardent desires are powerful sources of energy, especially when they flow from one's union with God. Catherine was a woman of desire. She knew what she desired. We find it often expressed in her letters—her desire to hear from someone, her desire to see a friend, to enjoy the company of friends, her desire to do something for the poor girls loitering in the

streets of Kingstown, her desire to please God. By trusting and expressing her desires, she was perhaps led to her deepest desire and energized by her love for God. For here in the depths of our desire to be with God, God moves us to accomplish in grace God's desire. An ardent desire, a burning within one resulting from and in the love of God, is the animating force of Catherine's life and mission. It is the realization in her of the animating Spirit of God.²⁸

For Catherine, God is mercy seeking to come to full expression in and through the human heart, overcoming the woundedness and divisiveness of evil. God acts at the heart of reality bringing the universe

For Catherine, God is mercy seeking to come to full expression in and through the human heart, overcoming the woundedness and divisiveness of evil.

to salvation. When we enter that desire of God to make the fullness of God's life present, we are part of that great enterprise, part of that mission for which Christ was sent among us. In this mission we "assist Christ in his labors." Our hearts are "animated with gratitude and love" which enables us to place all our confidence in the grace and providence of God.

Animated by this Spirit of God we work with others cooperating in God's saving action

in them and in us as God brings humanity and the universe to unity in God's own Self. From this perspective, we understand what Catherine wrote to Mary Ann Doyle in July of 1841:

It is not a disposition to bestow gifts, like benevolent persons in the world, but bestows generosity of mind for the religious state. It is bestowing ourselves most freely and relying with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.²⁹

Union and charity, expressed in an ardent desire for union with God and with all others in God, especially the poor and suffering, stands at the heart of Catherine's sense of mission.

The Challenges

As we look to the future of our institute, Catherine's sense of mission offers us some challenges. The first challenge is that we strive to have our mission arise from an ardent desire for union with God. It must be our desire for God that sends us rather than a desire for ease, comfort, or security. When our prayer and contemplation foster an ability to see all things in Christ and in God, then we can

perceive the dynamism of God in our world today and can cooperate with God's action.

We are missioned not only to service in and to Christ, but our very missioning in Christ is a mission of union and charity. We often understand this charism in its claim on the quality of our community life. Do we see it operating in our mission and ministry? Does our deep desire for union with God form the substance of our desire for union and charity and become the animating spirit of our ministry? How does it affect our sometimes painful relationship within the church? Does it enable us to live in the hope that makes dialogue possible? Is Catherine's perception of the cross an inspiration to us here? Does it enable us to love creatively with fidelity and in truth?

How will our movement into the future be an expression of the Spirit of God and of Catherine? In the Institute, how can we touch the animating Spirit of God moving among us articulating the shape of our collective desire to make God known in our time?

As she transcribed texts in her journal, Catherine herself became the journal written by the Holy Spirit expressing the mystery of the One she ardently desired. Through her, the Spirit wrote those words in which Catherine expressed the mission of the Order which has sent so many thousands forth in ministry over the last 167 years.

Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor.³⁰



Notes

- 1 Mary C. Sullivan, "Catherine McAuley's Spiritual Reading and Prayers" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 57, 2 (1991) p. 132.
- 2 Sullivan, op. cit. p. 141.
- 3 Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947) Ia, q. 43; IIIa, q. 1, aa. 1, 2.
- 4 Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) p. 297.
- 5 Sister Mary Ignatia Neumann, R.S.M., editor. *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) p. 272.
- 6 "Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy," Ch 3, 3rd, 6th as found in Sullivan (1995) p. 298-99. Archbishop Murray altered Catherine's wording referring to the Sisters assisting Christ in his labors.
- 7 "Bermondsey Annals," in Sullivan (1995) p. 117.
- 8 *Letters*, p. 352.
- 9 Later in her life Catherine would remark on how the want of prudence and the deaths that occurred did not deter the wonderful providence of God toward the new institute (*Letters*. p. 155).
- 10 Sullivan (1995) pp. 111, 113.
- 11 *Letters*, p. 115.
- 12 *Letters*, p. 129.
- 13 *Letters*, p. 204.
- 14 "As her letters, her Rule, and biographical documents. . . reveal, Catherine evidently felt moved by a deep personal vocation, however intuitive and unself-conscious, to be herself a maternal and sisterly 'kindling' in her world of what she understood to be the tender fire of Jesus Christ's merciful purpose: 'by bearing some resemblance to him' by receiving and going out to meet him and love him in the poor and distressed; by suffering in solidarity with them; and by being for them, in God's name, the instruction, visitation, protection, and consolation which she believed God desired for them" (Sullivan [1995] pp. 329-30).
- 15 *Letters*, p. 80.
- 16 *Letters*, p. 353.
- 17 *Letters*, p. 155.
- 18 *Letters*, pp. 194-95.
- 19 *Letters*, p. 360.
- 20 *Letters*, pp. 337-38.
- 21 At the time of the blessing of the chapel in June of 1829, this criticism was very sharp. Catherine was not present at the ceremony. Cf. "Letters of Mary Ann Doyle to Mary Clare Augustine," in Sullivan (1995) p. 42.
- 22 Mary C. Sullivan, "Comforting and Animating: The Generative Work of Catherine McAuley" *The MAST Journal* 3, 1 (Fall 1992) 6-13.
- 23 *Letters*, pp. 272, 342.
- 24 *Letters*, p. 289.
- 25 *Letters*, p. 78.
- 26 *Letters*, p. 308.
- 27 The animation which she particularly sought and prayed for was. . . the vivacious generosity of spirit made possible by the Spirit of God, giving her companions an "ardent desire to understand perfectly the obligations of religious life and to enter into the real spirit of their state." *Letters*, p. 319 as quoted in Sullivan, *The MAST Journal* 3, 1 (Fall 1992) p. 10.
- 28 *Letters*, p. 353.
- 29 The Rule, ch 3, art 1, in Sullivan, (1995) p. 297.



Contributors

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Mary Celeste Rouleau R.S.M. (Burlingame) has been a Sister of Mercy over fifty years. She holds a Ph.D. from St. Louis University and has done post-doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. After finishing many years of teaching philosophy, she continues her research, writing, and presentations on Catherine McAuley's spirituality and the Mercy tradition. Some of her articles have appeared in *Review for Religious* and *The MAST Journal*. Last year she traveled to China, a gift acknowledging her years of serving as archivist for the Ricci Institute of Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco, which was founded on her Jesuit uncle's research.

Judith Schubert, R.S.M., (New Jersey), associate professor of theology at Georgian Court College, received her Ph.D. in theology (New Testament) from Fordham University. At present she directs the Master of Arts in Theology Program. She has published in *Bible Today* and *The Mast Journal*.

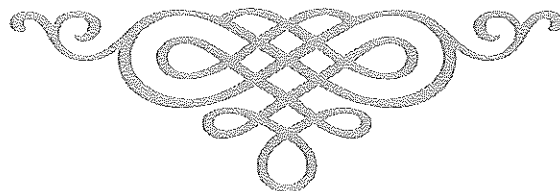
Maryellen Shuckerow, R.S.M., (Connecticut), ministers among the urban poor at St. Vincent De Paul Place as a development and public relations coordinator. Maryellen holds a masters degree in human service administration.

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Claudia Silke Ward, R.S.M., (St. Louis) is a native of Germany and, since 1996, a U.S. citizen. She recently professed first vows and currently serves as assistant principal at St. Alphonsus Elementary School in New Orleans. This inner city multicultural ministry witnesses to Claudia's passion for global justice and human rights.

