Religious Life and Constitutions, Part II
Anticipating the 2005 Chapter

Ecclesial Challenges for the Sisters of Mercy in the 21st Century
—Mary Aquin O'Neill, R.S.M.

Love of the Mercy of God Constitutes Our Life
—Maureen Crossen, R.S.M.

Incorporation:
Committing to Wisdom and Community for the Reign of Mercy
—Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

Community Life in Mercy
—Mary Anne Nolan, R.S.M.

Rights/Responsibilities of Women Religious in the Church:
A Canon Law Perspective
—Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.

The Reconciliation Process: An Ecclesial Structure for Protecting Rights of Members
—Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Colored Vocations: Women of Color in Religious Life
—Maria Luisa Vera, R.S.M.

Locating Ourselves in Theology and Ministry: Where I Am
—Elizabeth McMillan, R.S.M.
Dear Sisters, Associates and Friends of Mercy,

The discussions among theologians that occur at annual MAST meetings have a collaborative spirit, quality, and candor that are not experienced in our other professional settings in quite the same way. The issues of The MAST Journal arise out of these conversations of editorial board and MAST membership in such close synergy that this must always be affirmed—the journal exists only because the conversation at the MAST meeting does. In this sense, the writers here are expressing what it means to be "women of the Word"—the "God-talk" that is theology, and the "sister talk" that is MAST.

The power of MAST members' conversation to sustain such a project is expressed in simply noting that the organization is eighteen years old, and three issues of the journal have appeared every year for nearly fifteen years. We feel much gratitude to our faithful subscribers, and toward Institute and regional leadership for moral and financial support over the years.

The commitment to reflect on the relations of our Constitutions and religious life, anticipating the Institute Chapter of 2005 was undertaken two years ago at our MAST meeting. We planned two volumes of the journal around the implications of our Constitutions. The indefatigable Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., solicited contributors for both MAST volumes in addition to completing her own recently published study, Like a Tree by Running Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California's First Sister of Mercy (available at www.bluedolphinpublishing.com).

In this second of the Constitutions volumes, Mary Aquin O’Neill proposes that we measure fulfillment of our ecclesial mission, our community life, and vows by whether there is an enhancement—or a diminution—of union and charity among us. Further texts of her studies of religious life and vows are available at www.mountsaintagnes.org. Maureen Crossen names as the first guide for our life, not the Constitutions, but love for the mercy of God, which inspires compassion and forgiveness as the ground for working against injustice. Kathleen McAlpin breaks down the steps of the current Institute incorporation process, as described in the Constitutions, out of her years of experience in this ministry.

Mary Anne Nolan focuses on the quality of our sisterly relationships with each other, both our human interdependence and our gospel-based friendship as the foundation of our community identity and companionship in Mercy ministry. Maria Luisa Vera speaks of work done by a committed group of Sisters to undo the effects of racism within religious life and sketches the themes of annual meetings of the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color in the United States. Victoria Vondenberget, a canon lawyer, bases her important review of the ecclesial rights of Mercy women on the 1983 Code of Canon Law, describing what due process and participative decision making mean for women who are mature in Mercy life, not just "good Sisters" from decades past. Eloise Rosenblatt makes application of these rights, especially the right to appeal decisions of superiors, to the understandings of Mercy's reconciliation process, placing it in the context of grievance procedures that are standard in academia and healthcare. The volume closes with Elizabeth McMillan's inspiring essay on what it means to be a woman theologian who is conscious of her geographical place, her culture of origin, and the compelling demands of a teaching ministry in a seminary in Honduras, all of a piece with her street ministry to the poor.

Hopefully, readers will feel encouraged to respond to articles through editorials, opinion pieces, or reflections on discussion questions in this volume. Short contributions between 400-800 words can be sent to Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M. at k.mcAlpin@utoronto.ca.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R. S. M.
Editor, The MAST Journal
Ecclesial Challenges for the Sisters of Mercy in the 21st Century

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

In this reflection, I want to consider three things: (1) the effect on the congregation of what I perceive to be the collapse of the sectarian dimensions of Mercy life; (2) suggested criteria for evaluating contemporary Mercy life; (3) possible ways of framing the decisions that face us relative to our ecclesial challenges.

