The MAST Journal

The Journal of the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology

Vol. 9, No. 3
Summer 1999

Mysticism in Prayer and Action

Summer 1999

Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

Mystics live in the same world as everyone else, but they count both temporal and eternal dimensions as compelling. Sometimes the distinction between these worlds is called "the secular and the sacred." The gospel mandate is, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." The "church-state" polarity, interpreted from the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, implies a separation between the jurisdiction of the state, and protection for the church zone to insure that government will not interfere with religious freedom. As even semi-mystics will agree, these zones are not always neatly separable. Religious persons may assume that since God's authority is greater than worldly powers, those who serve God enjoy immunity from the lesser power of secular authorities. In this mythological structure, God ultimately trumps all Caesars.

However, in a recent spate of clerical sexual-abuse cases, Church-dedicated persons have suffered a rude awakening from this long-held assumption of immunity from civil authority. One illustration is the case of John Bollard, a former Jesuit seminarian at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley who sued four Jesuits, including the president of JSTB, and the California, Oregon and Maryland provinces of the society. He alleged that for six years he was repeatedly subjected to sexual harassment by his superiors, that he received pornographic materials through the mail from them, and that they made unwanted comments, solicitations and invitations to him of a sexual nature. After Bollard complained to the provincial in 1995 and 1996, and nothing was done, he left the society, in what was legally framed "constructive wrongful termination."

The lower court granted dismissal of the case of sexual harassment. It accepted the Jesuits' argument that hearing the claim would involve the court in adjudicating the relationship between the Society of Jesus and its clergy members, thus unconstitutionally interfering with the church's autonomy. (1998 WL273011 (N.D.Cal.))

On appeal, the Ninth Circuit Court reversed this decision and granted Bollard the right to sue the Jesuits for sexual harassment. The unanimous three-judge decision determined that in such a case, Bollard had the same rights as a layperson, such as a parishioner who is entitled to bring suit against a priest for sexual misconduct. Since Bollard did not ask to be reinstated as a candidate for ordination, the court's involvement would not interfere with Jesuit autonomy in determining a man's qualifications for the ministry. Since sexual harassment was behavior the Jesuits rejected, there would be no danger of the court's entanglement with Church doctrine, belief or official Church practice. (1999 WL 10756222 (9th Cir. (Cal.)))

It is probably instructive for those of us with mystical heritage to distinguish all citizens' accountability to civil law from a claim of "ministerial exemption" because of vows or dedication to religious concerns. The faith paradigm of some persons includes a reflex to resist civil authority, reviving the heroic spirituality of ancient martyrs persecuted by Roman emperors. However, the decision in *Bollard* is not about the civil authorities mounting a persecution against Catholics on account of their faith. *Bollard* concerns accountability of all persons in religion to those civil standards which theology equates with obedience to God's commands. The decision indicates that here, Caesar speaks as the friend of God.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., Editor

Images of God and Self in the Lives of Late Medieval Catholic Women Mystics

Eileen Chamberlain

At first glance, it might seem that there is not much to connect contemporary feminists with medieval Catholic women. Yet, a range of contemporary scholars have revisited the lives of medieval women mystics and uncovered some surprising stories of courageous, autonomous, authoritative women, who spoke and wrote with the type of authentic voices contemporary feminists often seek.

This study explores the picture that has emerged from recent feminist reassessments of the lives of Catholic women mystics in the late middle ages, a time generally viewed as particularly negative for women. A curious irony emerges from this research. On the one hand, history records that stricter rules were imposed on women religious during this period and that there was a significant loss of autonomy and authority in women's spiritual lives.[1] Almost total enclosure of women religious was enforced, and reliance on a male priest for spiritual guidance became the norm.[2] The influence and control of male clergy over the laity (including nuns), increased due to emphasis on their sole authority to dispense the sacrament in the form of the Eucharist.[3] The direct connection between women religious and the sacred was defined out of Church doctrine.

Despite these recorded changes, feminist scholarship reveals another side to this story. During the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, despite retrenchment of male clerical authority over women religious, there was a flowering of women mystics who experienced direct communion with God and "successfully" communicated their visions and experiences to others. A cluster of women arose who were inspired by the divine spirit of God without clerical mediation, and felt free to bypass clerical authority despite Church policy. The unearthed writings by and about these remarkable women manifest not a loss, but a blossoming of their sense of self and connection to the divine.

During the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, despite retrenchment of male clerical authority over women religious, there was a flowering of women mystics who experienced direct communion with God and successfully communicated their visions and experiences to others.

Ironically, their strong sense of self and their ability to communicate that sense to others are reminiscent of the findings in the ground-breaking contemporary work, *Women's Ways' of Knowing*. The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* forged a new vision of human development based on the experiences of women as learners in a university setting. They sought to articulate a vision of a fully developed self that did not neglect or denigrate attributes that are manifest in women. They discovered a path of development culminating in a phase labeled "constructed knowledge," in which women struggle to find their own voices—their own way of expressing what they knew and cared about. According to these findings, "constructed knowers" ultimately want their voices and actions to make a difference to other people and in the world, and they succeed in finding a way to achieve this goal

without losing themselves in the process.[4]

This path to "constructed knowing" seems to be an apt way to describe the struggle of many of the medieval mystics. Similar to the contemporary "constructed knowers," many medieval mystics learned to speak in a unique and authentic voice. They did not feel compelled to work within the frames and systems provided by external authorities, but instead created their own frames. Rather than extricate themselves from the process of acquiring knowledge, (as was the case in studies on male development), these women relied on themselves to rise to a new way of thinking.[5] Like the contemporary women studied, the medieval women mystics,

> no longer want[ed] to suppress or deny aspects of the self in order to avoid conflict or simplify their lives . . . These women want[ed] to embrace all the pieces of the self in some ultimate sense of the whole—daughter, friend, mother, lover, nurturer, thinker, artist, advocate . . . There [was] an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external, in all its complexity. And they want[ed] to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity.[6]

Medieval mystics fit the description of constructivists most aptly in their ability to establish communion with what they are trying to understand; "They use the language of intimacy to describe the relationship between knower and known."[7] What is most notable about the lives of the late medieval Catholic women mystics is that listening to God—the one with whom they are most intimate, the one whom they are trying to understand and with whom they commune—does not diminish the mystic's capacity to hear her own voice. The capacity to speak with and listen to God is accomplished while simultaneously speaking with and listening to the self.[8]

In light of the reported enclosure and increased clerical control over women religious, what accounts for the blossoming of women's sense of spiritual authority during this period?

This study considers recent feminist scholarship as it recasts the lives of medieval women mystics. Part 1 outlines contemporary feminist historical retrieval of previously unreported material about the lives of women. Part 2 discusses feminist assessments of church history and doctrine on women. Part 3 applies recent feminist theology about the importance of metaphorical language for God to human development to the lives of the late medieval mystics.

Two questions are used as a guide to the development of self and voice manifest by the medieval women mystics:
1) How did medieval women mystics envision God?
2) How did they view themselves in relation to God?

The evidence shows that medieval Catholic women mystics imaged both God and self in some surprising ways. Their modes of communicating their sense of God and their relationship to God did not match dominant patriarchal notions of how a female self should be seen in relation to God.

Many medieval mystics learned to speak in a unique and authentic voice. They did not feel compelled to work within the frames and systems provided by external authorities, but instead created their own frames.

By considering these questions, it is my hope that contemporary women may gain insight into how and why these women blossomed despite their circumstances.

I. Contemporary Feminist Historical Retrieval

Contemporary feminist scholarship is engaged in a complex endeavor. Feminists are absorbed in virtually every intellectual and practical realm, from science to anthropology, history to literature, psychology to politics. The multidimensional, multidirectional task taken on by feminists combines a critique of the detrimental effects of patriarchy with creative reassessment of the important, although previously unrecognized, contributions made by women throughout history.

In this regard, feminist efforts seem to contain both forward looking and backward looking dimensions. In some instances, feminists are engaged in constructing new ways of thinking within a given field. For example, in the widely acclaimed *Women's Ways of Knowing*, discussed above, a whole new way of conceptualizing and evaluating human development emerged from data that drew on experiences of women.

Other feminists are involved in revisiting the past and reclaiming lost parts of history. The distinction made by Gerda Lerner, between history as it has been recorded and history as it occurred has been helpful to these efforts. As she notes, it is in recorded history that women have been obliterated or marginalized.[9] Historian Elise Boulding agrees:

> We have created a myth called the "Evolution of Mankind" from our fragments. One of the many strange things about this myth is that it does not include women. The history of humankind has been written as if it were the history of Western Man.[10]

This awareness has led to a surge in feminist efforts to rediscover lost aspects of traditions and unearth important stories about women from history. By researching the past for previously neglected material about women, feminists are beginning to create a more accurate picture of the history of humankind.

The importance of this project, however, goes well beyond the provision of greater accuracy. Feminist renderings of history show that so-called "western civilization" has been marked by patriarchy, and that patriarchy has been extremely detrimental to the women of this civilization. Yet, what has only recently been appreciated is that the psychological impact of not recording and/or distorting the role of women in history has been as detrimental as the sexist practices that have caused direct injuries to women.

While the invisibility of women in the historical record makes the effort to include them in a reassessment of history extremely difficult, even more damaging is that "the fact of women's invisibility in the record tends to pull feminists toward the women-as-victim position on women"[11]

> The mental constructs explaining the world have been androcentric, partial, distorted. Women have been defined out and marginalized in every philosophical system and have therefore had to struggle not only against exclusion but against a content that defines them as subhuman and deviant.[12]

In many instances, it is the distorted images of women as taught to men and women, that have been more detrimental to women than de jure practices of discrimination.

II. Feminist Review of Church History and Doctrine

The problem of distorted images of women as deviant and subhuman is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the Catholic church. Church history as it has been recorded provides a relatively unidimensional story about the subordinate role of women in relation to male clergy in the church and in relation to men in the general society. This has been achieved through the combination of patriarchy and androcentrism in the church.

Patriarchy, coined from the Greek *pater/patros* (father) and *arche* (origin, ruling power, or authority), is a form of social organization in which power is always in the hand of the dominant man or men, with others ranked below in a graded series of subordinations reaching down to the least powerful, who form a large base. Religious patriarchy is one of the strongest forms of this structure, in that the power of the ruling men is said to be delegated by God and exercised by divine mandate.[13]

Androcentrism, from the Greek *aner/andros* (male human being), is the name commonly given to the pattern of thinking and acting that takes the characteristics of ruling men to be normative for all humanity. In theology, androcentrism ensures that ruling men will be the norm for language, not only about human nature, but also about God.[14] The androcentric perspective within church doctrine has ensured that whenever a distinction has been made between men and women, it has associated an inferior status to women.

Beliefs in the God-given inferiority of women, that women have weaker minds and intellects, that women are more subject to emotions and sexual temptations than men; and that women need to be ruled by men, have been taught through the centuries.[15] It is impossible to

calculate the devastating effect of these teachings on women's development. Even extraordinary women have had to struggle against these notions, which deprived them of authority and authenticity.[16]

Contemporary feminists, however, have been working to uncover the misogynist tendencies of the Catholic church over time. Feminist biblical scholars have labored to reinterpret important texts within the tradition while feminist theologians have highlighted the androcentric norms at work in the Church institutional hierarchy. In addition, feminist historians have been working to dig up previously unreported or underemphasized positive aspects of the lives of Catholic women. All of this work has helped provide women in the present, who see themselves as part of this faith tradition, a much needed frame of reference by which to view themselves.[17]

As a contemporary Catholic feminist, I have been greatly uplifted by this promising multidimensional and multidirectional work. By combining a critique of church doctrine on women with a new perspective on the rich history of women within the church, contemporary feminists have made it possible for many women in the present to reconcile their feminism with their Catholic faith.

While officially it is said that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either sex, the daily language of preaching, worship catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman.

III. Application of Contemporary Feminist Theology to the Lives of Late Medieval Catholic Women Mystics

One of the primary contributions made by feminist theologians in the church has been to shed light on the pervasive exclusion of women from the realm of public symbol formation and decision making. As Elizabeth Johnson notes,

> In the church, this exclusion has been effective virtually everywhere: In ecclesial creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological systems, liturgical worship, patterns of spirituality, visions of mission, church order, leadership and discipline. It has been stunningly effective in speech about God.[18]

The consequence of this exclusion has been the subordination of the needs of women to an organization designed chiefly by men.

A. Feminist Theology on the Importance of Language about God

Perhaps, the central criticism by feminists within the church has been directed to the virtually exclusive use of male metaphors in official discourse on God and the destructive effect of this practice on the spiritual lives of women. In the eyes of Sandra Schneiders, for example, "God's presumed masculinity has functioned as the ultimate religious legitimization of the unjust social structures which victimize women."[19] Similarly, she finds that "[t]he masculinity of God and Jesus has been used, in the practical sphere, to deny the likeness of women to God and to Christ and to exclude them from full participation in the life of the Church."[20]

Rosemary Radford Reuther also has focused much of her work on the connection between male oriented "God talk" and sexism.[21] She notes that in the Catholic tradition, God is modeled after a ruling patriarch and is seen addressing the class of ruling men directly, while ruling men are seen as God's representatives on earth. Symbolically, women become associated with the servant class ruled over by the patriarchal class. A symbolic hierarchy is set up: God → Male → Female.[22] Women relate to men as men relate to God.

> While officially it is rightly and consistently said that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, yet the daily language of preaching, worship catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as a male than as a female. The symbol of God functions. Upon examination, it becomes clear that this exclusive speech about God serves

> in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women. Wittingly or not, it undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God.[23]

> disrespect toward their fellow creatures. On the other hand, speech about a beneficent and loving God who forgives offenses would turn the faith community toward care for the neighbor and mutual forgiveness.[26]

The problem for contemporary Catholic women of the exclusive use of male metaphors for God, has perhaps been stated most succinctly in the memorable words of Mary Daly: If God is male, male is God.

The problem for contemporary Catholic women of the exclusive use of male metaphors for God, has perhaps been stated most succinctly in the memorable words of Mary Daly: "If God is male, male is God."[24]

Why is the way we talk about God so important to these feminist thinkers? Elizabeth Johnson explains that the way a community uses language to speak about God implicitly represents what the community takes to be "the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty."[25] The symbol of God functions as the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world:

> Such speaking, in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis. A religion, for example, that would speak about a warlike God and extol the way he smashes his enemies to bits would promote aggressive group behavior. A community that would acclaim God as an arbitrary tyrant would inspire its members to acts of impatience and

Speech about God shapes the life orientation not only of the larger faith community, but also guides its individuals. God is the focus of a person's absolute trust. Notions of God undergird and implicitly give direction to all of a believing person's enterprises, choices, and relationships:

> The symbol of God functions. Neither abstract in content nor neutral in its effect, speaking about God sums up, unifies, and expresses a faith community's sense of ultimate mystery, the world view and expectation of order devolving from this, and the concomitant orientation of human life and devotion.[27]

B. How did Medieval Catholic Women Mystics Envision God?

Thy heart's desire shalt thou lay nowhere
But in mine own Divine Heart
And on My human breast.
There alone wilt thou find comfort
And be embraced by My Spirit.[28]
—Mechtilde of Magdeburg (1210?-1297?)

One of the noteworthy aspects of the visions and writings of the medieval Catholic women mystics was that their imagery for God does not fit into a patriarchal mold of a righteous judge and warrior. Rather, their imagery took on a wide range of new and recovered elements from pre-Christian times.