Questions for Discussion

- Daly: How does the charism of union and charity find expression in your ministry? Which of the questions raised in the article resonate in your heart?
- Farley: What stories of inclusion, of unity across cultural lines have you experienced?
- Golshayan: What do you find in Rowshan Golshayan's description of mercy that helps open you further to the unity in diversity that Margaret Farley describes?
- O'Neill: As you reflect on the questions raised in the article on models of incorporation, what do you find most enriching for your own life? What would you recommend to an Institute Chapter?
- Reflections: How do you remember the experience of your early commitment in mercy? What do you say of it now?
- Rouleau: What challenging and beneficial experiences of multiculturalism have you encountered?
- Schubert: How do you see the Third Institute Chapter challenging the members to live their prophetic role?
- As you pray with these passages from Luke, what themes from the Institute Chapter move in your heart?
- Upton: What brought you to religious life and what keeps you?
- What constitutes the *habitus* of the life of a Sister of Mercy? How has it changed over time? How has it shaped and supported you over the years?
- How has your soul been shaped by your life-long search for God? What have you found on the journey?



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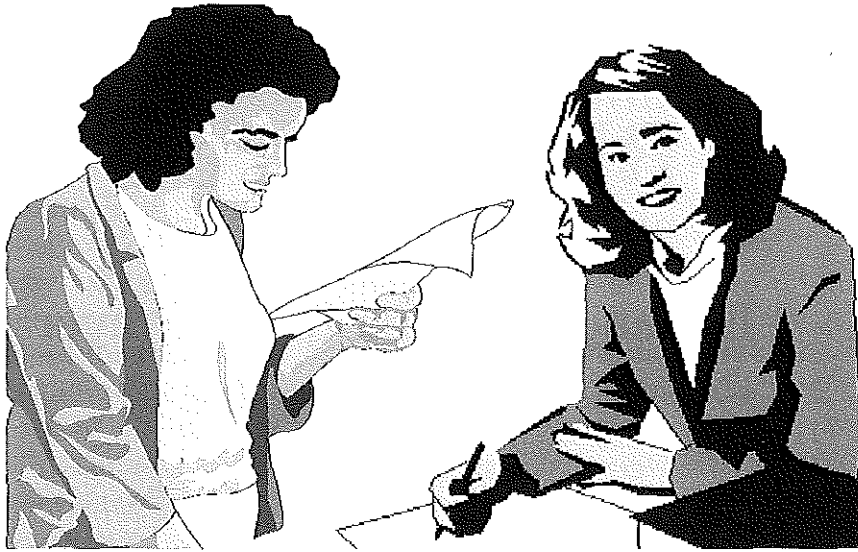
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MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

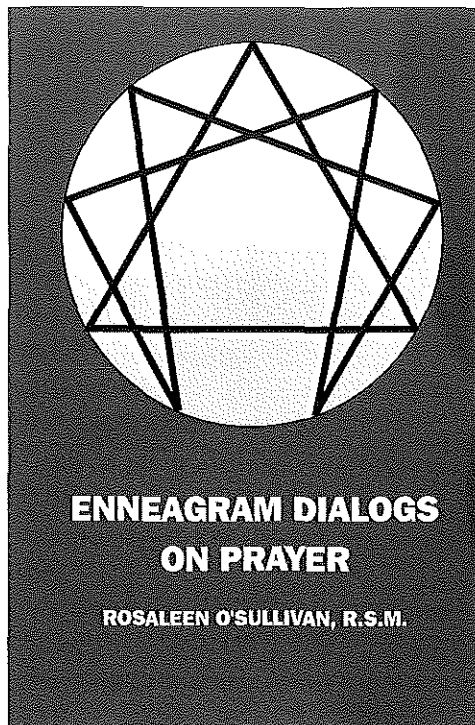
MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Julie Upton, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in the San Francisco Bay area prior to the CTSA in San Jose, June 8-11, 2000.

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

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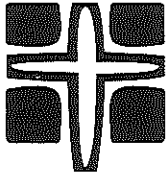


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