Responsibility for the Body of Christ

As I read the history of our Institute, the earliest sisters had a clear mission and a distinct enough way of life that, when women came to them, they had something for them to do and things to teach them. I fear that our 1991 Constitutions is a bit misleading in the way it casts Mother McAuley’s reason for founding the community. Perhaps in the most general way, she wanted her women, as religious, to partake in the mission of the church in the world. But it is clear that, up close, the church was not engaged in the mission to protect women, to visit the sick, to educate the poor. She saw something that wasn’t being done for those who were close to her heart and she found a way to get it done. In other words, I think Mother McAuley saw herself responsible for a dimension of the Body of Christ that she knew and loved well.

Moreover, the way of life she and her sisters inculcated in those who came to join the community enabled very young and inexperienced women to continue taking responsibility for the Body of Christ, wherever they found themselves. Granted, sisters often went at the request of a bishop and in this sense were collaborating with ecclesiastical leaders. But when the bishop failed them, even duped them, these women did not stage protest marches against the bishop. They found a way to carry out their mission of Mercy.

The story of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia is a wonderful example of what I am talking about. When Ursula Frayne arrived in Western Australia with two other professed sisters, three novices, and a postulant (after a voyage of 113 days and 25,000 kilometers) she found that no place had been prepared for them. Not only that, but in place of the hordes of children the bishop said were waiting for instruction, a single student presented herself the day they opened school. Ursula and her sister tramped through the bush and went to every home in the settlement. At the end of three months, they had fifty students.

From that beginning, they went on to open orphanages, hospitals, and boarding schools. They found a way to include aboriginal children in their educational mission. They visited the prisons and established a house of mercy for girls of good character to find refuge and learn skills that would lead to employment. Of course they did all this within the Catholic Church in Australia. But all accounts indicate that they presented a different “face” of the church, as did the Sisters who nursed in the Crimea, the U.S. War Between the States or Civil War, and the yellow fever epidemics—so too, the Sisters who taught slaves to read when it was against the law in the southern United States to do so.
Varied Understandings of Official Church Mission

Perhaps it was their very success that led the Sisters of Mercy to become part of the work force for the bishops. Certainly, it was the amalgamation that initiated some Mercy groups into an organization that in many ways resembled the church itself. I think that in ways we could not have anticipated, the sense of having our own mission as emissaries of Christ and of being a community of women with our own ways (characterized above all by “union and charity”) was attenuated.

The current Constitutions displays an alignment with the church and its mission. Though the reality that we are of pontifical right is claimed from the beginning, there is little sense that we have our own traditions of piety or our own priorities for service. The sacraments and the prayer of the church merit frequent mention, as does the mission of the church. The text gives repeated assurance that we do everything according to the universal law of the church and in recognition that whatever authority we have to govern ourselves has been conferred on us by the church.

At the same time, our Constitutions has done away with as much of the hierarchical ranking as was possible. It is clear from the tone of the text that this group wants to be a community of sisters and that the exercise of internal authority is a service, not a lifelong office or honor.

It is stunning to recognize these elements in the year 2004. At the same time, we find the Sisters of Mercy running the gamut of thinking between particular and universal notions of church identity. Some of us have taken up parochial and diocesan positions, engaging directly in the ecclesiastical mission under the authority of pastor or bishop. Others of us want to see members of our Institute ordained, thus introducing into the heart of the community a distinction that would make some members clergy and carry with it the power to confer or withhold the sacraments. At the other end of the discussion, the universal pole, there is discussion about accepting into membership persons who are married, persons who do not want to make a life commitment, persons who are not female, persons who are not Catholic. Inasmuch as this represents the urge to express a model of inclusion, universal in scope, the ideal type at work is the church type.

Some of us really believed the promise of Vatican II and interpreted it to mean that we could be partners in furthering the church’s worldwide mission. We are now badly disillusioned, having found that collaboration in ecclesiastical terms always means that men hold ultimate authority and have no need to consult what the women of the church know and no requirement to listen to what women say.