Perhaps the most far reaching of all medieval reconceptualizations of the divine came from Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century English mystic.[29] Julian sees God as an androgynous figure with male and female attributes:

> And thus in our Creation God almighty is our kindly Father, and God Who is all wisdom is our kindly mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Ghost—all of Whom are one God and one Lord . . . Thus in our Father God we have our being, and in our Mother of mercy we have our reforming and our restoration, in Whom our parts are united and all made into perfect men, by the yielding and giving grace of the Holy Ghost we are fulfilled . . . for our nature is whole in each person of the Trinity which is one God.[30]

In other instances, Julian uses the image of mothering to describe the type of nurturing, loving, and disciplining a soul receives from God:[31]

> To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and understanding, and it is God. Although our bodily birth may be insignificant, meek and humble compared to our spiritual birth, yet it is He Who enables creatures to give birth . . . He is our Mother in nature by the operation of grace in humble part for love of the higher part.[32]

Julian's conceptualization of Jesus is also far removed from patristic

notions. She imagines Christ as our "True Mother" who cares for all of our needs beyond what any earthly mother might do.[33] Julian sees God, not as monolithic warrior and judge, but as an all-loving mysterious Trinity: Father of our being, Christ as birthing Mother of all, and Our Lady, Mary Mother "in whom we are all enclosed and born of her in Christ."[34]

The conception of Christ as nursing mother was not uncommon among medieval women mystics. Several medieval mystics graphically envisioned Jesus placing them at his breast, allowing them to suck and be fed as his child. Beatrice of Nazareth, the thirteenth-century Flemish mystic, for example, meditated on how Christ "fed her with the milk of consolation and maternal affection."[35] Similarly, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) had a vision of Christ as nursing mother just after she drank the pus from the diseased breast of a sick woman:[36]

> With that, he tenderly placed his right hand on her neck, and drew her toward the wound in his side. "Drink, daughter, from my side," he said, "and by that draught your soul shall become enraptured with such delight that your very body, which for my sake you have denied, shall be inundated with its overflowing goodness." Drawn close . . . to the outlet of the Fountain of Life, she fastened her lips upon that sacred wound, and still more eagerly the mouth of her soul, and there she slaked her thirst.[37]

For a variety of other medieval mystics, Christ was imaged as food to a starving soul. Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510), for example, imaged Christ's body and blood as the food and drink that can satisfy the insatiable hunger and thirst of the human soul.[38] In a vision of the bleeding Christ, after a Lenten confession, she envisioned Jesus saying,

> If by taking my blood and giving it to man to drink, I could make known to him this truth [about love], I would give it all for love of him.[39]

Hunger is the basic image of Catherine's desire for encounter with God. Eating bread is the metaphor used most frequently to elaborate on the spiritual encounter with God:

> Let us imagine that in the whole world there was but one bread and that it could satisfy the hunger of all. Just to look at it would be to nourish oneself. That bread is what a healthy man would seek; and when he could not find it or eat it, his hunger would increase indefinitely. Aware that that bread alone could assuage his hunger, he would also know that without it his hunger could never abate it.[40]

Hadewijch, the thirteenth-century Flemish poet and mystic also used food as a basic metaphor for Christ. Once, as she was about to go to communion, she reported having seen Jesus, "the sweetest spouse of the soul, standing at the altar," with his outstretched arms, drawing her to him as she "desired the saving reception of his body, in marvelous tasting."[41] In her poem, "Love's Seven Names," she asserts,

> *And we do eat him, of this we can be certain.*
> *But because he remains so undevoured,*
> *And so untouched, and so undesired.*
> *Each of us remains uneaten by him and separated so far from each other.*
> *But let him who is held captive by these chains*
> *Not cease to eat his fill,*
> *If he wishes to know and taste beyond his dreams,*
> *The Godhead and the Manhood!*[42]

The conception of Christ as nursing mother was not uncommon among medieval women mystics. Several medieval mystics graphically envisioned Jesus placing them at his breast, allowing them to suck and be fed as his child.

C. Feminist Theory on the Importance of Self Image

A second important criticism of feminists within the Church has been the negative light in which church doctrine has portrayed women and taught women to view themselves. For example, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), one of the most commanding thinkers of all time in the Catholic church, lived, wrote and had much influence during the thirteenth century. Aquinas had a view on the nature of female persons as "something defective

and misbegotten."[43] His views manifest the misogynist androcentrism at work in Church doctrine on women:

> Only as regards nature in the individual is the female something defective and misbegotten. For the active power in the seed of the male tends to produce something like itself, perfect in masculinity; but the procreation of a female is the result either of the debility of the active power, of some unsuitability of the material or of some change effected by external influences, like the south wind, for example, which is damp, as we are told by Aristotle.[44]

According to Aquinas, the natural consequence of the defect manifest in women is the need for women to be governed by men: "by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates."[45] From woman's natural inferiority in the order of creation, Aquinas "reasonably" deduces a host of consequences, such as that children should love their fathers more than their mothers; women should not be ordained priests since priesthood signifies the eminence of Christ and women do not signify what pertains to eminence; women should not preach since this is an exercise of wisdom and authority of which they are not capable.[46]

When discussing "the human person" in non-gender specific cases, church doctrine consistently incorporates an androcentric bias and thereby undermines any aspect of what might otherwise be a distinct path to human development in women. An obvious case in point is the example of what constitutes "conversion" in church doctrine.

In classical theology, the category of conversion connoted the process of disowning oneself or ego in order to be filled with divine grace.[47] Feminist analysis has pointed out that this approach can be fruitful when it is spoken, as it originally was, from the perspective of the ruling male whose primordial temptation was likely to be the sin of pride or self assertion over against others. If pride is the block on the path to God, then decentering the ego may be the best way to be filled with divine grace.[48] But when this language is applied to persons already relegated to the margins of significance and excluded from the exercise of self-definition, the language of conversion as loss of self, turning from love of self, functions as a way to rob them of power and maintain them in a subordinate position:

> Analysis of women's experience is replete with the realization that within patriarchal systems women's primordial temptation is not to pride and self-assertion but rather to the lack of it, to diffuseness of personal center, overdependence on others for self identity, drifting, and fear of recognizing one's own competence . . . In this situation, grace comes to [women] not as the call to loss of self, but as empowerment toward self-discovery, and affirmation of one's strength, giftedness, and responsibility . . . It involves a turning away from demeaning female identity and toward new ownership of the female self as God's good gift.[49]

Perhaps more than any other attribute, the late medieval women mystics manifest a strong sense of themselves as "God's good gifts." Despite heavily androcentric Church norms for human development and conversion toward God, these women resisted the trap, identified by contemporary feminists, of failing to develop themselves as agent of God.

D. How did Medieval Catholic Women Mystics View Themselves in Relation to God?

> When in a vision, Christ told Gertrude the Great that he would bring to pass whatever she promised in his name, he touched her tongue, saying, "Behold, I give my words into your mouth."[50]

Women mystics of the late medieval period seem not to have internalized negative ideas about their femaleness, but instead emphasize their specifically female bodily attributes as means to greater unity and intimacy with the divine.[51] For example, in numerous instances, women mystics in this period describe themselves as nursing, cradling and fondling the Christ child. In other cases, they imagine themselves as the child of Christ, nursing at his breast, and even experiencing the sensation of feeding on the blood of Christ as they receive the Eucharist.[52]

Another image that conveys the sense of deep intimacy between self and God was that of the woman mystic as the bride or lover of Christ. Such images occur repeatedly in medieval writings. One of the most notable such visions comes from Hadewijch of Brabant, the

Dutch mystic of the thirteenth century. Hadewijch expresses her vision of herself as Christ's lover in extremely memorable erotic imagery:

> On a Pentecost I had a vision at dawn. The mass was being celebrated in the church and I was there. My heart and my veins and all my limbs shook and trembled with longing . . . and I felt in so fierce and terrible a mood that I thought I could not satisfy my beloved and my beloved did not fill me entirely: it seemed I might die raging against myself and dying had to continue to rage against myself . . . I longed to enjoy my beloved, to recognize and feel him in order to experience my humanity in fullest measure by feeling his humanity . . . Then he came in the shape and dress of the man, as he was on the day when he first gave us his body; entirely human and male, wonderful and beautiful with a glorified face he approached me in an attitude of humility, as someone who entirely belongs to another. He gave himself to me in the form of the sacrament, in the form in which one usually partakes of it; and afterward he himself offered me the Cup to drink with its taste and form as usual. But then he came to me himself, took me into his arms and pressed me to him; and all my limbs felt his in the fullness of my heart's desire and my humanity . . . But after a short time I lost the beautiful man in his external form. I saw him disappear and melt into Oneness so I could no longer separate him as outside of myself and I could no longer perceive him. It seemed to me that we had become one without distinction . . . And so I rested in my beloved in dread and awe, so that I fully melted into him and there remained nothing of myself to myself; I was transformed and accepted into the spirit; and this vision lasted for hours.[53]

Although the institutional Church had moved toward the view that clerical mediation between God and the laity was the primary mode of human connection to God, the women mystics of medieval times had some other ideas.

Another expression of oneself as Christ's lover comes from Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210?–1297?):

> *Lord, now am I a naked soul*
> *And thou a God most Glorious!*
> *Our two-fold intercourse is Love Eternal*
> *Which can never die.*[54]

Despite the fact that certain influential patristic figures, such as Augustine and Tertullian, had argued that women were not created in the image of God, numerous women mystics seemed not to absorb this notion. Instead, mystics such as Catherine of Siena embraced their femaleness as the avenue through which they could most closely experience *imitatio Dei*. Catherine addressed God directly about how she viewed herself in relation to God: "By the light of understanding within your light I have tasted and seen your depth, eternal Trinity, and the beauty of your creation. Then when I considered myself in you, I saw that I am your image."[55]

In her description of contemplative prayer, Clare of Assisi (1195–1253) wrote: "Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation."[56]

Although the institutional Church had moved toward the view that clerical mediation between God and the laity was the primary mode of human connection to God, the women mystics of medieval times had some other ideas. Reassessment of the writings by and about women mystics in the late middle ages reveals a story of women with supreme confidence in their own connection to God, who developed a sense of authority and autonomy despite Church doctrine on their "natural inferiority" and their need for male clerics as an avenue to God.[57]

The German nun Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), for example, viewed herself as an instrument of God's power. She expressed total confidence in her God-inspired gifts and referred to herself as "God's little trumpet."[58] Hildegard characteristically defied clerical authority on several occasions and based her defiance on her own "inner light," her direct relation to God. She never doubted that her mystical revelations were of greater authority than Church

commands. Rather than shrink away from her divinely ordained work, Hildegard compared herself to Moses, and did not hesitate in her role as prophet and spiritual leader:

> Then in a true vision I saw these tribulations had come to me according to the exemplar of Moses, for when he led the children of Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea into the desert, they, murmuring against God, caused great affliction to Moses too . . . So God let me be oppressed in some measure by the common people, by my relatives, and by some of the women who had remained with me, when they lacked essential things.[59]

Hildegard overcame the obstacle the church tried to impose on all women, of disbelieving her own authority and ability to be a spiritual leader and teacher. One of the notable attributes of the visions of the medieval Catholic women mystics is the extent to which they imaged their own agency in bringing both God and Jesus to the world for others.[60] One such compelling vision of female agency is reported by Christina Ebner (1277–1356), a German nun at the Dominican convent in Engelthal. As part of her journey toward re-living the life of Jesus in *imitatio Christi,* she describes her experience of giving birth to her Lord Jesus Christ:

> At a time when she was well and 24 years old she dreamed that she was pregnant with our lord. She was so filled with grace that every part of her body felt this grace. And she experienced such tenderness toward the child that she had to guard herself for his sake . . . And after a while she dreamed that she gave birth to him without any pain and she experienced such extraordinary joy that after she had carried it within her for a while she felt she could no longer deny it and so she took the child in her arms and brought it before all those assembled in the refectory and said, 'Rejoice with me . . . I conceived Jesu and now have given birth to him' and she showed them the child and when she was full of joy as she walked around with him, she awoke.[61]

IV. Conclusion

How do we begin to understand the lives of people who lived so many centuries ago? This is a question that all historians must ask of themselves.

Historians of women have an additional question to ask. How can we avoid the pattern of the past, where women in their own time come to realizations about who they are, how important they are to their world, but where this self-awareness goes unrecorded and is lost to future generation: "So, generation after generation, they struggle for insights others had already had before them."[62]

Material recovered by contemporary feminist scholars, written by and about late medieval Catholic women mystics, is in many ways surprising and uplifting. For me, perhaps the most surprising aspect of the lives of the late medieval Catholic mystics was their total self-confidence in their connection to God and their agency in the world. Despite a general lack of respect for women in their culture, these medieval mystics chose to listen to a different voice and to view themselves as agents of God.

Although the common, contemporary impression of medieval women is that they lived lives of total self-denigration, without need for self-fulfillment, without authority, and without impact in the world, the evidence uncovered by recent scholarship suggests that these impressions are incorrect. On the contrary, perhaps it is contemporary women who could take a lesson from the medieval mystics about how to cultivate our own sense of our divinely ordained authority and about how we can communicate that authority to others.

Perhaps it is contemporary women who could take a lesson from the medieval mystics about how to cultivate our own sense of our divinely ordained authority and communicate that authority to others.

Notes

1 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy,* (Oxford University Press, 1993) p.73.

2 Ibid, p. 173.
3 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (University of California Press, 1987) p. 27.
4 Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, (Basic Books, 1986, 1997) p. 133.
5 Ibid., pp. 134–35.
6 Ibid., p. 137.
7 Ibid., p. 143.
8 Ibid., p. 145.
9 Gerda Lerner, p.4.
10 Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*, (Sage Publications, 1992) pp. 3–4.
11 Ibid., p.7.
12 Lerner, p. 5.
13 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (Crossroads, 1995) p. 23.
14 Ibid., pp. 23–24.
15 Lerner, pp. 46–47.
16 Ibid.
17 See, e.g., Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*, (Sage Publications, 1992; Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of the Lives of Seven Women Mystics*, (HarperSanFranscisco, 1993).
18 Johnson, p. 4.
19 Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, (Paulist Press, 1991) p. 5.
20 Ibid., p. 6.
21 See e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 1993).
22 Ibid., p. 53.
23 Johnson, pp. 3–4.
24 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.
25 Johnson, p. 4.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Quoted in Carol Lee Flinders, p. 57.
29 Lerner, p. 90.
30 Ibid.
31 Bynum, p. 266.
32 Lerner, p. 90.
33 Flinders, pp. 96–98.
34 Ibid., p. 95.
35 Bynum, p. 163.
36 Ibid., p. 166.
37 Ibid., p. 172.
38 Ibid., pp. 184–186.
39 Ibid., p. 185.
40 Ibid., p. 184.
41 Ibid., p. 162.
42 Ibid., pp. 157–158.
43 Johnson, p. 24.
44 Ibid.
45 Cited in Johnson, p. 24.
46 Johnson, p. 25.
47 Ibid., p. 64.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Bynum, p. 231.
51 Ibid., pp. 277–302.
52 Lerner, p. 90.
53 Ibid., p. 89.
54 Flinders, p. 58.
55 Bynum, p. 261.
56 Flinders, p. 23.
57 Lerner p. 51.
58 Ibid., pp. 47–49.
59 Ibid., p. 58.
60 Ibid., p. 92.
61 Ibid., p. 93.
62 Ibid., p. 19.

The Relationship of Ruth and Naomi in the Book of Ruth

Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M.

"We're not ready to start, we haven't finished connecting yet." Thus spoke a woman presumably voicing the concerns of those who were seated near her at a table in the cafeteria of the Wellington Catholic Center, which in the evenings became my classroom. This incident took place at the end of the first half-hour of the first class. It was a three-hour class in a series of six classes on women in the New Testament. The woman was one of twelve Pakeha (i.e., New Zealanders of European descent) and two Irish women in their 40s and 50s. Most had university degrees and were a mixture of practicing and non-practicing Catholics, two Anglicans and one Presbyterian. Two were unable to pay the $50 (US$25) course fee. The women were seated in three groups discussing their responses to study questions based on reading material mailed to them three weeks prior. The first article was about women in Mediterranean societies at the time of the New Testament. The second article was about the omission of stories of women from the Lectionary. The task for each group was to record four or five significant points from the discussion of their individual answers. They were then to share those points with the large group. When the woman made the above comment, I was very conscious of the material to be covered during the next six weeks. I therefore ignored her concern and continued with mine.

During the next five weeks, I encouraged the participants to sit in different groups as they took part in the various activities and tasks, but noted that they chose to remain in the first evening's groups. Upon reflection, it seemed to me that bonds and connections had been established in the first week that the women wished to pursue. What were these bonds and what did the woman mean by saying, "We haven't finished connecting yet"? How significant are relationships for women? Can relationship be proposed as a governing category of the spiritual life for women today? Are there stories from the biblical tradition that speak to this issue of women's experience? How can they be reappropriated for today?

Many commentators on the book of Ruth suggest that Ruth's oath of loyalty to Naomi (1:16–17) is one of the most beautiful and profound expressions of affection and love to be found in all literature. As Phyllis Trible writes passionately:

> Consequently, not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth's. And there is more. Not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but she has also reversed sexual allegiance. A young woman has committed herself to the life of an older woman rather than to search for a husband, and she has made this commitment not "until death us do part" but beyond death. One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.[1]

I would like to examine the book of Ruth as a classic text and focus on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Their friendship may be viewed as a helpful model for relationships among ordinary. Women's spirituality, our way of being and doing in the world and our effort to appropriate Christ's saving work, concerns who we are before God, before others, and before all creation. It is our journey toward wholeness and fullness of life, leading to a concern for others and all creation.[2]

In my experience, women's spirituality is nourished by generative friendships. These friendships allow us to speak and hear the truth of our lives and call forth creativity and inventiveness the like of which we could never imagine. The area of women's relationships is a significant topic for spirituality today for three reasons: First, Joann Wolski Conn suggests that for women the possibilities for humanity/spirituality are restricted in that most models of human development peak at autonomy, while women's experience indicates that maturity

must include not only autonomy but relationship.[3] Second, she contends that Christian teaching and practice have significantly contributed to the restriction of women's maturity in that women have been consistently taught to value only one type of religious development—self-denial and the sacrifice of one's own needs for the sake of others. Third, in describing the effects of male dominance in the area of spirituality, Sandra Schneiders states that women have rarely been encouraged to imitate the great women of salvation history. She maintains that the predominance of Christian warfare over friendship as a model for the spiritual life has expressed the concerns, interests, and experience of men and excluded women's.[4] For these three reasons, the topic of women's experience of relationship is significant in spirituality today.