Spirituality

On the other end of the spectrum, we have sisters who espouse a spirituality without religion or who are turning to other spiritual traditions (Eastern, Native American, pagan) for sustenance, most often in their private prayer. Some do not see the need to gather with the Mercy community or with a local congregation of Catholics for worship. Their relationship with God is interior and personal. Increasing numbers of us work in secular settings where we cannot speak about God publicly, so we learn to speak in therapeutic or political or sociological categories. Whatever God talk we once had grows dated or we become uncomfortable speaking about God at all. This, too, drives our spiritual energies deeper inside, privatizing what might once have been a communal and social reality.

My analysis leads me to hypothesize the following. Institutionally, we are veering toward the universal church-type ideal of membership, and some Sisters are finding a satisfactory religious life as }

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part of a parish. Many disaffected with the church are trying to sustain their spirits with a mystical type of Christianity and even with a generic “spirituality” that borrows from many other religious traditions. Others are trying to change the church and/or society through protest actions sponsored by other groups. These groups may have preserved more of the sectarian character of radical, justice-oriented Christianity.

I have in mind here not only the growing dedication to closing the School of the Americas, which has created such bonds that some Sisters will forego community events to attend protest rallies, but also the ecological communities and the justice network. Within the Institute are support groups that, in effect, are trying to influence in some way the larger Institute, e.g., the feminist network, the under-45 Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy of Color, and the lesbian network.

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Institutionally, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has become so much of a church that we may need “sectarian” groups within to function the way religious orders once functioned within the larger body of the church. Yet it seems, from a reading of our 1999 Institute Chapter documents, that those responsible for deciding directions for the Institute are not satisfied with this picture. The call for a “corporate voice” is, to me, a call to be together on some things. Underlying the language of “corporate voice” appears to be a desire to work some issues all the way through our processes so that they become, not the position of this or that group of Sisters of Mercy, but a stand taken by the Institute as a whole.

Identity, Mission, and Vows

In a presentation to the Regional Community of Omaha, I reviewed what we have said about the vows of religion in our successive Constitutions. Two years of wrestling with these materials has convinced me that we cannot leave what we have said about ourselves in place and simply deal with “issues,” whether they be internal (e.g., membership) or external (e.g., women in the church). Working through selected issues must be done in tandem with working through who and what we say we are.

I say this because I think our very effort to be loyal daughters of the church has left us in great internal confusion. If my earlier suggestion is correct, that religious life is a kind of “sectarian” existence within the church type of organization, confusion will follow if we have no thought out articulation of our own—no communal understanding of what we are doing with our lives.3 The church type of religious life, by its nature, speaks with a universal voice. It thinks it knows the truth about everything. It will also expect that, once having spoken, all under its authority will simply comply. We have good examples of this animus in the promulgation of the Essential Elements, and the first two drafts of Vita Consecrata. Rembert Weakland has written, “What results is a description of a way of life that does not seem to spring from the lived reality of religious life in our day, but from a preconceived intellectual schematic framework that is more juridic, more external, and less inspiring.”4 The more we try to conform ourselves to this description, the more confused we become.

There is not space here to develop the entire argument for what I am about to say. The more detailed analysis can be found on the Mount Saint Agnes website where the talks developed for Omaha are published (www.mountsaintagnes.org). What I saw when I did the work on the vows is that, for Mother McAuley, the vows of religion were not at the heart of Mercy life. It appears that what was at the heart was union and charity and the works of mercy. Moreover, from the foundation of the Institute, the ideal of a life of union and charity among women devoted to the
spiritual and corporal works of mercy has been uncomfortably yoked to the ideals represented by the vows of religion as defined increasingly by male leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

I think the task before us is to think through the way we are living and serving with this question foremost in mind: Does our way of life enhance union and charity and inspire us to do the works of mercy? I do not know what will happen among us if we take up this challenge. There is no way to predict where we will arrive if we pass the vows of religion and our life in the church through the fire of our own analysis. I don't even know if we can free ourselves enough from all that has soaked into us over the years to face the real questions. I believe, however, that the surest way to let our legacy languish is to fail to try.

I want to suggest some of the issues that have to be faced if we are to undertake this sustained and creative theological reflection on Mercy life. Inevitably, I will also be offering my "take" on how things should go. But let me insist: whatever I think, only a communal process can result in the rediscovery of Mercy life that I think possible to us.