Method

Spirituality as an academic discipline is intrinsically interdisciplinary due to the multi-faceted nature of the object of its study, i.e., transformative Christian experience.[5] In proposing relationship as a governing category of the spiritual life for women today through an examination and reappropriation of the Book of Ruth, I shall employ one of the constitutive disciplines, scripture, as well as several of the problematic disciplines, feminist theology and women's psychology. I employ the "appropriative method" proposed by Michael Downey, which involves three interrelated steps: description, critical analysis and constructive interpretation.[6]

First, I describe the spiritual life as experienced by the two main characters in the story, Ruth and Naomi. Using the method or approach of narrative analysis within a feminist framework, I examine the historical and literary background to the story.[7] As a method of biblical interpretation, narrative analysis holds that the text functions as a mirror in projecting a certain image of a narrative world which influences the reader. This method is well suited to the narrative character of Ruth since it facilitates the transition from the meaning of the story in its historical context to its significance for the reader today. Although women's lives were not the prime concern of the biblical authors, the author of Ruth places two women center stage and introduces issues of special concern to women. I will pose to the text questions about women's lives.

Second, I analyze the friendship between Ruth and Naomi using the disciplines of women's psychology and feminist theology. Jean Baker Miller suggests that each person becomes a more developed and more active individual only as s/he is more fully related to others and the relationships grounded in mutuality lead to the empowerment of all those concerned.[8] I shall use some of the assumptions about women's psychology and feminist theology to examine whether or not the relationship between Ruth and Naomi affords a model of mutuality and empowerment appropriate for women today. Mary Hunt argues that contemporary theology pays little attention to the issue of friendship, yet everyone has friends. She claims: "Friendship is a useful theological construct. Friendship illuminates questions of ultimate meaning and value."[9] As response, I employ the approach of feminist theology to examine this statement.[10]

Katherine Zappone contends that a crucial shift in spirituality's meaning for the twentieth century resides in the importance associated with interdependence or relationality and that this conviction should guide our lived experience of relationships.[11] Some current research on the theme of interdependence affirms that this a more natural way of surviving in the world than independence. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi affords a model of interdependence for ordinary women.

Women have rarely been encouraged to imitate the great women of salvation history. The predominance of Christian warfare over friendship as a model for the spiritual life has expressed the concerns, interests, and experience of men and excluded women s.

The book of Ruth can be described as a classic text, one continually open to new interpretation. As Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe state:

> Women's questions about women of biblical times and about the implications of the Bible for women's lives reflect the fact that for good or ill, the Bible is a book that has shaped and continues to shape human lives, communities, and cultures in the West, as well as those in other parts of the world under the hegemony or influence of Europe and North America.[12]

Step 1: Description

Narrative Summary

During a famine at the times of the judges, a native of Judah, Elimelech, went with his wife Naomi, to Moab in the hope of a better future. His death left Naomi with two sons who eventually married two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Like Naomi, they were widowed and thus the three were alone in a patriarchal society. Naomi decided to return to Judah where the famine was now over and told her daughters to return to their mothers' homes. Orpah reluctantly obliged, but Ruth, in a passionate outpouring of devotion and fidelity, chose to remain with her mother-in-law:

> Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well, even if death parts me from you (1:16–17).

Once back in Bethlehem, Ruth won the favor of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi, eventually married him and gave birth to a son which assured security for both women.

Literary Analysis

Most commentators agree that there is no clear evidence concerning the time of the book's composition, its setting or its purpose. The usual dating gives a range from some time after the later period of the monarchy down to the post-exilic period. It is generally categorized as a Hebrew short story since the four characteristics of this genre can be found in it: (1) the work is composed in a distinctive literary style with elevated prose and semi-poetic rhythmic elements; (2) there is an interest in typical people combined with an interest in mundane affairs; (3) it is both entertaining and instructive and the reader is invited to participate in the joys and sorrows of the characters; and (4) the reader is impressed by the author's artistry and creativity.[13]

Most commentators remark on the extraordinary literary achievement of the book of Ruth, citing its flawless style rarely paralleled before or after.[14] The work is easily divided into four scenes according to its four chapters. The first and last balance each other through contrasting themes, e.g., emptiness/fullness, death/life. These form a framework for the middle chapters in which the main action takes place. Furthermore, this main action is framed by conversations between Ruth and Naomi. Within the middle two chapters there is further evidence of balance in that in chapter 2 everything takes place in the open, in public, in the light. The opposite is true for chapter 3.[15] Within the structure, women and men move between life and death in open and deliberate ways, while God works between blessing and curse in ways that are hidden and fortuitous.[16]

Edward Campbell Jr. deals in detail with the questions concerning the canonical status and canonical place of Ruth as well as the various textual traditions.[17] Lack of evidence makes it impossible to answer questions of historicity, although the individual scenes themselves are historically plausible. While the story dominates the whole book until the genealogy (4:18–22), it then becomes subordinated to the background of the history of the Davidic line.[18]

There are a number of significant themes which commentators suggest: loyalty, the importance of clan relations and God's ultimate faithfulness, providence and redemption. The narrative structure of the book illustrates the theme: "from emptiness to fullness."[19] By this is meant that the main characters in the story begin with nothing and end with abundance. It is story without villains in contrast to the stories of other women: Susanna, Esther, and Judith.

Direct speech is a very significant aspect of the book occupying fifty-five of the eighty-five verses.[20] It is the medium through which character and relationships are developed. Ruth's determination and courage are only completely made clear when she speaks to Boaz on the threshing floor. In addition, Naomi's feelings concerning her loneliness are only fully made clear in two

speeches (1:11–13, 20–21). Speech is also used to reveal information to the reader such as that concerning the redeemers.[21] Chapter 2 begins with Ruth speaking to Naomi (v. 2) and ends with Naomi speaking to Ruth (vv. 18–22). The movement of their day surrounds the movement in the field (v. 3 and v. 17). This circular design leads Trible to conclude that both it and the content yield a feminist interpretation: the women shape their story. They plan (v. 2), they carry out the plan (vv. 3–17) and they evaluate it (vv. 18–22).[22]

The book emphasizes the crucial importance of a correct understanding of the way humans cooperate with God. Do these two Moabite women become a model for how God should act?

Some commentators wonder whether the author was a woman since there is a female perspective throughout and it is women's initiative and assertiveness which drives the story's action. Initial references to "his wife" and "his two sons" are reversed and become "her husband" and "her two sons." Moreover, Orpah and Ruth are told to return to "their mothers' houses." All characters are set in reference to Naomi, although Ruth is the center of interest.[23]

Examination of the Relationship between Naomi and Ruth

Ruth is a story of women's friendship set within the larger theological concept of God's fidelity.[24] The voluntary female bonding described is unique in the Bible and in considering how the book lends itself to appropriation in support of women's bonding, J. Cheryl Exum makes the following point:

> It is generally accepted in criticism today that gender, race, ethnicity, social location, and a range of other factors influence the way we read. Indeed there is nothing to stop readers reading as they please, finding in texts the meanings they are looking for. But the text does play a role in the reading process. Texts need readers to actualize them, but readers need texts to actualize.[25]

As a relationship between a Moabite and an Israelite, the friendship between Ruth and Naomi exceeds what might be expected from the most successful relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.[26] Ruth decides to throw her lot in with Naomi totally and go wherever she goes. In joining fates and forces, their bleak future is transformed because the closeness between the two women fuels their creativity and allows them to accomplish together what they could not have done alone. Their collaboration ensures their security. In freely combining forces and accepting each other, one offers wisdom and guidance, the other the energy and fertility required to secure their future.

As a radical act of courage, Ruth's promise of life-long commitment to Naomi is remarkable; Naomi's God, Naomi's people, Naomi's life, in fact even her final resting place will be Ruth's.[27] Ruth is utterly committed to the older woman. To begin with, she meets Naomi's loneliness with her presence. Naomi voices a very negative self-image as she argues for separation and can see little hope for the future (1:11–13), but Ruth "matches her with passionate hyperbole as she insists on non-separation."[28] She shares Naomi's grief, but points to the future. Later in chapter 2, Ruth leaves Naomi in her silence, but returns with symbols of life and hope. She urges Naomi to look beyond her loneliness. The older woman eventually takes up the challenge and becomes a woman of initiative, able to believe that she is wanted and secure. Thus, Ruth moves Naomi from "emptiness" which is the latter's greatest suffering to "fullness."

Ruth's declaration shows profound affection for her mother-in-law, but it goes deeper than feeling. Her appropriation of Naomi's existence and fate and all that that involves is at the expense of her disappropriation of her own.[29] Without Ruth, Naomi would be a widow with no support, property, or purpose in life. But through Ruth's loyalty and cleverness, her future is secured.

The book emphasizes the crucial importance of a correct understanding of the way humans cooperate with God.[30] Naomi prays that God will deal kindly with her daughters-in-law as they "have dealt with the dead and with me" (1:8b) Do these two Moabite women become a model for how God should act? It is they who appear to have set *ḥesed* in motion and Ruth continues this by not

abandoning Naomi.[31] Later she will again become God's *ḥesed* to Naomi.

Ruth accepts the responsibility of providing for herself and her mother-in-law. She does not sit down and wallow in self-pity or wait for divine intervention. She accepts the lot of the poor person and makes use of the resources that are available to her. When Naomi invokes the *ḥesed* of the Lord, she bases the blessing on not her own experience from the past since, for her, the past has meant only famine, living among a strange people, and the deaths of her loved ones. Rather, she invokes the blessing on the basis of the gracious hospitality that her daughters-in-law have shown to her family. These foreign women are being held up as models of the kindness that is expected by the Lord. Before she is faithful to her new husband, Boaz, Ruth first shows *ḥesed* to another woman. In this story, Ruth's *ḥesed* to Naomi (1:10) actualizes God's *ḥesed* to Naomi (2:20) and Ruth is a Moabite!

Despite the patriarchal setting, the story of the women's courage is quite remarkable. Orpah was prepared to leave her homeland and all that was familiar to her to be with her mother-in-law; Ruth determined to do so. Naomi's wish was to leave both Orpah and Ruth in Moab, even though this would have meant a solitary journey and solitary future for her. This future would be one of powerlessness—a woman unattached to a man in such a patriarchal world was powerless. As a childless widow (as were Orpah and Ruth), Naomi belonged to a group with little power in Israelite society.

The story reflects a historically grounded situation in which the most important task politically and personally for women was motherhood and the bearing of sons. In the climax to the story, a typically patriarchal blessing is given to Boaz:

> May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judith (4:11b-12).

If Ruth is to be like Rachel and Leah, she must also emulate Tamar whose courage proved to be outstanding according to Judah whose son Perez, she bore.

A remarkable passage, which highlights the significance of the relationship between Naomi and Ruth, follows three verses later. The women, in speaking to Naomi about Ruth, attest to the fact that Ruth means more to Naomi than seven sons (4:15b). Since seven is a symbolic number for totality and since a woman's prestige within society was significantly influenced by the number of her sons, whatever bond existed between Naomi and Ruth was obvious to others and impressive.

In addition to Ruth's passionate speech at the beginning of the story, other passages give evidence of the intensity of her devotion to the older woman. Ruth "left" her mother and father (2:11) and cleaved (*dabeqah*) to Naomi. This same language is used about the first couple in Eden (Gen 2:24). Moreover, in cleaving to Naomi, Ruth assumes the closest physical position a woman in the scriptures takes.[32] Further uses of the word again focus on women's relationships, as both Boaz and Naomi urge Ruth to cleave to the women in the fields (2:8, 21). It is in being with women that both Ruth and Naomi will find safety. We are not told explicitly that Naomi returns Ruth's affection. We do know, however, from chapter 1 that Naomi is concerned for her daughters-in-law and begs them to return to their mothers' houses. Naomi ignores Ruth's presence at the end of that chapter: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (v 21).

Ruth accepts the responsibility of providing for herself and her mother-in-law. She does not sit down and wallow in self-pity or wait for divine intervention. She accepts the lot of the poor person and makes use of the resources that are available to her.

Later however, Naomi acknowledges their familial bonds by speaking of a relative of "ours" and one of "our" redeemers. Commentators also point out that there are signs of Naomi's feelings towards Ruth, even before the story actually begins, since

Naomi had already proved her love for and acceptance of her throughout the latter's barrenness. Moreover, the fact that Naomi strongly advised Ruth to remain in Moab, which would have meant Naomi's giving up the last connection she had to her dead son, indicates her concern for Ruth's future happiness. Rather than hold fast her link to her dead son through Ruth, she wishes Ruth to remain with her own people where presumably life will be better for her than among strangers.[33] Obviously, as readers we can find evidence of mutual concern and loyalty without the narrator having to be explicit. It is interesting to note that the narrator does not tell us that Ruth loved Naomi. Rather, the women of Bethlehem attest to this fact (4:15). In this, we can find evidence, then, that Ruth's love for Naomi was obvious to others, for it is in this verse that the storyteller makes Ruth the subject of the only use of the word "love."[34]

As Trible concludes:

> As a whole, this human comedy suggests a theological interpretation of feminism: women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them. Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Ruth and the females of Bethlehem work as paradigms for radicality. All together they are women in culture, and women transforming culture. What they reflect, they challenge. And that challenge is a legacy of faith to this day for all who have ears to hear the stories of women in a man's world.[35]

Step 2: Analysis

The Theme of Interdependence

What do recent conclusions from the scientific world have to say about relationship? Research in physics illustrates both how fundamental and how central the concept of interdependence is. By analogy, the concept can be a theme for women's spirituality.

Physicists propose that quarks, which are subatomic substances and the most basic elements of nature, function in a relational mode. They can only be studied and understood in a relational context. To date it has not been possible for scientists to isolate a quark or substantiate its identity as an isolated building block. What quarks demonstrate is the existence of patterns of interrelating energy, suggesting complex, tangled webs of relationships. Matter is interdependent and interconnected.

O Murchu believes that our ability to relate both mutually, i.e., in ways which enhance others and allow us to be enhanced by them, as well as ethically, is innate to being human and is the pivotal element of our spirituality.

In arguing that our capacity to relate may be the most basic element of our spiritual makeup as a human species, O'Murchu describes how the prevailing understanding during ancient times was that life was a unity. Within this unity, everything was interrelated and interdependent.[36]

O'Murchu notes that it is difficult to identify the precise factors that enabled us to develop our capacity to relate as a human species. It would appear that even before we learned to speak (about 100,000 years ago) human beings were able to relate. O'Murchu suggests that our survival was probably aided more by a cooperative mode of relating than a competitive one. Furthermore, he wonders, in the light of anthropological studies, whether human beings are more cooperative than competitive by nature. O'Murchu believes that our ability to relate both mutually, i.e., in ways which enhance others and allow us to be enhanced by them, as well as ethically, is innate to being human and is the pivotal element of our spirituality. Our whole understanding of what life is revolves around our ability to relate and the need to do so in mutually and spiritually beneficial ways.[37]

As an analogy with physical energy, the relationship between Ruth and Naomi illustrates the "natural" qualities of cooperation, mutuality, and interdependence rather than competition. Just as one is unlikely to find an isolated individual in the

natural world since everything must be considered in relationship to something else, so also can the reader imagine the two women. It is their relationship that sheds light on their individual identity. It is their interdependence that creates strength as "patterns of benevolent energy."[38]

The Voice of Feminist Theology

Reclaiming the relational mode as the primary dynamic of life at every level of existence is probably the most profound and most provocative claim of feminist spirituality. On this all other understandings—imaginational, conceptual, philosophical and theological—hinge. Relationship lies at the heart of reality and is the core interaction and value around which everything revolves.[39]

Like O'Murchu, Margaret Farley attests to the importance of relationship for feminists, claiming that this concept is at the heart of feminist theory in general as well as in feminist theology, psychology, sociology, and political theory.[40] Persons and all reality have a profoundly social and relational character. Farley notes that while relationships for women are very important, the nature of their importance is still being explored. For example, some feminist theories of moral development contend that the sustaining of human relationships is at the heart of women's experience. But there is debate as to whether this means that women and men are essentially different, that is, whether gender determines the priority given to relationships over autonomy, or whether the well-being of both women and men requires respect for individual freedom as well as the capacity for relationship.

Within a patriarchal framework, all relationships are presumed to function from the top down.[41] People are expected to know their place on the ladder and to keep it. There is much emphasis on difference and isolation, and usually identity is obtained from dualistic categorization in which all things (including people) are understood in terms of what they are opposed to. However, there is a strong movement, particularly among feminists, to view the world more in terms of both/and values rather than either/or values. In this viewpoint, the essential nature of all life is relatedness, and identity is obtained from the context of relationships. Human experience tells us that we can never fully understand or explain relationships. There is always an element of mystery. It is this prevailing sense of mystery and immeasurable quality that gives relationships both vibrancy and depth. (In analogical relation, elements in nature e.g., quarks, all share this same mysterious binding force which indicates the relational bond of all reality.) But the relational mode of being with its emphasis on interdependence, radical equality, participation, and community, requires a very different set of paradigms from the hierarchical mode. Relationships within an interdependent system require openness, trust, and freedom rather than their hierarchical opposites.