**Union and Charity**

Do we any longer believe in the salvific power of union and charity? That is, do we believe that women united in heart and mind can determine together how to serve God with or without institutional guarantees? This is not an idle question. I have worked exclusively with women of faith for the last eight years and I know the demons that inhabit us. One of the worst is captured in a passage from Audre Lorde:

> We have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, and that is the way we learn to testify against ourselves, against our feelings. The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with so you don't even need to stamp it out.5

She speaks to our deepest wound: that we cannot have an unsanctioned thought, that we suspect what is most creative in ourselves. I think we have insights into very important church and societal issues—insights that stem from our experience—that we could, as a body, offer to the world. But we would have to believe in our own processes of discernment enough to suffer for those insights. Another of the demons is a kind of inclusivity that makes it impossible to respect boundaries. Union and charity are difficult if not impossible to achieve when one is never sure who is in the community.

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**Public Vows**

I see our current awareness of the fourth vow and our determination to connect it with our living out of poverty, chastity, and obedience as one of the most important developments arising from the years of experimentation and change since Vatican II. The proposals being floated to have an alternate form of religious life that would be based solely on this fourth vow are of great importance as well. They point to what is attractive about this life at the moment. Of course, these proposals may also point to our failure to make sense of the other vows in ways that could be attractive also.

The 1991 Constitutions declares, "we profess by public vows . . ." Does this line mean only that we pronounce our vows in public and then live them out in private? In other words, do public vows entail a public dimension to our life, a dimension that can be experienced by others, especially those in need? I find this question to be especially acute when it
comes to the works of mercy. If, to minister as a Sister of Mercy, we must be able to perform the spiritual as well as the corporal works of mercy, then we need to think very seriously about our current practices. As I’ve noted, some of us are involved in secular institutions where we can’t talk publicly about God or speak as professionals on religious or spiritual matters. What does this portend for the identity of the individual Sister and of the community as a body?

When I speak of ministries, I do not mean to exclude our life of prayer. Mother McAuley opened the chapel at Baggot Street so that others could share the prayer life of the women who lived and ministered there. Surely, one of our most important ministries is to share our belief in and understanding of God, especially as we proclaim that belief and understanding in acts of worship and praise. It is not enough to rely on the life of the parish for this. Women of our day are begging for opportunities to worship God in a language and in a manner that includes and honors our own ways of being human. What I am saying is that if we make public vows, we cannot expect to keep our devotional life private. It is an obligation of public vows to give witness to the God of our lives.

The Traditional Vows of Religion: Starting with Chastity

In addition to the vow of service, a vow that I take to be central to Mercy identity, Sisters of Mercy have taken the traditional vows of religion: poverty, chastity, and obedience. In the 1991 Constitutions, the order of consideration is changed. The text begins with chastity. I’ll follow that order.

Though constitutions have always spoken in euphemisms about this vow, the clear interpretation has been that by this vow the sister foregoes sexual activity and sexual pleasure. In former ages, this understanding of chastity was connected to a perception of sexual pleasure as defiled and defiling. Chastity, as the 1955 Constitutions implies, makes one like the angels.?

For Mercy life to endure in the next century, we must do several things relative to this tradition of vowing chastity: confront the questions about sexuality that are coming to us, especially from new members, and connect this tradition to the essential charism of union and charity.

To accomplish the first, I believe we will have to think through the truths of our experiences as women with sexuality, with friendship, with generativity, with community. One sad reality is that too many of us were formed in an atmosphere of gynophobia. Fear of women on the part of male clerics was transferred in many ways to women of the church, especially to the women religious. This fear, institutionalized especially by the rules and regulations regarding particular friendships, may have resulted in varieties of homophobia as well.

I think that this discussion needs to be carried on without any of the labels currently in use—straight, gay, heterosexual, lesbian. We must try to find the courage to talk about what we have learned about loving from living. My hunch is that what we know in this way is much more interesting, complex, exciting, mysterious and Godlike than the labels or the ethical categories can comprehend.