The paradigm of human relationships is marked by equality of power, mutuality of freedom and responsibility, love that is other-centered yet neither neglectful nor destructive of the self and fidelity . . . For many feminists, not surprisingly, the model and the goal of human relationships is therefore friendship.[42] How then do we understand friendship among women today? What is its significance? Indeed what constitutes a friend?

Friendship is defined as "freely chosen relationships in which one intends the well-being of the other."[43] Friends are those who try to live out equality and mutuality, love and justice as qualities of their relationships, while all the time paying attention to one another in a focused way. As friendships deepen, attempts are made to change social and economic structures that divide people and to build relationships of integrity that ground justice work. Hunt notes how this understanding of friendship contrasts greatly with the patriarchal model based on Aristotelian hierarchical categories.[44] She asserts that the latter model is used as the foundation of almost every non-feminist treatment of friendship.[45] The patriarchal model is grounded in men's experience of having fewer and fewer friends as they ascend the ladder of intimacy.[46] In contrast, women befriend and are befriended in multiples, beginning with oneself, then with others, creation, and the Divine. Therefore, in this feminist understanding, "friends" scarcely exist in the singular because friendship is always a self-involved relationship, automatically plural. It begins with women's self-affirmation, for it is only then that women can discover without fear the self of other women.

To bond or connect with other women, women need first of all to be companions to themselves, to

befriend themselves.[47] Women's friendships deny the need for men to be central to every human exchange. Instead, women can choose to put other women first in relationships of equality and mutuality. Central to the dynamic of mutuality are reciprocity and vulnerability.[48] Reciprocity involves give and take with each person being prepared to be an active agent in the relationship. Vulnerability means that we allow others to virtually change our lives, knowing that we are all essentially linked and that we cannot make it on our own.

Mary Hunt calls for more theological attention to friendship:

> Friendship has been discussed rarely in Christian theological literature. This strikes me as peculiar in a faith tradition where laying down one's life for one's friends is lauded . . . Women's friendships in particular are virtually ignored as data for theological reflection. They are passed over, as is women's experience in general, in the few examples of noteworthy friends that one finds in theological sources.49

Hunt notes that women's friendships in patriarchal contexts emerge as much out of necessity as out of attraction. Women friends help one another survive and thus they have a social component to them. For Hunt, three themes dominate women's friendships: attention, which is essential to the development and nurture of friendship; generativity, which calls forth truths and talents in areas such as poetry, music, theology etc., as well as the psychic and physical space to survive; and community, which emerges slowly as a network grows between friends who share similar values and who nurture one another.[50]

Sallie McFague contends that of all relationships friendship is the most free.[51] It is also potentially the most inclusive.[52] All other relationships are bound by duty, utility, or desire. What one expects from a friend are trust, i.e., reliability, constancy and loyalty. For McFague, friendship "is a free, reciprocal, trustful bonding of persons committed to a common vision" and a "relationship of joy."[53] She develops this understanding into a model of the relationship of God to us and the world and our relationship to God and the world. It is a model which stresses mutuality, commitment, trust, common vision, and interdependence. We are friends of the Friend of the world.[54]

When we place the relationship between Ruth and Naomi in dialogue with the voice of feminist theology, the connections are obvious. Hunt's three dominant themes of attention, generativity, and community (recall the women at the end who proclaim Ruth's love for Naomi) are evident. Ruth and Naomi care for each other and, in their care, call forth from each other enormous creativity. In addition, there are examples of mutuality, equality, and vulnerability, which are characteristics of women's friendships. The story illustrates how both Ruth and Naomi were able to become active agents in the relationship and how they both allowed the one to change the other's life.

The Voice of Women's Psychology

Feminist psychologists have pointed out that the concept of relationship has been determined by only half of the world's population. In other words, men have interpreted both their own experience and women's. In response to this situation, Conn advocates a developmental psychology that gives equal value to women's and men's experience.[55] In contrast to what some developmental models suggest, she believes that every phase of human maturation involves both autonomy and attachment. Maturity involves independence from fusion with the other (family or religious authority) in order to have relationships of intimacy that are deeper, more complex and more inclusive of diversity.

In a study of women's relationships, psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller observed that women's sense of personhood is grounded in the motivation to make, enhance, and maintain relatedness to others.[56] In addition, she discovered that women tend

In a study of women s relationships, psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller observed that women s sense of personhood is grounded in the motivation to make, enhance, and maintain relatedness to others.

to find satisfaction, pleasure, effectiveness, and a sense of self-worth if they experience what they do as arising from and leading back into a sense of connection with others. Thus, they become more developed and active only as they are more related to others. To discuss her findings, Miller draws on Judith Jordan's understanding of empathy as a "cognitive and emotional activity in which one person is able to experience the feelings and thoughts of another person and simultaneously is able to know her/his different feelings and thoughts."[57] As such empathy requires a high level of cognitive and emotional integration, Miller cites the research of J. Surrey concerning the question of how people actually learn empathy and the central place of mutual empathy in all psychological development. For Surrey, an "experience of mutual empathy of 'being with' means 'being seen' and 'feeling seen' by the other and 'seeing the other' and sensing the other 'feeling seen.'"[58]

Miller contends that relationships involving such mutual empathy are growth-promoting relationships. These relationships produce the following results for each woman involved: vitality and energy, a more accurate picture of self and other, a greater sense of self-worth, a feeling of being more connected to the other, and a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in the specific relationship, a greater ability to take action. These characteristics are produced by the interplay between women rather than by what is done by each individual or what goes on in each individual. Thus each person, for example, acquires more ability to act as a result of her response to the other person in the relationship and the other person's response to her. Action emerges out of the interplay between the women, not out of one woman as sole actor.

It is not at all difficult to align the relationship between Ruth and Naomi to the these themes in women's psychology. First of all, Ruth's beautiful pledge of loyalty is a clear example of one woman's connection to another. Ruth realized that she needed her relationship with Naomi, whose voice of wisdom was able to call her forth and to help her understand who she was. Similarly, Naomi needed the younger woman to restore her to her true self, to help her see life in death, to bring her from "emptiness" to "fullness." In addition, I believe that the relationship

Each person in a relationship involving mutual empathy acquires more ability to act as a result of her response to the other person in the relationship and the other person s response to her.

between Ruth and Naomi can be described as an experience of mutual empathy in Surrey's terms. We see both women grow and develop, and the characteristics of a growth-promoting relationship described above such as vitality and energy are evident. Obvious examples are Ruth's encounters with Boaz and Naomi becoming Obed's nurse as well as her movement from an experience of "emptiness" to "fullness." The vitality and energy of the relationship are produced through the dialogue between Ruth and Naomi. They plan and act, not alone, but in response to the other.

Step: 3 Constructive Interpretation

The Nature of a Classic

How do we recognize a spiritual classic? Can the book of Ruth be considered a classic text? David Tracy argues that a classic, a text in which we recognize the disclosure of truth, lives as a classic only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention.[59] The purpose of a classic is to challenge our complacency, break our conventions, provoke, shock and transform our horizons. The book of Ruth has the potential to do this for women. Having been formed by my culture, I brought my own pre-understanding with its questions, opinions, fears, hopes, expectations to the text and then experienced the "claim to attention" that Ruth exerted on me.[60] Ruth is a text that has the power to persuade and move readers to a response, which is the task of a classic.

Phillip Sheldrake maintains that classic texts "bring us into transforming contact with what is enduring and essential in our religious tradition."[61] Friendship, as illustrated by the relationship of

Ruth and Naomi, is an enduring and essential tradition, and its value still has relevance. Ruth, considered as a classic text, can bring us into transforming contact with this value. Finally, Tracy argues that classics must be freed to allow them to educate us in the realities which as noble and true are public.[62] Ruth holds aloft the value of women's friendship as something noble, true, and public.

Reappropriation

Denise Lardner Carmody suggests that friendship between women such as that between Naomi and Ruth requires a religious agreement. She maintains that, without a union of heart and mind as well as a common surrender to divine mystery, it is unlikely that two potential friends will be able to plumb the depths of their possibilities.[63] The narrator underlines the reality that the women's bonding is ultimately a religious one, in which Ruth entrusts herself to the God of Naomi. Ruth has glimpsed something of Naomi's God and embarks on a journey of faith with her mother-in-law. There are no details of the physical journey, but it would have taken them at least a week to cross the Arnon River, trek through hilly country until they reach the Jordan, then cross the river and descend into Bethlehem. If the two women traveled alone, it would have been dangerous. Did they travel on foot or use donkeys? The long, wearying journey must have made them cling more closely to each another. In all probability, as they were trekking back to Bethlehem, the hardships of the journey would have been shared amidst much talk, the bonds nurtured, the relationship deepened, and a brighter future envisioned.

The narrator underlines the reality that the women s bonding is ultimately a religious one, in which Ruth entrusts herself to the God of Naomi.

Women today have such "journeys" to make. Can ordinary middle class women in first world countries at the beginning of a new century bring their questions to this text and find answers?[64] Can the story of Ruth question and challenge their lives? Today's audience may have questions which the text does not address. First, the text accepts without question the setting of a patriarchal culture. This culture determined that women's first duty was to produce a male heir, and it left her in abject poverty if she had no connection to a man. Second, the text does not question the society in which the "business" is transacted by men at the city gate—"business" which involves the lives of the women who are seen as elements in a financial transaction. Third, women today would have serious questions to ask about the levirate marriage custom on which the story is based. This custom required that a widow had to make herself available to her husband's close relative in order to continue her husband's name.

However, other aspects of the story can easily be reappropriated. Ruth is a story that says much about friendship between women. It models women's ways of planning, taking risks and evaluating. It illustrates fidelity. It shows the rewards that come when burdens are shared and women combine their efforts to overcome adversity. A woman can choose to put another women first, and make another woman the primary recipient of her fidelity and affection.

As a story of women's friendship, it is a key scriptural text and deserves to be proclaimed loudly and frequently as the Word of God.

Notes

1 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 173. Trible also notes that Abraham was called by God, promised blessings by God and was accompanied by his wife, whereas Ruth stood completely alone without any support group.

2 Sandra Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline." *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6, no.1 (Spring 1998):3.

3 Joann Wolski Conn ed., *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New York: Paulist, 1886) p. 3.

4 Sandra Schneiders, "Effects of Women's Experience on Spirituality," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, p. 39.

5 Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline." p. 3.

6 Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1997), pp. 129–130.

7 As a feminist, I am committed to recovering a usable past for women.

8 Jean Baker Miller, *What Do We Mean By Relationships?* Work in Progress Series (Wellesley College, MA: Stone Center, 1986), p. 3.

9 Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 7.

10 Unfortunately, space does not permit an exploration of whether the friendship between Ruth and Naomi has potential for imaging God's relationship with us, but I believe this would be a very fruitful pursuit.

11 Katherine Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness: A Spirituality for Feminists* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), p. 12.

12 Newsome, Carol and Sharon Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 2.

13 Roland Murphy, *Wisdom Literature The Forms of Old Testament Literature*, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene Tucker, vol. XIII (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 86. Other examples of the Hebrew short story are: Genesis 24 and 38; Judg 3:15–29; and Judges 4.

14 Andre Lacoque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 93.

15 Johanna Bos, *Ruth Esther Jonah*, Knox Preaching Guides, ed. John Hayes, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), pp. 12–14.

16 Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 166.

17 Edward Campbell Jr., Ruth *The Anchor Bible* vol. 7, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 32–41

18 Murphy, *Wisdom*, p. 86.

19 Jan De Waard and Eugene and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, (London: United Bible Societies,1973), p. 1.

20 Ibid., p. 2.

21 Bos, *Ruth Esther Jonah*, pp. 12–13.

22 Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, p. 180.

23 Lacoque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, p. 110.

24 In Hebrew, Naomi sounds like "my pleasantness" and Ruth like " friend" but etymologists have reached no conclusions as to their historical background or meaning (De Waard and Nida, *Handbook*, pp. 7–8). In an interesting discussion, Lacoque suggests that all the names are symbolic and describes how through Ruth, which he contends means "saturated," Ammon and Moab are joined with Israel. Thus, she is a sign of restoration and redemption. *The Feminine Unconventional*, pp. 114–116.

25 J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. Clines and Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 137.

26 It is significant that Ruth is from Moab, and the narrator reminds us of it several times. She is not just any foreigner, but someone from a dreaded enemy territory whose female ancestors had attempted to corrupt the Israelites on their way from Egypt to Canaan (Num 25:1).Thus, it would have been scandalous that a friendship could develop and flower between two women with such a hostile past. It is Ruth the Moabitess who eventually becomes the model of fidelity for Israel.

27 De Waard and Nida explain that Ruth's willingness to be buried where Naomi is buried is the ultimate proof of her loyalty since the norm was to be buried in one's own homeland (*Handbook*, p. 17). However this very verse (17) is omitted from the Lectionary on the one occasion when 1:14–16 is proclaimed.

28 Danna Fewell and David Miller, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 101.

29 Lacoque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, p. 96.

30 As a character, God is almost absent from the story with only one direct appearance at 4:13, where God gives conception, but through Ruth's initiative, mediation, loyalty and trust. However, God pervades the story, being invoked in numerous blessings, and God's activity is intimately tied into the ordinary affairs and interrelationships of human beings.

31 The term *hesed* (steadfast love, fidelity, dedication) describes an intimate relationship between God and God's people (Hos 4:1). Usually, it denotes in scripture the contractual attitude of loyalty and love within the framework of the covenant (Lacoque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, pp. 86–88).

32 Amy-Jill Levine, *Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 80.

33 Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted*, p. 139

34 For an interesting discussion which suggests that Ruth's motives were somewhat mixed, see Fewell and Miller, *Compromising Redemption*, pp. 94–105.

35 Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, p. 196.

36 Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p. 46.

37 Elizabeth Johnson adds to these insights about interdependence by stating that scientific evidence suggests that spirit and matter are not two essentially different substances, but two forms of the same phenomenon. Spirit evolves from matter and the two are profoundly interdependent (Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993], pp. 37–40, as well as McFague, *The Body of God* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993], pp. 27–63; and Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness*, pp. 138–139).

38 Ibid., *Reclaiming Spirituality*, p. 66.

39 Johnson contends that women's experience consistently demonstrates that the most life-giving exchange occurs when bonds are mutual or reciprocal, rather than when the relationship is based on competition and domination. Mutuality involves a concomitant valuing of each other, common regard marked by trust, affection and respect for difference (*Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, p. 27).

39 O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality*, p. 108. It is important to note the word "reclaiming," for, as Sallie McFague attests, the radical interrelatedness of everything is not a novel insight. Rather, the view that we are isolated and independent individuals is the more recent understanding (*Models of God* [Philadelphia: Fortress], p. 166).

40 Farley, Margaret, in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 238.

41 O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality*, pp. 106 -107.

42 Ibid.

43 Hunt, in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, p. 123.

44 Ibid.

45 Although basing his work on Aristotle's and other significant male thinkers' understanding of friendship, Paul Wadell acknowledges his debt to feminist ethicists who point out that if existence is relational, then friendships are not something that we have. Rather they are shapers of who we are. The interconnectedness of all life is such that our actions and responses make a difference. Through our friends, we are put in touch with the deepest and most promising aspects of our selves (*Friendship and the Moral Life*, [Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989], p. 161).

46 McFague cites a study of American males which concluded that friendship was largely noticeable by its absence (*Models of God*, p. 157).

47 Patriarchy divided women and encouraged them to see other women as competition for men's attention and protection.

48 Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness*, pp. 67–85.

49 Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, pp. 9–10.

50 Ibid., pp. 151–164.

51 McFague, *Models*, p. 159.

52 Ibid., p. 164.

53 Ibid., p. 171.

54 Anne Carr draws attention to the fact that the metaphor of God as friend meets with objections philosophically because there can be no real equality between God and human beings. But she argues that, in New Testament terms, the compassionate love of God is revealed in the image of friendship (John 15:15), which demonstrates God's love as desiring and giving humankind the equality of friendship (*Transforming Grace* [San Francisco: Harper & Row,1988], p. 150).

55 Joann Wolski Conn, "Toward Spiritual Maturity," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 255.

56 Jean Baker Miller, *What Do We Mean by Relationships?*, pp. 1–13.

57 Ibid., p. 2.

58 Ibid.

59 Tracy, David. "The Classic." Chap. 3 in *The Analogical Imagination* (NY: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 108–115.

60 Ibid., p. 119.

61 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), p. 172.

62 Tracy, "The Classic," p. 130.

63 Denise Lardner Carmody, *Bible Women: Contemporary Reflections on Biblical Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), p. 35.