To accomplish the second, we must determine whether and how a vow of chastity connects to that union and charity that was Mother McAuley’s legacy to the Institute. As our current Constitutions makes very clear, chastity is about love.

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exists as a body in response to a call from God, neglect or refusal to participate in and care for that community constitutes a failure of chastity.

New members come looking for this loving body. They want us to spend time with them, pray with them, tell them stories, teach them our devotions and songs, share our experiences, teach them how to be holy. And they tell me that all too often their pleas are met with the curt response, “We don’t have time for that.” Something is wrong with the way we are living if women who want to throw in their lot with us receive such a rebuff—no matter how careful we are about keeping the technicalities of the vow.

**Vow of Poverty**

I agree with Jacques Pohier when he contends that “the possession of goods and the use of money has such a different significance [in our day] that to deprive oneself of possessions or money must inevitably have a totally different significance also.” We seem to have intuited this when we changed the emphasis in poverty from renunciation of any acts of possession and use of goods except by permission of a superior (former Constitutions) to the surrender of “the independent use and disposal of material goods.” Lovely as the idea is, however, I am not sure what we think it means nor how it works out in practice. Are we continuing to consider “independent” to mean “without permission”? Given the level of affluence among us, I fear that we are. That is, I fear that many of us think that as long as the community allows us to have what we ask for, there is no obligation to think further.

I would prefer to think that “independent” means rather that our use and disposal of goods as women religious cannot be independent of the needs of our sisters and of those we vowed to serve. Once again, the double charism of union and charity and the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant is a guiding principle. This understanding of “independent,” then, would involve a responsibility to examine our ways of living and consuming so as to face squarely the extent to which an individual desire for things affects any corporate ability to respond to need with generosity and creativity.

In an interview before he died, Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned child psychiatrist, recalled an old German proverb that says, “One has to stretch according to the covers.” It comes from a time when many family members slept in one bed. If someone wanted to stretch, she did so aware that her action could pull the covers off another. He went on to say that by giving our children “their own” of everything—their own room, their own television set, stereo, computer, their own bike, eventually their own car—modern parents unwittingly deprive them of the capacity that Bettelheim thought most necessary for life in the next century: the capacity to share. I fear that we may have fallen into the same trap. Where once women religious shared goods to an extent that amazed and edified others, we now all too often insist that we must have our own of everything. Does this mean that we too are losing or have lost the capacity most necessary for life in the next century?

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**My Own and Our Own**

And this idea of “my own” does not apply only to the individual sister. We can also be guilty of thinking of material possession as “our own,” as belonging to a particular regional community and thus off limits to any other. I believe that the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has a golden opportunity to testify to our union and charity in a dramatic and salvific way as we face the reality of poor and rich regional communities. And as we contemplate the bold act of sharing funds and other resources across regional community lines, we need an intense theological reflection on the dimensions of this opportunity. Patricia Wittberg has
written in her challenging book, *Pathways to Creating Religious Communities*[^10] that the world needs a *corporate* lived virtuoso spirituality that will speak to the problems of our time. Whatever we call it—simplicity, interdependent use of goods—the vow we have known as poverty must have a corporate dimension and meaning if we are going to embody into the next century the Christian way of holding goods in common.

Isn’t it the case that we simply begin with the maintenance figures (generated by the submission of individual and community budgets) and assume that what is left over is for mission?

The first “our own” to be considered, then, is the separation of resources into the “possessions” of regional communities. The second is the separation between maintenance money and mission money. It seems that, all too often, an impermeable wall has been erected between these two budget items: money used to maintain Sisters, whether living alone or in community, and money used in the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. Isn’t it the case that we simply begin with the maintenance figures (generated by the submission of individual and community budgets) and assume that what is left over is for mission? Despite all the appeals for “conversion of lifestyle” since the first Institute Chapter, I have heard no discussion of finances that has challenged my assumption that such an approach governs our processes.

Surely, the initiative at the Third Institute Chapter to have us cut the percentage of resources consumed was inspired by some sense that our levels of consumption are affecting our mission. I applaud that impetus, but think we have to get much more concrete before we will realize, as a body, how the growing individualism and consumerism among us is inhibiting our living out of the vow of service. Similarly, the growing concern for ecology and the call to change our attitudes toward the cosmos will affect our understanding and practice regarding material goods.