64 Unfortunately, since it only features twice in the Lectionary in Year 1 and never in Year 2, chances are limited for hearing it proclaimed, let alone preached, as the Word of God (see note 25).

Bibliography

Ackerman, Denise. In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, pp. 220–222. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Bos, Johanna. *Ruth Esther Jonah*. Knox Preaching Guides. ed. John Hayes. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986.

Campbell, Edward Jr. Ruth. *The Anchor Bible* vol. 7. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975.

Carmody, Denise Lardner. *Biblical Women: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts*. New York: Crossroad, 1988.

Carr, Anne. *Transforming Grace*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

Joann Wolski Conn, "Toward Spiritual Maturity." In *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine LaCugna, pp. 235–259. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

_____. "A Feminist View of Therese." In *Women's Spirituality*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn. 2nd ed. (1996), pp. 452–475.

De Waard Jan and Eugene Nida. *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Ruth*. London: United Bible Societies, 1973.

Downey, Michael. *Understanding Christian Spirituality*. New York: Paulist, 1997.

Exum, J. Cheryl. *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. Clines and Davies, 215. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Farley, Margaret. In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, 238. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Fewell, Danna and David Miller. *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.

Hubbard, Robert, Jr. *The Book of Ruth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988.

Hunt, Mary. *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

_____. In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson,123. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993.

Lacocque, Andre. *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990.

Laffey, Alice. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

McFague, Sallie. *Models of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

_____. *The Body of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

Miller, Jean Baker. *What Do We Mean By Relationships?* Work in Progress Series. Wellesley College, MA: Stone Center, 1986.

Murphy, Roland. *Wisdom Literature. The Forms of Old Testament Literature*, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene Tucker, vol. XIII. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983.

Newsom, Carol and Sharon Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

O'Murchu, Diarmuid. *Reclaiming Spirituality*. New York, N.Y.: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997.

Schneiders, Sandra. "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline." *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6, no.1 (Spring1998): 1–12.

Sheldrake, Philip. *Spirituality and History*. Rev. ed. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995.

Tracy, David. "The Classic." Chap. 3 in *The Analogical Imagination*. pp. 99–135. NY: Crossroad, 1989.

Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.

Wadell Paul. *Friendship and the Moral Life*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

Zappone, Katherine. *The Hope for Wholeness: A Spirituality for Feminists*. Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991.

Education: Our Heritage—Our Future

Carol Rittner, R.S.M.

In Memory of M. Concilia Moran, R.S.M. (1930–1990)

> "Let us fit the young women for earth without unfitting them for heaven."
>
> Catherine McAuley

"Mercy—the principal path marked out by Jesus for those desirous of following him." These words of Catherine McAuley proclaim both her response to the experience of God's provident love and her expectation of those who joined her in ministry.[1] How often have we read or heard these words. But what do they mean? How are they incarnated in our lives and manifested in our ministry? How shall we carry Mercy into the twenty-first century?

We gather these days from many parts of our fragile earth a planet torn by conflict and soaked in blood, but also bursting with life and open to transformation, ever so beloved in spite of everything. We gather from all parts of Ireland, north and south, from England, Africa and the Americas, and from other places as well. We gather "to reflect together on our heritage, to address our present realities and to envision our future as Catholic and Mercy schools in a new century." We gather as Sisters of Mercy, as co-ministers of Mercy, as colleagues and friends to engage issues and questions surrounding "our heritage" and "our future." As we do, let us do so in solidarity as we Step into the Past, Stand in the Present, and Dance into the Future.

I thank all of you for the invitation to speak at this Mercy Education Conference, "Sharing Our Heritage, Shaping Our Future." I am conscious that I "stand on the shoulders of giants"—Catherine McAuley, Mary Anne Doyle, Mary Vincent Harnett, Frances Ward, and many, other Sisters of Mercy—all of them women of faith and generosity. Like us, they wanted to leave their mark in life. Catherine McAuley, writes Sister Mary Vincent Harnett in the Limerick Manuscript, "was convinced that Almighty God required her to make some lasting efforts for the relief of the suffering and instruction of the ignorant . . ."[2] Catherine and her early companions wanted to make a difference for good in this world.

My topic is, "Our Heritage—Our Future." My presentation has three parts—you might think of it as a three-step jig, which to paraphrase our Kitty McAuley, "Hurrah for [jigs], makes the old young and the young merry!" My three-step jig goes like this:

First, in "Step into the Past," I want to illuminate our heritage and say a few words about Catherine McAuley and how I think she has inspired and in-spirited "Mercy unto thousands" for nearly 170 years. Second, in "Stand in the Present," I deal with the charism of "Mercy" and the values that underpin our long heritage in education through values of compassion, hospitality, justice, and excellence. Finally, I will treat "Dance into the Future," as I suggest some questions we might consider as we carry our Mercy vision and values in education forward into the new millennium.

Catherine McAuley and the Charism of Mercy

The period between Catherine's birth in 1778 and her death in 1841 was a season when "unemployment was high in Ireland, especially in urban areas where poorhouses and workhouses multiplied as fast as factories. Rapid industrialization as well as crop failure impelled hundreds of farmers to migrate toward urban areas for assistance and employment."[3] Catherine was born into what could be described as "comfortable, upper middle-class circumstances," although after her father's death, her mother's "inability to manage her financial matters occasioned a gradual descent into poverty for the McAuley family."[4]

From her parents, Catherine inherited a twofold legacy. As Johanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss write in their book, *Tender Courage*,

> Her father's religious fervor crossed with her mother's intellectual independence; her mother's gentility and ability to associate in society crossed with her father's identification and involvement with the poor, the outcast and the downtrodden.[5]

While the repeal of the British penal laws had begun in the decades before Catherine's birth in 1778, the residue of years of legal discrimination against Catholics clung to some peoples' hearts the way pollution clings to buildings in our cities today. In addition, the social and economic reality of Ireland was marked by extreme wealth and extreme poverty, straining the few welfare systems available to poor people.[6] Like the Ireland of our time—and might I say, the America of our time as well—it was possible to avoid the poor if one wanted to, but Catherine did not. She opened her eyes and her heart, and she addressed her reality.

Sister Regina Kelly—the finest teacher I ever had—described Catherine in a little booklet she wrote more than twenty years ago:

> A remarkable woman once walked the poorest sections of Dublin city, saddened and stunned by what she found there—ignorance, neglect, disease. She was appalled by the all too visible hunger and hopeless prejudice. The poor had overwhelming needs—the poor always do. These Irish poor had no way out, caught as they were in a bitter struggle of political-religious ideas and ideals that denied them food, freedom, property and education. This woman knew there was something she had to do: she comforted, she prayed, she instructed, she consoled; she returned again and again. Finally she started an institute of women religious who could bring to those in need the incomparable quality of God's mercy. Who was this woman of compassion and prayer? [Who was this] Socialite turned social worker, lady of fashion who lived among the poor, woman of wealth who had no money, activist who early learned the discipline of sanctity[?] Her name was Catherine McAuley . . . In nineteenth-century Dublin, which Catherine labeled "one scene of wretchedness and sorrow," poverty and ignorance appeared to be taken for granted. Distressed by the misery of the poor, she was one of a few extraordinary women who began to care for those for whom, to all appearances, no one else seemed to care.[7]

As educators in the Mercy tradition, in institutions influenced by the spirit of the Sisters of Mercy because operated, staffed and often owned by congregations of Sisters of Mercy, we participate, in one way or another, in an enterprise begun by the energies of a woman who created a future she could not have imagined. The enterprise has been shaped and reshaped by diverse times and circumstances, and by the needs and challenges of each particular venue where our Mercy foremothers have established and carried on the mission of Mercy.[8] Whether it is Zambia or Brazil, the Americas or South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Guam, the Philippines, England, or Ireland—north and south—we are shaping and reshaping the tradition.

As educators in the Mercy tradition, we participate, in one way or another, in an enterprise begun by the energies of a woman who created a future she could not have imagined.

Catherine McAuley was fifty-three years old, an "older woman," when she established the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin. Between 1831 and 1841, she personally opened twelve of the fourteen original Convents of Mercy, personally traveling throughout Ireland and to England to make these foundations.[9] This energetic Irish woman was committed and focused, making present the Mercy of God in her world.

She was a "realist with a practical turn of mind . . . a shrewd observer who responded to the challenges of her time in a manner at once novel and relevant."[10] Her vision for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy was

clearly and concisely expressed in the original constitutions: "The principal aim of the Congregation is to educate poor girls, to lodge and maintain poor young women who are in danger . . . and to visit the sick poor."

We are focusing on education, not because the other ministries in Catherine's time were not important, but because, as Sister Angela Bolster writes in *Catherine In Her Own Words*, visitation of the poor convinced her "that permanent improvement for Dublin's slum dwellers could only come through provision of education."[11] Why? Because education is a basic human right.

Article 26 of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, promulgated by the United Nations in 1948, declared, "Everyone has the right to education . . ." Pope John XXIII emphasized education as a basic human right in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"). Every human being has "the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he or she belongs" (#13). Catherine recognized these rights a century and a half earlier.

To educate is to provide schooling—to provide opportunities for people to learn, to develop their talents, to acquire skills, to learn how to think and express themselves, to develop insight about life, about the world, about one another, about God. The goal of education is to train the whole person to be at once intellectually discerning and humanly flexible, tough-minded and openhearted; to be responsive to the new and responsible for values that make us civilized. It is to teach us to meet what is new and different with reasoned judgment and humanity. We who are involved in the grand enterprise of education teach so that people can develop their intellectual, moral, ethical, and physical selves. We teach so they care for themselves, earn a living, provide food and shelter for themselves and for their families, so that they can contribute to what our Jewish sisters and brothers refer to as *tikkun olam*—"the healing and repair of the world."

We who are involved in the grand enterprise of education teach so that people can develop their intellectual, moral, ethical, and physical selves.

"Education is a social enterprise; it involves the well-being of groups as well as individuals. Education, power, and rights—political and economic—have much to do with each other."[12] Human rights can withstand tyrannical forces only if attention is paid to education, and in nineteenth-century Ireland, Catholics, poor and rich alike, for too long had suffered at the hands of tyrants. Perhaps Catherine knew, even before Paulo Freire himself, that education must lead to "conscientization."

Coupled with Catherine's conviction that the poor must be educated was her equally strong conviction that women must be educated, a value not highly regarded in the nineteenth century. (Regrettably, this is still the case in many places around the world. If more women were educated, I think we would speak less about the "feminization of poverty.") "No work of charity," wrote Catherine, "can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women . . . since whatever station they are destined to fill, their example and their advice will always have great influence and wherever a God-fearing woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found."[13] These are powerful words, all the more so because they remind us that she is not thinking only of poor women, and in a world that diminished or dismissed women, and in a Church that was patriarchal from "head to toe," and still is.

She once told her close friend Frances Warde that educating women was of "utmost importance." Why? Because women were the "link between the high and the low classes." Today we do not like to use such terminology as "the high and the low classes," but in her day, Ireland was a class-conscious society. Catherine McAuley and those first Sisters of Mercy who engaged in "the careful instruction of women" intended that women have power, and use it for good

in society. Above all, women were to be educated for the serious purpose of social change and not for social ornamentation or to enhance their marriageability.

The Mercy Heritage in Education

Conscious of our past, we now focus on the charism of Mercy and on values which underpin Mercy education in the Roman Catholic tradition: justice, compassion, hospitality, and excellence.

What do we mean when we say "Mercy"? "The word has good and authentic connotations, but it can also have inadequate connotations, even dangerous ones . . . The danger is that it may seem to denote sheer sentiment, without a praxis to accompany it . . . Mercy can connote the alleviation of individual needs but entail the risk of abandoning the transformation of structures."[14] We can educate the poor, but fail to critique—or enable the poor themselves to critique—the causes of poverty. We can educate young women, but fail to analyze the patriarchal structures that conspire to keep women subservient, quiet, and powerless in society. As Sister Patricia Smith, a member of the Baltimore regional community in the United States, said, "The term 'Mercy' sometimes has suffered from disempowering interpretations." Mercy, for example, "can refer to 'being nice,' enabling unhealthy behaviors, or keeping the peace. But mercy is something quite different . . . mercy is a kindness of the mind that mirrors the spaciousness of the heart."[15] It is "a mode of relationship and a power that is wounded by the suffering of others and propelled to action on their behalf now."[16] Mercy is a basic attitude toward the suffering of another, whereby one reacts to that suffering in such a way as to eradicate it and its causes. It is "an action, or more precisely, a reaction to someone else's suffering."[17] That is why people who practice the principle of Mercy literally put their lives on the line.

I met a young woman, educated by the Sisters of Mercy and their colleagues at Thornhill College in Derry in 1992, at Thornhill's annual prize-giving. Her name is Moire O'Sullivan; she's twenty-three now, a graduate of York University with a B.Sc. in chemistry. My friend Sister Deirdre Mullan encountered her on the street in Derry right after she had graduated from York University. Deirdre asked her what she planned to do now that she had her B.Sc. "Sister," she said, "it's 'pay back time.' I've been given so much. Now it's my turn to share."

Today, Moire O'Sullivan is a lay missionary with the Mill Hill Fathers in Nairobi, learning Swahili, working in the slums, and extending the reach of Mercy from Thornhill College in Northern Ireland to Shauri Moyo Parish in Kenya. Not only is she involved in teaching math to slum children and in trying to let them know they are loved and valued as human beings. She also is involved in social analysis with the Shauri Moyo Parish group as they protest against "land grabbing" by the powerful who want to keep the poor destitute and powerless.

Do not underestimate the power of your influence on young women and their willingness to commit a few years of their lives in service to God s people.

Do not underestimate the power of your influence on young women like Moire O'Sullivan and their willingness to commit a few years of their lives in service to God's people. Do not undervalue the influence of Mercy education and its power to encourage Mercy graduates to stand in solidarity with people who are denied their rights in Nairobi—or in Limmerick, Dublin, Derry, Belfast, or London. Catherine's "greatest influence as a teacher came from the recognition that she lived by the values she imparted," and so, too, will ours.[18]

To remember Catherine and our "heritage of Mercy" is to risk living dangerously, which brings me to two related values

underpinning Mercy education: compassion and justice. Catherine often said that "Compassion should be our animating principle in undertaking the duty of instructing children or adults, since they are made in God's image."[19] But what is compassion? Compassion is sympathetic consciousness of another's distress and a desire to alleviate it. Parker Palmer calls it "love."[20] To be compassionate is to love tenderly, to love with an awareness of the capacity of the other to be wounded, to suffer pain. To be compassionate is to discover the pains of the world in one's inner center and to respond to them. To be compassionate is to know that nothing human is foreign to oneself. To be compassionate as an educator is to be understanding, or as the late Sister Corita Kent put it, "To stand under," which I suggest means to hold up, to support—firmly, but gently. Compassion is not a virtue for "sissies" but a stance in life for the "tough-minded" who are also "tender-hearted."

Dorothee Soelle, a German Christian theologian, decries a lack of compassion, and writes against a "new form of human development that is purged of compassion," that perceives human beings as "singles," that promotes "consumerism as the aesthetic fulfillment of humankind," that "thoroughly disposes of every sort of Christian or socialist vision of humanity as so much obsolescence," and that argues "there is no common good whereby human beings feel responsible for what happens in their village, or their part of the city, or to their neighbors and children."[21] Cognitive development is not enough in our Mercy schools if we intend to educate young people to be informed, committed citizens of their respective villages, cities, countries. Cognitive development alone will not "nurture in students . . . A positive attitude to responsible citizenship within the European Community," as your "Mercy Philosophy of Education" advocates.[22] We must teach students to care to learn, but at the same time, to learn to care.

If we take our faith seriously, we will commit ourselves to scripture study—I don't mean that we will all get degrees in theology, but we will read and study the texts that hold sacred the collective memory of the ancestors in faith—from Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca and Ruth, to the communities of the beloved disciples and apostles of Jesus the Christ. To do so, however, is to risk living dangerously—just like Jesus, and just like Catherine. When did Jesus provoke the most opposition? When he studied and read from the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord has been given to 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 downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" (Isa 61:1–2). When did he get himself in trouble? When he began to speak to the people about Isaiah's prophecy (Luke 4:21). When did Jesus find himself in political trouble? When he tried to put into practice the teachings of the prophets. I suggest that if one were to study the life and writings of Catherine McAuley, the same could be said for her. For example, consider a text from the prophet Micah, "What does the Lord ask of you? Only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

"[T]o act justly" requires both critique and alternative. Walter Brueggemann, the well-known scripture scholar, writes, "when God does justice, it is not modest or polite or understated. It is an act of powerful intervention. It is like Moses in the court of Pharaoh insisting on freedom. It is like Nathan sent to David (2 Samuel 12) who will not tolerate such rapacious action. It is like Elijah thundering against Ahab and Jezebel

To be compassionate as an educator is to be understanding, or as the late Sister Corita Kent put it, To stand under, which I suggest means to hold up, to support firmly, but gently.

when Naboth has been done in, for the sake of land (1 Kings 21). God is a lover of justice, which means God intervenes for the poor and weak against the powerful who have too much (Ps 99:4) [like Moire O'Sullivan and the people of Sauri Moyo Parish in Nairobi] . . . justice is no holding action in order to maintain equilibrium. It is rather an active intervention aimed at the transformation of social power."[23] "To know God is to do justice."[24]

Justice is not a romantic ideal for another world. "To do justice" is to immerse one's self in the difficult, dirty, demanding, day-to-day work in this world of redeploying social power and transforming social systems. It is the high profile work of people like Nelson Mandela and Mary Robinson; it is the lower profile work of people like Moire O'Sullivan and Angela Hegerty, another Mercy graduate who works with the Committee for the Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland. It is the often unheralded work of so many Sisters of Mercy, their colleagues, and students who instruct the ignorant, care for the sick, and serve the poor, in the classroom, in hospitals and clinics, in parishes and community centers, on the road with travelers and refugees, and in meetings with government officials here, there, and everywhere.