**Vow of Obedience**

The complementary notions of obedience and authority have fallen on hard times, especially among women. Our own long struggle after the Second Vatican Council to recover some sense of personal sovereignty has made us quite wary, I think, of this vow and its consequences. In the wake of Jeannine Gramick’s silencing, many of us are reacting with anger to the way those who have taken a vow of obedience can be treated. There is great confusion about what we promised in taking that vow.

Before we simply jettison this tradition on the basis of how it relates us to ecclesiastical authorities, however, I think we must look at whether or not it serves our double charism of union and charity and the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant. I suggest that the following points should be considered in that discernment.

There can be no union among persons unless they are willing to join their individual decision-making power to that of others in some fashion. There can be no union unless the members of the group are ready to obey the decisions made according to whatever processes are adopted. A group may decide to delegate the decision making to an individual (such as was the case when we had a whole system of superiors). Another group may engage in the elaborate forms of discernment involving every single member (as was the case in the Pathways process). In either case, there can be no united action unless individuals in the group commit themselves to the outcome of the decision before knowing how it will turn out.

Perhaps the current longing for “a corporate voice” and for “corporate action” is related to this. Perhaps, too, our zeal to insure that each person feels part of whatever decision is made has made our processes so time consuming that it is nearly impossible to speak or act together in a timely fashion on matters of great importance to those we serve. Perhaps, finally, we are doing this because we
have lost our nerve where mandating and commanding is concerned.

This union of which I speak, then, is not only a matter of holding the group together in a recognizable organization so that it can function to make decisions regarding its own life. The works of mercy in our day require corporate action. It is naive to talk about systemic change without the capacity to mobilize one's own for action.

Perhaps by holding it up to the light of the double charism, we can rediscover the truth of the Latin root, that obedience is about listening, heeding, attending. Then, vow or no vow, we will have to come to some agreement about what is entailed when one listens indeed—in deed.

We need to decide together who and what we think we are or want to be in the great broken Body of Christ . . . And we need to do that without starting with definitions imposed by someone outside the community.

Ecclesial Challenge

We are very well aware of the ecclesiastical challenges. In fact, I think we have been consumed by them for quite some time. But I believe that our greatest ecclesial challenge is to turn our eyes away from "them" for awhile, whoever "they" might be. We need to decide together who and what we think we are or want to be in the great broken Body of Christ—which is not nor can ever be coextensive with ecclesiastical structures. And we need to do that without starting with definitions imposed by someone outside the community.

I do not think it inevitable that, having done this reflection, we will revoke canonical status and become a secular institute or some other kind of group. This is, of course, a risk. I believe that if we are truly one body—united by having worked through for ourselves the most contentious and important issues of our lives—the sanction of ecclesiastical authorities will not have the importance, one way or the other, that it has assumed in our minds in this time of confusion.11

I cannot state strongly enough, however, that we have to develop processes that allow us to confront the real differences among us and to resolve the essential ones. I have argued throughout this reflection that one difference regards the "type" of Christianity on which we organize and understand our lives. In this framework, other differences will take on new aspects.

Notes

1 Anne Walsh, A Woman of Mercy, the Story of Ursula Frayne (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt Publishing, 1977).
2 See Sandra Schneiders, Finding the Treasure, for some very strong opinions on this question of ordaining members of women's religious orders.
3 These typologies are taken from Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (published in German in 1911; published in English in 1931). There he identifies three types of Christianity: the sect type, the church type and the mystical type.
8 Jacques Pohier, God in Fragments (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 32.
10 Patricia Wittberg, Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities (New York: Paulist, 1996).
11 For additional information on this topic and the text on ecclesial experience of the Sisters of Mercy as reflected in the Constitutions, consult: http://www.mountsaintagnes.org.
Love of the Mercy of God Constitutes Our Life

Maureen Crossen, R.S.M.

It was a Sunday, and I was in a strange town for a conference. Early in the morning, I went out for breakfast. I turned on the radio. To my surprise I had tuned into a rabbi’s instruction on mercy. “When it comes to justice you have to do it. But when it comes to mercy you have to love to do it.” The words he said with such passion reverberated through me. Immediately I thought of the prophet Micah’s bidding: “My people, this is what Yahweh asks of you, only this: to do justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8).