Educational institutions that bear the mark of Mercy must try to inculcate in students, staff, and members of Management and Governing Boards a sense of responsibility for this world, the conviction that it is possible to find creative responses to the threats and promises facing the twenty-first century. This brings me to another value underpinning Mercy education: hospitality, the creation of a free and friendly space where one can reach out to strangers and invite them to become friends.[25] The word's origin conveyed a sense of receiving the stranger as a welcome guest in one's home. "Today the virtue might require Christian persons to understand themselves as guests in the home of Mother Earth; to welcome into the home of their hearts persons considered strange; to open the doors of nation and state to shelter those without home and family."[26]

For Catherine McAuley, hospitality was "as much a matter of being at home with oneself as a matter of being at home with others."[27] While we must always offer our guests a "comfortable cup of tea," we must go one step more as educators and offer our students an example of openness and receptivity to people, ideas and questions. There can be no narrow-minded thinking in our Mercy schools; no lack of enthusiasm for life and intellectual exploration; no bigotry and prejudice about "the other sort" or "those ones." We must exemplify hospitality in an educational sense as well as in a social one. This means creating "safe spaces" in our schools and classrooms where students can engage issues and ask questions, where they can experience an attitude on our part that mirrors the thought of the poet, e.e. cummings when he wrote, "I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing / than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance."

The late Henri Nouwen reflected, "One of the greatest tragedies of our culture is that millions of young people spend many hours, days, weeks and years listening to lectures, reading books and writing papers with constantly increasing resistance."[28] Why? What has happened to us as educators if we can no longer inspire students with a passion for learning, with the desire to grapple with new ideas and profound questions?

For those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition, we admit that for too long our Church has focused on giving answers rather than encouraging questions. Questions are more important than answers. Answers aim to settle things whereas question aim to "unsettle" things. People are less likely to savage and annihilate each other when their minds are not made up but opened up through questioning. Answers have their place. They can even be essential, but "questions deserve lasting priority because they invite continuing inquiry, further dialogue, shared wonder, and sensitive openness. Questions can relate people to one another, especially students and teachers; they may even focus concern about the common good in ways answers rarely can."[29]

Catherine McAuley was a questioner. She questioned poverty, hunger, bigotry, ignorance, and powerlessness; she questioned religious life, bishops, priests and solicitors. She questioned her early companions in Mercy. How else could she have

become the "inspired, creative innovator" she became, as you put it in your "Mercy Philosophy of Education."[30] Innovators question, probe, try out new ideas. They risk new perspectives; they try to see things from a different perspective. Catherine would encourage us expand the traditional 3 Rs—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. She might suggest that we add 3 C's: curiosity, creativity, and courage. We have to prepare students to take exams; education has to facilitate the acquisition and development of appropriate tools, heuristic methods for successful searching. Education also should encourage inventiveness, not unthinking conformity. In Catherine McAuley's spirit, we can be exemplars of personal and intellectual hospitality, open to new perspectives, new questions, even new answers to old questions. We can create space in our schools and classrooms, in ourselves and in our students so that together we welcome questions that keep us open to inquiry, dialogue, and wonder.

Sister Helen Marie Burns, vice president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, believes that "a call to excellence" is a consistent theme in the tradition of Mercy service, whatever our ministry. We are called to provide the highest quality of service in all our ministries, not least of which is education. "The call rests . . . in a profound reverence for persons."[31] Why? Two practical reasons were voiced by Catherine McAuley. We must teach "kindness and patience" because doing so is "indispensable," but teaching "kindness and mercy . . . will not suffice without a solid foundation of a good education and a judicious method of imparting knowledge." The second reason follows on the first: "If we in Catholic schools are not efficient teachers, our schools [will] degenerate, [and] our scholars will seek education elsewhere."[32]

The call to excellence should not "suggest uncritical imitation of the latest techniques and theories but rather a constant awareness of the new in order to evaluate and adapt the better parts/insights."[33] Excellence is not rigidity. Excellence is not omniscient teachers trying to fill pupils' heads with vast amounts of data which in due course are decanted into examination booklets whose contents, to a large extent, will determine who will be deemed worthy of continuing on to the next level of education. No, excellence is enabling every student to achieve her or his potential. Excellence is a teacher who loves teaching, who is prepared every time she steps into the classroom. Excellence is a teacher who knows how to expand the traditional structures of education into one that will fit the evolving needs of our world. Excellence is instilling in everyone associated with the ministry of education—teachers and students, principals and staff, parents and Boards of Governors, bishops and ministers of education, Sisters of Mercy and lay colleagues that education is lifelong.

Catherine would encourage us expand the traditional 3 Rs reading, riting, and rithmetic. She might suggest that we add 3 C s: curiosity, creativity, and courage.

The Future of Mercy Education

We "dance into the future," not by imposing a singular vision of our future as Catholic and mercy schools in a new century, but by posing some questions for further discussion. How do we envision such a future? Does our vision include developing places of excellence where we prepare students for jobs in booming economies, or in developing ones? Excellent schools, after all, do contribute to economic development and to moving countries forward in the high technology effort. An excellent school will adopt demanding standards to support an educational program aimed at passing on an intellectual and cultural heritage. But what else do schools pass on?

Schools that are excellent contribute to keeping a nation strong so as to enable them to

compete in the twenty-first century. But is that all they will contribute? How shall we implement Catherine McAuley's admonition to her first Sisters of Mercy when she said, "Let us fit the young women for earth with out unfitting them for heaven." Does our vision of excellence include a willingness to teach Catholic and Mercy values across the curriculum and not just in religious education classes? What does fidelity to the Church mean? Does it mean adherence to the magisterium and its authority, to the laws of the Church and the commandments? Will our schools be Catholic, with a capital "C" or catholic with small "c"? What's the difference and how does it matter?

Does being "C/catholic and Mercy" include sensitivity to women's experiences, to women's ways of knowing, to the suffering women feel in a hierarchical church that too often patronizes women but seldom takes them seriously? Will our vision of the future as C/catholic and Mercy schools reclaim women's experience, women's wisdom, women's spirituality, women's relationships? Can we do so without diminishing or demeaning men?

Does our vision include ecological consciousness? Will it promote an awareness and an understanding that we cannot go on destroying our natural resources and continue to survive as a species? How will our schools affirm the interconnectedness of all life and being? Will we become more sectarian rather than less? More tribal rather than less? Will we embrace the values of the gospel or the values of the marketplace? Will we encourage our students to "speak truth to power" or will we teach them, "Whatever you say, say nothing"? Will our students become technological wizards but moral midgets? Will their vision be broad and deep, sensitive and embracing, or cold and calculating, small minded and mean spirited? Ideally, our vision of education includes an awareness that every person is created in God's image and likeness, and that no one lies outside the reach of our concern.

Our future depends on education, on the awareness that every mind, every person is a precious resource. But education as learning, is not an end in itself. What do I mean? Perhaps a story will help me explain.

There once was Rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when the night has ended and the day begun.

"Rabbi," said one of his students, "You can tell when the night is ended and the day begun when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a cow or a horse."

"No," said the Rabbi. "That's not correct."

"When you look in the distance and can tell if it is an orange tree or an apple tree," answered another.

"Wrong again," said the Rabbi.

"Well then, tell us, when is it?" asked his students.

"You can tell when night has ended and the day begun," said the Rabbi, "when you look into the face of any man and recognize in him your brother; when you look into the face of any woman and recognize in her your sister. If you cannot do this, no matter what time of the day it is by the sun, it is still night."

If our schools are to have "a future as Mercy and Catholic schools in a new century," then our vision must affirm that every person is made in God's image and likeness, that one lies outside the reach of our concern, and the outcome of our educational effort must be that we can tell when night has ended and day begun. If we can't do that, it won't mater what our vision of education is because we won't have a future in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. and Sheila Carney, R.S.M., *Sisters of Mercy* (Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, n.d), p. 4.

2 Quoted in Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M., "Some Lasting Efforts." Cincinnati, Ohio: Mercy Secondary Education Conference IV, October 26, 1985, p. 3.

3 Helen Marie Burns, R.S.M. and Sheila Carney, R.S.M., *Praying with Catherine McAuley* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1996), p. 15.

4 Ibid., 16–17.

5 Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, First Sister of Mercy* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), p. 14.

6 Ibid.

7 Regina Kelly, R.S.M., "Remember Me Affectionately to All." Dallas, PA: Religious Sisters of Mercy, 1991 reprint.

8 Burns, "Some Lasting Efforts," p. 4.

9 Kelly, "Remember Me Affectionately to All."

10 Burns, "Some Lasting Efforts," p. 5.

11 Ibid.

12 John K. Roth and Frederick Sontag, *The Questions of Philosophy* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 284–285.

13 Quoted in Burns, "Some Lasting Efforts," p. 7.

14 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 16.

15 *Morning and Evening Prayer*, The Sisters of Mercy (Washington, DC: The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1998), p. 932.

16 Ibid.

17 Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, p. 16.

18 Congregation of Sisters of Mercy, Ireland, "Mercy Philosophy of Education" (n.d.), pp. 2–3.

19 From "Catherine McAuley Quotes." Mimeographed, p. Y-98 (no date).

20 Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known, Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 8.

21 Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoirs of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 144.

22 "Mercy Philosophy of Education," p. 5.

23 Walter Brueggemann, "Voices of the Night—Against Justice" in Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks and Thomas H. Groome, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 15.

24 Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 67.

25 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 79.

26 Burns and Carney, *Praying with Catherine McAuley*, p. 86.

27 Burns and Carney, *Praying with Catherine McAuley*, p. 84.

28 Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 84.

29 John K. Roth, "What Teaching Teaches Me" in John K. Roth, ed., *Inspiring Teaching: Carnegie Professors of the Year Speak* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc., 1997), p. 203.

30 "Mercy Philosophy of Education," p. 2.

31 Burns, "Some Lasting Efforts," p. 8.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

Jesus: A Feminist Mystical Perspective

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

Introduction

When we answer Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" and the you who responds is a woman conscious of her female experience as a member of the community of believers, we begin to glimpse both the struggle and theological creativity of Christian feminist theologians and mystics of our own day. This accumulating, critical reflection on and reconstruction of the Christ symbol for women is characterized by a number of features. Reformist Christian feminists find sufficient good news and emancipatory possibilities within Christian tradition to advocate a critical recognition of the religious legitimization of gender discrimination fostered by Christianity in its various cultural contexts. They criticize this discrimination as a betrayal of the "dangerous memory" of Jesus' own ministry, behavior, teaching and that of the original community of co-equal disciples which formed under the sway of God's Spirit mediated through Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Feminist Perspective as Liberation Theology

This feminist critique, retrieval, and imaginative reconstruction of the Jesus tradition and its understanding of Christology is a form of liberation theology. These theologies begin with the concrete experience of the oppression or injustice experienced by a particular group of people within a particular cultural and social location. Within Christianity, the dominant group encourages oppressed persons passively to accept their social oppression and the suffering it entails by identifying themselves with the suffering Jesus rather than naming and resisting socially caused suffering. Critical consciousness asks these questions: "Who is made holy by passive resignation to suffering?" "Who benefits from this resignation and acceptance of an unjust social or economic status?" "Who in power in the church or in society participates in this same suffering?" "Who thinks a particular form of suffering is good for members of a completely different social group?" "Have members of the group who suffer participated in theological reflection on their situation?" Historically, liberation theologies which developed first in Latin America, then in other parts of the third world and in African-American communities here, were developed by male theologians who ignored the specific ways women experience oppression in addition to their marginalization by virtue of race, ethnicity, religion, or class. Thus, rather rapidly, women theologians began to voice the unique oppression of women, giving birth to feminist liberation theologies.

Today, Christian feminism struggles to be inclusive. It is no longer the reflection of primarily white, middle and upper-middle-class women of North American or European backgrounds, but now includes *womanist* reflection authored by Afro-American women, *mujerista* reflection by Hispanic women, and reflection by third-world women from all parts of the world.[1] No woman now claims to speak for all women, but each theologizes from her own cultural and class perspectives. Thus, women recognize that patterns of domination and submission are present world-wide yet vary in significant ways.

Questions for the Reader's Reflection

As you read my reflections, I invite you to notice how you have personally related to Jesus and the narratives and theologies through which we understand him. In what ways do you identify with Jesus through the lens of gender and culture? As a woman, do you experience the maleness of Jesus to be theologically significant? Have you experienced

the maleness of Jesus to be an obstacle to your full participation in the ecclesial community? Have you experienced the maleness of Jesus to be an obstacle in your spiritual development or in your relationship to God? If you have enjoyed mystical experience, how has Jesus been involved? Do you relate to Jesus as *other* and as sexual partner, or as someone with whom you identify as "another Christ"? If you are lesbian, how does this sexual orientation affect your relationship to Christ? As a man, how do you identify with or relate to Jesus? What about Jesus makes you uneasy about your masculinity? For both men and women, how has your experience of the Risen Christ been empowering or liberating? These are all questions which deeply affect the possibility of mystical intimacy with God through the Jesus symbol as well as our own identity as Christians and our participation in our various ecclesial communities. Although these questions may seem irrelevant to some, they are now occurring to children as young as five years of age in Roman Catholic experience.

Feminist theologians look to the future. They advocate a vision of a new human community based on the values of mutuality and reciprocity.

One of my women students reported this christological conversation between her nine-year-old son and her five-year-old daughter. Mollie gives this reply to her mother's question, "What is the most holy time for you?"

Mollie:"When we all go to the mall and you buy me presents and I feel like I'm the baby Jesus."

JP: "You know the baby Jesus was a boy!"

Mollie: "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, JP."

Their mother reported another conversation in which JP was struggling with the androcentric attitudes of another boy and said, "Boys are better than girls because God was a boy." JP muses to his mother, "I'd like to know more about Mary." This wondering about Mary seemed to be his only way out of this impasse he finds himself in between the voices he hears in his boys' world and his sister's resistance to them.

Feminist Christology

The core insight of feminist reflection on Jesus recognizes the androcentric bias of the cultural contexts and thinking which shaped classical christological belief about Jesus and about how Christians ought to behave. Thus, feminist theologians seek to unmask this bias, reveal its oppressive and distorting effects on women's lives in the churches and in society, and resist it on the basis of discovering and promoting other more liberating strands within the tradition itself as normative for the community. The theological assumption such women hold is that women share equally with men in the dignity of being fully human; that women are equally redeemed by Christ; that God wills not women's oppression and diminishment, but their full flourishing; and that the historical life and ministry of Jesus demonstrated such an inclusive intention and actual relationship with women despite the patriarchal culture which shaped Jesus' own humanity. Furthermore, feminist theologians look to the future. They advocate a vision of a new human community based on the values of mutuality and reciprocity; this new community represents what the community of disciples, called church, who gather in the name of Jesus, is meant to become now, not merely projected as a vision for the next life. In summary, this process represents basically three steps: analyzing the situation of sexism, searching the tradition and naming what contributes to the oppression, and finally searching the tradition for what liberates.[2]

Sexism

After thirty years of the contemporary women's movement and beginning with Vatican II in the church, sexism is understood to be discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, invisibility, and subhuman treatment on the basis of gender. This discrimination includes subtle psychological pressures as well as forms of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Sexism is recognized as a social sin and one of the "signs of the times" of God's Spirit

moving in the world to right this injustice. Sexism is culturally constructed through the ideology of patriarchy—that is, structures shaped by males for males in which power is exclusively in the hands of males who are themselves ranked in a series of graded subordinations, with the least powerful being at the base. Women do not fit at all in this structure except as defined by the men to whom they belong as wives, daughters, etc. Women who belong to men higher up in the power pyramid outrank the women who belong to men lesser ranked. Within most societies today, the structures of family life, social life, political life, economic life and ecclesial life are predominately patriarchal. In societies such as ours in which the women's movement has effected legal changes making job discrimination on the basis of gender illegal, women can occupy positions in the structures so regulated. However, they do so as "honorary males" and are usually successful if they can conform to the masculine rules of such structures.

Sexism also occurs in patterns of thinking which take the humanity of male human beings and make it normative for all. The adult male is the model of the appropriately human. Women are not considered fully "human" in their own right, and their way of being, thinking, doing, structuring life and organization is not considered to be equally good or appropriate and is resisted when women attempt to create organizational change. The social and economic analysis of the recent U.N. Conference on Women held in Bejing offers a world-wide, multicultural analysis of gender discrimination.[3]

Feminist Critique of Christology

Within the theological tradition, virtually all of the most influential theologians were both male and androcentric in their thinking. Feminist critiques have adequately demonstrated the anti-woman bias assumed as normal in the tradition which presents women universally as temptress, identified with Eve and with evil—in Tertullian's charming phrase, "The devil's gateway"—or as not possessing the image of God in herself, (Augustine) or is rejected as a "misbegotten male" because of her embodiment. (Aquinas).[4]

Furthermore, the Christ symbol has been used in ways which are oppressive for women. According to Mary Daly, "If God is male, then the male is God." If, according to Augustine, "a woman is in the image of God only when taken together with the male who is her head," while "as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one," then women and men do not fully and co-equally embody human nature nor are both equally the image of God. Presently within Roman Catholicism, the insistence that only a male can act *in persona Christi* and so be symbolically suitable for ordained ministry is the most blatant expression of an androcentric Christology being used against the full flourishing of women's humanity in order to preserve male sacral power. The maleness of Jesus is thus used to deform the image of God, restricting it to exclusively male gender, to make the male the norm of the truly and fully human, and to enforce an unjust structure of power domination within the church itself. This latter social experience within Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism is, according to Rosemary Ruether, creating a serious church/world split.[5] The churches now teach that gender discrimination against women in society is wrong, but apparently not in the churches.

The insistence that only a male can be symbolically suitable for ordained ministry is the most blatant expression of an androcentric Christology being used against the full flourishing of women s humanity in order to preserve male sacral power.

Daly claims that even more harm is done to women by idealizing the image of Jesus as sacrificial victim. Within a tradition that denies women the possibility of identifying with the role of priest, she is forced to identify exclusively with the role of victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc.[6] Protestant theologian Rita

Brock argues that various theories of the atonement cause even more damage to women. For her and others, Christology supports the patriarchal family by its father-son language and she refers to God the Father's acceptance of his son's death as "cosmic child abuse." Brock's work has particularly focused on the struggle of Asian-American women and victims of sexual abuse.

Feminist Retrieval of Women's Mystical Tradition

While it is true that many women have experienced negative effects from the androcentric theological tradition related to Jesus, Carolyn Walker Bynum and numerous other feminist historians have consistently shown that the mystical tradition, while often assuming the androcentric cultural frame of reference in which theology developed, has also had liberating effects on women.[7] Bynum's work sensitively explores the actual and creative ways the complex and ambiguous symbolism related to the Christ figure has functioned in women's spiritual lives. Symbols cannot simply be created anew according to logic. Symbols function in far more ambiguous ways within their particular social and cultural contexts. For instance, numerous women mystics and reformers developed their relational, empowered selves in relationship to Jesus who both nurtured their development into selfhood and made concrete demands on them requiring them to teach, preach, found convents, convert, console and present often another face of God to people. Joan of Arc was compelled by her mystical voices to lead the French army. Teresa of Avila undertook the reform of the Carmelite contemplative tradition. Catherine of Siena cultivated the spiritual development of her lay community, influenced local politics, and dictated her theology of the spiritual life in a visionary state. Julian of Norwich offered an alternative theology of the mothering Jesus and the compassion of God at time when the theology of the atonement had taken on extraordinarily vengeful forms.

While other men resisted these women, Jesus in his maleness authorized, called, empowered, and supported them through their prophetic callings and mystical experiences.

This radical mystical empowerment of women was the only form of legitimization women had apart from traditional authority such as a queen might exert. This spiritual empowerment also made them potential objects of intense persecution in the form of witch hunts, heresy accusations, and other sanctions. Within the situation of patriarchy, many women have found in Jesus a countervailing form of masculine empowerment. While other men resisted these women, Jesus in his maleness authorized, called, empowered, and supported them through their prophetic callings and mystical experiences. A couple of my favorite examples are Gertrude the Great's mystical affirmation of her counseling ministry in which she found she spoke for God in her reconciling words.

> And another time when she prayed for someone . . . the Lord replied: "Whatever anyone hopes to be able to obtain from you, so much without a doubt she will receive from me. Moreover, whatever you promise to someone in my name, I will certainly supply . . ."
>
> After several days, remembering this promise of the Lord without forgetting her own unworthiness, she asked how it was possible . . . the Lord replied: "Is not the faith of the universal church that promise once made to Peter: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and firmly she believes this to be carried out by all ecclesiastical ministers. Therefore why do you not equally believe because of this that I can and will perfect that which, moved by love, I promise you by my divine mouth?" And touching her tongue he said, "Behold I give my words into your mouth."[8]

Another is Teresa of Avila's vision in which when she complained that all the books that had helped her grow in her spiritual life had now been burned by order of the Inquisition, Jesus replied, "Do Not be afraid, I will be for you a Living Book."[9]

The Afro-American womanist tradition according to Kelly Douglas asserts, "*Jesus Christ means that God is real.* Christ brings God down to earth. Christ is God's actual presence in the daily lives of African-American women. Christ is a living being

with whom African-American women have an intimate relationship."[10] There are several dimensions to this relationship: Christ is a friend and confidant with whom they intimately share their pains and sorrows of being black and female in a hostile society; Christ is a co-sufferer, intimately in solidarity with their sufferings; Christ is a healer and provider helping them take care of their needs; and Christ is a liberator working through them to liberate their community from its complex forms of oppression.

Feminist theologians ask: Can Christology be developed in such a way that it no longer encourages women to be passive victims within families and societies and offers women the energy, courage, and hope to work for change, and move out of oppressive situations if necessary? The overarching feminist theological principle is whatever enables the full humanity of women (and men) to flourish is redemptive and of God; whatever damages this is non-redemptive and contrary to God's intent.

Feminist Liberation Theology

Ellen Leonard identifies five approaches to Christology in contemporary feminist theology which take into account women's reflection on Christ in the light of their gendered experience. These are new insights into the meaning of Jesus the Christ for the coming century:

1. Beginning from the Jesus of history as prototype
2. Beginning from the Jesus of history as iconoclastic prophet
3. Relocating Christology in the community
4. Envisioning Christ as the incarnation of female divinity
5. Envisioning Christ's humanity in female terms.[11]

For my purposes, I am presenting Ellen Leonard's original analysis in an order which differs from hers. I begin with the reconstruction of the Jesus of history as both prototype of a liberating Christology for women and as indication of God's desire for the flourishing of women. The retrieval of the historical Jesus which in itself does not exhaust the Christ mystery, an experience of on-going relationship through the Spirit of Jesus within the believing community, has enormous implications for us. Elizabeth Johnson is fond of saying: "If God became a human being, then it matters enormously what kind of human being God became." While the various quests for the historical Jesus yield limited information about him, nevertheless, the data serves as a corrective to our various pious images of Jesus that bear little or no resemblance to the historical Jesus. Elizabeth Johnson among others draws on this witness of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection and the tradition of wisdom Christology. She identifies the following features as supportive of women's flourishing:[12]

Can Christology be developed in such a way that it no longer encourages women to be passive victims within families and societies?

1. Jesus' preaching proclaims justice and peace for all peoples, inclusive of women. The vision of the reign or *basileia* of God which he proclaimed was a community where every human person is valued and all interrelate in a mutually respectful way. This inclusiveness was particularly expressed in his table community with the poor, with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims that Jesus and the praxis of the earliest church is a prototype rather than an archetype. From the perspective of the present experience of women's struggle for liberation, Jesus calls forth a community of co-equal disciples which was submerged and often oppressed historically by ecclesiastical patriarchy, and which invites women today to move into the future in a such a discipleship of equals.

2. Jesus' naming of God as Abba can be liberating for women because Jesus' Abba is the opposite of a dominating patriarch. Rather, this compassionate, intimate, and close Abba releases everyone from patterns of domination and subordination.

3. Jesus' partiality for the marginalized included women at every turn. Jesus treated women with grace and respect, healed, exorcised, forgave, and restored women to shalom.

4. Feminist interpretation of the stories of women in the Gospels shows that Jesus called women to be disciples despite androcentric attempts to interpret these women out of the tradition whenever possible. These women were part of the missionary group that traveled with Jesus.

5. All of the Gospels show that women witnessed both Jesus' death and resurrection, that Jesus explicitly commissioned them to tell their brothers. Thus women were included in his community not as subordinate to males but as equals in the community.

6. In the early decades of the Christian community, there is strong evidence, massively documented by Fiorenza,[13] that women were missionaries, preachers, teachers, prophets, apostles, healers, speakers in tongues, leaders of house churches.

7. Contemporary interpretations of the death of Jesus make the connection between Jesus' revolutionary, prophetic behaviors of inclusion which so severely challenged the religious power holders of his day that they had him executed as a political revolutionary. Feminists have argued that his inclusion of women was among his socially destabilizing activities.

They assert that Jesus' message of good news to the poor and his inclusive practice is what is to be carried into the future by his followers. Jesus is a paradigm for liberating personhood, inclusive of all of redeemed humanity, every culture and people of the world. Thus the image of Christ must take on ever new forms "as woman, as Black and Brown woman, as impoverished and despised woman of those peoples who are the underside of Christian imperialism."[14] Thus, if Jesus as the Christ is a universal image of redemption, it is totally appropriate to represent Jesus in every ethnic identity and both genders.

Relocating Christ in the Community

According to Leonard, other attempts to transform the image of Christ focus either on a Spirit Christology or in the community of believers itself. Ruether emphasizes a Spirit Christology which focuses on the post-resurrection experience of the community in which Jesus' spirit is poured out on all who believe, women equally with men. Both men and women were baptized into this same spirit and both men and women were understood to be in the form of Christ. In this way, each Christian is *in persona Christi*. The Risen Christ is represented by the entire community of believers. Rita Nakashima Brock uses the phrase Christa/Community where she relocates Christ in "the community of which Jesus is only one historical part so that the community generates the erotic power which heals and thus becomes the locus for redemption."[15] However we understand this aspect of Christology theologically, I think this experience of believing Christians that each embodies the Christ is the spiritual or mystical experience from whence emerges empowerment and action despite the constancy of church preaching, practice, and teaching which denies this Christic reality in practice but which we know in our deepest faith experiences.

Envisioning Christ as the Incarnation of Female Divinity

Elisabeth Fiorenza and Elizabeth Johnson have both retrieved the feminine image of God as Sophia from the biblical tradition. They both talk about Jesus-Sophia. Fiorenza talks about Jesus as Sophia's child, according to the Q tradition, and Johnson of Jesus as the embodiment or incarnation of the feminine divine Sophia.[16] This strategy revives the ancient wisdom tradition and lifts it up for our assimilation. If Sophia is the feminine personification of God's creative and saving involvement in the world, then Jesus is no longer only a son to a male father-God, but also Sophia's child. The exclusively masculine gender of God relentlessly reinforced by the use of male pronouns is broken. Jesus can be an androgynous, tricky, male/female embodiment. Others simply focus on God as mother or female and also employ non-gendered images for God as well as retaining some masculine images.

Envisioning Christ's Humanity in Female Terms

The final strategy Leonard describes is that of envisioning Christ's humanity in female terms. This strategy values women's concrete embodiment in a positive way as medieval women realized: if God became flesh, then women could achieve religious

transcendence precisely through their embodied practices. The tradition of Mother Jesus which largely disappeared after the Reformation has strongly reemerged in the last thirty years. In Julian of Norwich's theology, Jesus' nurturing love for all humanity is evoked in her use of Mother Jesus.

> But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at the last he died. And when he had finished, and he had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love.[17]

Prior to the Reformation, such androgynous, gender-bending images of Christ were common. They drew richly on women's embodied experiences of childbearing, birthing, nurturing and make connections to Eucharist and Jesus. Thus, they enable women to directly identify their embodied experiences in sustaining life and the suffering that entails as an access to the holy. Woman-Christ includes female embodiment in the image of Christ. This image tends to offer strength in the present adversity, but it continues to collapse the feminine into what remains a male image. Woman herself is not so clearly of herself in the image of God. Women may still have "to become virile or male" themselves, crossing over to include the masculine in order to be in the image of God and of Christ.

Rosemary Ruether suggests that a Spirit-Christology may overcome this androgyny. This means that when Jesus pours forth his Spirit in the Christian community, both men and women equally image/embody the Christ. The story of Blandina's martyrdom demonstrates this poignantly:

> Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes *they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them,* that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's glory will have eternal fellowship in the living God.[18]

Contemporary Women's Experience and Images

In my experience and in that of many other women, women are both increasingly conscious of their oppression in the church and creatively innovating within the tradition. While many women in the pews remain without the rich resources for a more woman-affirming relationship with Jesus emerging from the technical scholarship of women theologians, artists, and popularizing materials which encourage women to develop and pray with feminine images of God, others have been struggling with naming the destructive effects of negative Christologies and creatively re-imagine a Jesus who wills women's flourishing. My directees speak about powerful and beautiful images of God as Sophia as well as a fully woman-affirming relationship with Jesus. They relate to and image God as maternal. They increasingly claim their own embodiment as an extension and image of God's body despite the official teachings which deny it. I poignantly remember my first experience in Berkeley years ago, when a pregnant clergywomen presided at Eucharist speaking the words, "This is my body." I experienced in her pregnant body the connection of women's life-creating, life-giving experience in a way I never could have imagined without that liturgy. One woman I interviewed described this lovely experience of Jesus as healer:

> I was working with a massage therapist, a holistic practitioner. She was working on this shoulder, and she sort of delineated a triangle, and told me to close my eyes, and to breathe deeply, and to breathe in light, and to put that light in my shoulder. I often have the experience of the presence of Jesus with her, when she's working. At first I had the experience of Him behind her, and then it was as if His hand *became* her hand. And then—although her hand was more fingers, touching me—it was like His palm was on my shoulder, and the three nail holes in His hand were the three points of . . . the triangle. And I experienced, an image I guess, of the triangle at first becoming very luminescent, and then that . . . that light kind of growing and spreading, almost as a flame. And it was very, just very strongly the feeling that that was coming from the nail holes in the hand. [EC10]

Another described her unfolding christological reflection and experience:

> I'm not sure if I am a Christian in terms of classical, Christian believing, Jesus is the Son of God, whatever, or that Jesus is God. When I think of Jesus, God, myself . . . is that here I am. Here's Jesus standing before me, and saying before all of us "You want to know what it's like to be a human being which is to be like God? Look at me." And so I look at Jesus and I say, I live in the Father and the Father lives in me and I live in God, God lives in me, God and I are one, Jesus and I are one. Somehow we are all connected. For me, the connection with Jesus is very strong but it's not necessarily because I say Jesus is God in a classical language but that love has connected us all and we're all kind of in this together in some giant circle . . . It's quite personal and quite present and quite real though not differentiated. And in fact, impacts my outer world. As I am impacted . . . who I am on the inside has become more connected with who I am on the outside, so there's that integration . . . The way I move in the world is different. (WC6)

In our feminine Mercy tradition, we once had black ebony crosses with an ivory inlay in the center, no corpus. We were told we were to be the corpus, identified with Christ in our performance of the works of mercy. One of our artists, Celeste Marie Nuttman, paints Mercy crosses in the style of Taize which depict the historical works of Mercy performed by specific regional communities or institutions, by encoding in her icons the faces of pioneer and contemporary Sisters of Mercy in all of their ethnic and cultural particularity. Only the Christ is on the cross, the women of Mercy and their collaborators are Christ active in the world today.

The experience and power of Jesus continues to inspire, empower, and engage us today. The current practices of domination and subordination within the Roman Catholic church daily countersign an inclusive and liberating Christology. At the same time, God's Christic Spirit in the world and especially within women's experience and the experience of feminist men, invite and impel us into ever deeper contemplation of this profound faith reality and into liberating action and celebration which allows Christ and Christianity to be experienced as 'good news" for women.

Notes

(This presentation was originally given at a Contemplative/Seminar, Jesus for the 21st Century, at Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, June 18, 1998).

1 For a brief account of African-American womanist christological reflection see Kelly Brown Douglas, "Christ, Jesus" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* ed. by Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson. Kentucky: Westminster /John Knox Press, 1996.
2 This entire account relies heavily on Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 1991. See her entire chapter on "Feminist Christology," p. 97 ff.
3 See *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, China 4–15 September 1995, New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1996.
4 Johnson, pp. 100–102.
5 For a brief account of the feminist critique of Christology see Ellen Leonard, "Women and Christ: Toward Inclusive Christologies" *Toronto Journal of Theology* (6/2 1990) pp. 266–285 and Francine Cardman, "Christology" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, pp. 40–3.
6 Leonard, p. 271.
7 Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987 and *Fragmentation and Redemption*. New York: Zone, 1991.
8 Gertrude the Great, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. Alexandra Barratt. CF 35 Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991, Book I,14, p. 83.
9 *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, trans. E. Allison Peers New York: Doubleday, 1960, Chapter 26, p. 247.
10 Douglas, *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, p. 39.
11 Leonard, p. 273ff.
12 Johnson, pp. 54–55.
13 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
14 Rosemary Ruether, cited by Leonard, p. 278.
15 Leonard, pp. 278–9.
16 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*. New York: Crossroad, 1992 and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
17 *Julian of Norwich, Showings*, trans. and ed. by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. New York Paulist Press, 1978, chap. 60, p. 298. See Bridget M. Meehan, *Exploring the Feminine Face of God*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991, for texts and illustrations of feminine images of God and of Jesus.
18 Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*. Boston: Beacon, 1983. From *The Acts of the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne*, CE 177, cited by Ruether, p. 131.

Review of Mary Sullivan's
The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Mary C. Sullivan, ed. *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pp. i–xii + 226, with notes, bibliography and index. ISBN 0–8122–3489–9

Mary Sullivan, R.S.M. (Rochester), Ph.D., is professor of language and literature at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Scholars have already published various editions of some of the estimated 14,000 letters of Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) the English reformer of public health care. Through research in the Bermondsey convent archives as well as Nightingale archives in London, Sullivan's original work is her focus on the ten known letters written by Mary Clare Moore (1814–1874) the founding superior of the Sisters of Mercy in Bermondsey, to Florence Nightingale, and to the correspondence of Nightingale addressed to Moore as "Revd Mother" over the twenty-year period of their friendship, which concluded at the death of Moore.

Nightingale, who never married, lived to be ninety, outliving Moore by thirty-five years. The forty-seven letters which are the basis for the commentary are published by Sullivan for the first time in most cases. Her aim is to show not only the friendship, but the influence of Moore on Nightingale's spiritual development. Ultimately, Sullivan says, "I hope that readers will find here convincing evidence of the attractiveness and quite special character of the woman whom Florence Nightingale was pleased to treasure as a friend" (p. 185).

Sullivan admits in her well-crafted and synthesized introduction, which exists as a most useful text apart from what follows, that the letters she has identified may not be the only ones which exist, since nuns' names and identities are confused in secular records. There are also unexplained gaps in the Nightingale-Moore exchange for several years. Occasionally, Nightingale supplies a note of "burn" to her letter, (at points when she has been self-deprecating or especially critical of persons in political office). As feminist historians commonly note, much of the record of women's contribution to society in past centuries has been marginalized or demeaned in its importance. This is also true for the work of Catholic nuns, whose initiation of political and social change on behalf of the poor has also been largely ignored, even by feminist historians in general and historians of nineteenth century England in particular (p. 185). Sullivan's volume resists both tendencies and enlarges the record, not of a single woman, but of the partnership between two of them.

The twenty-year friendship was begun in 1854 during the first months of the Crimean War (1854–1856), when Nightingale, at the age of thirty-four, had been named by the British government to be superintendent of female nursing in the military hospitals in Turkey and the Crimea during the war with Russia. Mary Clare Moore, along with several other British Sisters of Mercy had responded to a request for volunteer nurses from their bishop. In Scutari, Turkey, under conditions of great deprivation, Moore served under the supervision of Nightingale, whose gratitude and recognition of her service was to last even beyond Moore's lifetime. By contrast, with both comic and tragic consequences, the Irish Mercy Mary Francis Bridgeman, resigned and returned to Ireland rather than work under Nightingale. Prior to their departure, Nightingale was referring to her and her companions as the "Brickbats" (p. 58). The tensions between Irish and English flared even in Turkey, with Irish Jesuits refusing to minister the sacraments to the party of English nuns stationed there.

After the war, they both returned to England. Nightingale became effectively an invalid for the next fifty years, residing in London, but ceaselessly reviewing field reports from English outposts in Turkey and India and advocating for change in army sanitation, public health, nursing, nurses' training, workhouse nursing and public health. The tragedy of the Crimean War was that most of the casualties resulted not from war wounds, but from diseases brought on by unsanitary conditions. Lack of clean water, lack of knowledge about health and sanitation, inefficient organization and management, politicization of the healthcare budget, inability to requisition and distribute needed supplies in the field in a timely way, and the unreliable supply of even the simplest of treatments—prescriptions of port wine and brandy—also contributed to the death rate. These elements in the story emerge from complaints in Nightingale's letters, her affirmation of Moore's assistance, and Sullivan's historical commentary.

Moore lived at Bermondsey, most of the years as superior, from 1841 to 1874. After her return from the Crimea, she remained in residence, and undertook the expansion of services at Bermondsey and purchased property to consolidate its convent and school. She weathered political conflicts with Archbishop Manning over the staffing of St. Elizabeth's hospital. Until his death in 1870, Moore worked closely with the local bishop, Thomas Grant for nineteen years, as secretary, advisor and co-worker, without "any quarrel." (p. 166) Despite bad health, Moore supervised repairs and renovations to buildings, directed retreats, advised novices in formation, prepared the manuscript of Catherine McAuley's *Sayings* for publication, and kept up a correspondence with Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, England and Australia. (pp. 159–160).

Some historians have concluded that Nightingale, a practical-minded Anglican, had little use for spirituality or mysticism, and valued only a faith which issued in helpful action to relieve the needs of others. Nightingale typically used the image of productive action, "cleaning out your own gutters" as a mark of respect for spiritually-inclined persons such as Moore. Evidence indicates that Nightingale was convinced Roman Catholic doctrine was erroneous, and was critical of aspects of Ignatius and Teresa's teachings because in her mind they fostered attitudes of passivity and submission without independence or freedom of thought (p. 165). However, as several letters indicate, Nightingale was grateful to Moore for the loan of spiritual reading books. From them, Nightingale copied passages, for example, from John of the Cross (pp. 110–11), Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Sienna (p. 112), and Teresa of Avila (p. 187) whom she also praised (p. 184). She also read Gertrude of Helfta (pp. 44–46). Nightingale referred to her spiritual teaching as her "stuff," and planned to publish the collection of her excerpts and religious commentary which exist in manuscript as "Notes from Devotional Authors" (p. 45).

Nightingale continually reverenced the Catholic Mary Clare Moore as war-mate from the Crimea, sister at arms in the struggle for social reform, companion in the fight to overcome poverty and ignorance, spiritual mentor, religious inspiration, and confidante. Sisterhood and commitment to the needy transcended denominational differences. It was not necessary to belong to the same church to do the same charitable work.

This wonderful collection of primary literature, tied together with Sullivan's intelligent, spare historical commentary, shows the enduring friendships of women whose religious zeal once inspired them to risk their lives and health to serve the medical needs of men on the battlefield. But the zeal ran deep and strong, and nurtured a commitment lasting all their lives to serve both men and women, adults and children, in health, education, and social reform. "The essence of the work of Florence and Clare" Sullivan concludes," was to relieve misery and address its causes."

This book is another classic volume in Mercy literature. Part of its genius is its clarity, choice of interesting details to highlight, and its combination of genres—literary commentary, archival exactness, historical chronicle, and narrative cohesion. Sullivan synthesizes presentation of epistolary text with commentary that locates the letter in the biographical continuum of Nightingale and Moore.

Political controversies, such as the one over Vatican I's declaration of papal infallibility, are woven into the narrative (p. 166). As Sullivan notes, Mary Clare Moore was a trusted companion of Catherine McAuley and "is acknowledged to be the person who most closely assisted Catherine in preparing the original manuscript of the Rule and the Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy" (p. 3).

Thus, to enter the world of these letters is to come close to the original charism and energy that inspired the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy.

As Mary Clare Moore was dying, Florence Nightingale wrote to an unidentified Sister at the Bermondsey convent: (p. 176).

12/12/74

Dear Sister

I know not what to write.

Perhaps she is at this moment with God.

But this we know: She could scarcely be more with God than she was habitually here: & therefore all things are well with her, whether she be there or still here:

It is we who are left motherless when she goes.

But she will not forget us:

I cannot say more.

I send 2 or 3 Eggs for the chance.

And I have got a little game which I send: for I think you, & perhaps others, must be so worn out with watching & sorrow that perhaps you cannot eat.

And you know she would wish you to eat.

We pray with our whole hearts to God.

Ever yours
F.N.

Autograph: Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Bermondsey

Sometime between 1870 and 1872, Florence Nightingale wrote a note which alludes to her own choice not to marry, yet her conviction that she acted as a "Virgin Mother." It also expresses the esteem in which she held the work of others, like Mary Clare Moore, whose maternity was resided in "their defense of the vulnerable, their empowerment of the weak, and their formation of daughters and sons trained to perform with discipline the work to which they themselves had been so steadfastly committed." (p. 182)

Who are those who have had the most influence over us? over the world?

Who have been our real spiritual fathers & mothers? The real fathers and mothers of the world?

Virgin Mothers?
Virgin Fathers?
Christ to the world?
St. Teresa?
Mrs. Fry?
J.S. Mill?

& let each one consult his or her own experience.

These Virgin Fathers & Mothers have sometimes been married—sometimes not been childless.

But it is not over their own children that they have had influence. It is over others. They have brought many to perfection—out of darkness into light.

(BL Add. MSS 45843, f. 306).

The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore can be purchased from the following:

*Kate's Tea and Gift Shop
1437 Blossom Road
Rochester, NY 14610
(716) 271-2657
$36.95 plus $1.50 shipping

*University of Pennsylvania Press
4200 Pine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-4011
(215) 898-6264
$39.95

*Amazon.com

Contributors

Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, holds a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard University, and a J.D. from Stanford University. Interested in the intersection of feminist jurisprudence and feminist theology, she is currently in the doctoral program in theology and ethics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Married with four children, she is also a founding member of WELS, Women's Experience in Law and Spirituality. WELS is a network which acknowledges spirituality as a dimension of legal practice and provides a feminist critique of legal concepts and conventions. WELS seeks to educate women about the law and to promote a more conciliatory, less combative approach for settling disputes.

Elizabeth Julian, is a Sister of Mercy from Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, where she has been preparing student teachers to teach in Catholic schools as well as adult education. She holds a B.A. and B. Ed. from Massey University, Palmerston North ANZ and an M. Ed. from Boston College. She has done research on the relationship between biblical texts, Mercy spirituality and the indigenous tribal rituals of New Zealand. Currently she is a candidate in the Doctorate of Ministry program at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, where she is completing her thesis on the spirituality of women who teach in Catholic schools in ANZ.

Carol Rittner, R.S.M. (Dallas, PA) holds an M.A. in English from University of Maryland, an M.T.S. from St. John's Seminary in Detroit, and a D.Ed. in Higher Education Administration from Pennsylvania State University. She is Distinguished Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Her film, "The Courage to Care," was nominated for a 1984 Academy Award in the Short Documentary category. With Sondra Myers, she edited *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. With John Roth, she edited *Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy*, and *Different Voices: Women During the Holocaust*. She has contributed chapters to several books and written numerous essays about the Holocaust. Her most recent publication is *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, edited with Stephen Smith and Irena Steinfeldt, intended for presentation to Pope John Paul II on his visit to Yad Vashem in March 2000. For the past ten years, Rittner has been involved with Holywell Trust, a community development organization in Derry, Northern Ireland dedicated to peaceful solutions to conflicts there. She also serves with the London-based Aegis Trust, a non-governmental organization developing strategies to combat potential genocides around the world.

Janet Ruffing, R.S.M. (Burlingame, CA), holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and is associate professor in the graduate division of religious education at Fordham University, chairing a concentration in spirituality and spiritual direction. She has lectured on spirituality and spiritual direction in Ireland, England, Australia, and India. She has written numerous articles and has authored *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Narrative and Spiritual Direction*. Other publications include "The Gifts of Celibate Friendship and Intimacy" in *Horizons* (1998), "Celibacy and Contemplation (1997) and "Going Up into the Gaps: Prophetic Life and Vision in *InFormation* (1998) "Supervision and Spiritual Development: The Conventional post-Conventional Divide" *in Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* (1997), "As Refined by Fire" in *Living Prayer* and "Resisting the Demon of Busyness" in *Spiritual Life*. She is a regular contributor to *The MAST Journal*.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. (Burlingame, CA) is the editor of *The MAST Journal* and a founding member of WELS (see Chamberlain, above). Her Ph.D. is from the Graduate Theological Union (1987); she served there as associate dean of faculty from 1997–1999. Currently she is studying law. Recent publications include "Gender, Ethnicity and Legal Considerations in the Hemorrhaging Woman's Story" in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Reviewed*, ed. by Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), "The Present and Future Status of Women in Religion and Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2000); "Collaborations: Jewish and Christian Feminist Biblicists" in *The Way Supplement* (2000) and "Edith Stein" in *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, ed. by Rittner (above).

Discussion Questions

1. (Chamberlain) "Feminist historians have been working to dig up previously unreported or underemphasized positive aspects of the lives of Catholic women. All of this work has helped provide women in the present, who see themselves as part of this faith tradition, a much needed frame of reference by which to view themselves."

> Are the maternal activities of women toward children a service to God, or an image of who God is? Is the address of God as nursing mother, lover or friend too "soft" to ground theology? How do these nurturing images of God appeal to women you know? Do such images reflect the needs of women today or reinforce a "status quo" spirituality?

2. (Julian) "Ruth is a story of women's friendship set within the larger theological concept of God's fidelity...Ruth decides to throw her lot in with Naomi totally and go wherever she goes. In joining fates and forces, their bleak future is transformed because the closeness between the two women fuels their creativity and allows them to accomplish together what they could not have done alone. Their collaboration ensures their security. In freely combining forces and accepting each other, one offers wisdom and guidance, the other the energy and fertility required to secure their future."

> What friendships have you been graced with that allowed you, like Naomi and Ruth, "to accomplish together what they could not have done alone"? If collaboration in ministry cannot always produce friendships outside the workplace, what features of friendship are necessary to sustain a viable ministerial and working partnership?

3. (Rittner) "For those of us in the Roman Catholic tradition, we admit that for too long our Church has focused on giving answers rather than encouraging questions. Questions are more important than answers. Answers aim to settle things whereas questions aim to "unsettle" things. People are less likely to annihilate each other when their minds are not made up, but opened up through questioning."

> When you hear a person raise questions, and unsettle things, is your instinct to make peace, to ignore the question, to give an answer, or to support the question? How do you evaluate whether a question is useful for opening up minds, or whether what is actually needed is an answer or a different question?

4. (Ruffing) "Have you experienced the maleness of Jesus to be an obstacle in your spiritual development or in your relationship with God? If you have enjoyed mystical experience, how has Jesus been involved? Do you relate to Jesus as 'other' and as a sexual partner, or as someone with whom you identify as 'another Christ'...How has your experience of the Risen Christ been empowering or liberating?"

> How does this discussion affect a) mystical intimacy with God through the Jesus symbol; b) our own identity as Christians; c) our participation in our various ecclesial communities?

Information for New Subscribers and Current Readers

New Subscription: *The MAST Journal* is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. To subscribe, please fill out the coupon below or a copy of it. Make your check payable to *The MAST Journal* and send to Julia Upton, R.S.M., Center for Teaching and Learning, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439.

Back Issues: If you are interested in obtaining a back issue of *The MAST Journal*, issues are available at $3.50 per copy plus postage. Bulk rates to one address are negotiable. Please send all requests to Julia Upton, R.S.M., St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439.

Address Change: If your address is incorrect, or if you have changed your mailing address, please send that information to Julia Upton, R.S.M., St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439, or email to Uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Issue Didn't Arrive: If your subscription is up to date and your issue of the journal did not arrive (and you know the issue has been published, the grapevine says!), then write to Julia Upton, R.S.M., St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439, or email to Uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Want to Write: If you have an idea for an article, or you have a talk or article you would like published in *The MAST Journal*, please send the article or inquiry to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., MAST Office, 1121 Starbird Circle #4, San Jose, CA 95117. Please include a complete return mailing address on all correspondence or contact her by e-mail at erosen1121@cs.com.

I wish to subscribe to *The MAST Journal* for:

One year ____
($15.00 U.S.; $18.00 outside U.S.)

Two years ____
($25.00 U.S.; $30.00 outside U.S.)

Name _____

Address _____

_____

_____

Please make payment by international money order, check drawn on U.S. bank, or U.S. currency.

MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address 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 at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, June 4–6, 2000, prior to the CTSA in San Jose.

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.

Membership dues are $20 per year, payable to Marie Michele Donnely, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, Convent of Mercy, 515 Montgomery Ave., Merion Station, PA 19066.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Julia Upton, R.S.M., Executive Director, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439 (718) 990-1861, or email to Uptonj@stjohns.edu.

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.

Marian Retreat Center
535 Sacramento Street
Auburn, CA 95603