Mercy. What an incredibly mysterious gift! God extends mercy to the world through history. Human beings are capable of not only receiving the gift, but are also capable of offering it to one another and to creation. The Sisters of Mercy, their Associate members and coworkers are invited to reflect on this gift, this charism, through work, through prayer and, for some, through a common life—truly a mysterious gift.

The Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is the rule that guides our lives. However there is, indeed, but one rule that constitutes our lives, the mercy of God. The Constitutions merely offers us a way to organize and to challenge ourselves in a faithful way to love the mercy of God. Let’s reflect on the mercy of God as the “constitution” of our lives.

Mercy is God’s way of being in the world. The great insight of Judeo-Christian faith is that history is the arena in which God chooses to be among us. “Not in some heaven light years away, but here in this place.” God is understood as intimately involved in history. God’s response in history is through a divine pathos of mercy. This pathos is a difficult word to describe. It refers to a deep, passionate response of love for the other that summons forth radical transformation. Mysteriously, God shares this depth of love with us making it possible for us to love as God loves. We are created to love God with the same sort of pathos. In a holy exchange of pathos, our love of God’s mercy touches God and God is moved to response. God loves us so much that God’s “heart is stirred” (Jer 31:20) and the mercy of God is poured out. Touched by God’s overflowing mercy we are created anew (see Jer 31:22).

However, there is another dimension of God’s pathos, and that is God’s anger. God’s anger bursts forth from divine pathos as well. Sacrifices and worship are all thrown aside by God when one of the least ones suffers at the hands of other human beings. Out of God’s anger comes the demand for justice. So fundamental is God’s demand for justice as the way we should relate to one another, that, according to the Torah, the person of faith is not given a choice for or against doing justice. Rather, when the situation arises where a good deed is called for, it must be done. It may be done patiently or even begrudgingly, as the rabbi on the radio said, but it must be done. There is no choice. Doing justice appeases God’s anger far more than sacrifice or worship. And, according to scripture, we have the consolation that God’s anger
Crossen: Love of the Mercy of God Constitutes Our Life

lasts but a moment (Mic 7:18) while God’s mercy endures forever (Psalm 118).

An enlightening story from Jewish midrash illustrates the creative tension between God’s demand for justice and God’s enduring mercy. In spite of Moses’ insecurities and doubt, he had the honor of calling God “friend,” a very special relationship. So intimate was Moses’ relationship with God that he could speak to God face to face. One day Moses went up Mt. Sinai for a visit with God. He caught sight of God, but as he drew closer, Moses saw an unusual sight. God was on his divine knees in prayer. Moses kept a respectful distance. But then, it occurred to Moses: Who does God pray to? And, what does God pray for? Greatly puzzled, Moses began to clear his throat, you know, not to disturb God or anything. God looked up. “Ah Moses, you’ve come to see me today.” “Yes, I have.” “Is something wrong, Moses?” “Well, I was just wondering: what were you doing?” “Ah, Moses,” said God, “I was praying.” “Oh, yes, of course. Well who, or I mean, what do YOU pray for?” “Oh, Moses,” replied God, “I always pray that my desire and love of mercy overcomes my demand for justice.”

Love of the mercy of God invokes justice, for justice must be done. However, the demand for justice should be underscored with the desire, the longing to love mercy, which draws us to see God in those who suffer and those caught up in sin. The summons to love mercy is the recognition of the closeness of God in the world.

Love of the mercy of God invokes compassion. Compassion is a resistance to injustice with a jealous love, passionate love for the one who suffers. Catherine McAuley herself presents us with a powerful image of love of the mercy of God that recognizes the presence of God in the other. “There are three things the poor prize more highly than gold: the kind word, the gentle compassionate look, and the patient listening of their sorrows.” People who are poor, people who are suffering summon us to see the mercy of God and so to have our hearts “stirred” with a love of mercy. One must love mercy so radically as to allow compassion, a resistance to injustice, to be summoned forth in service to the other.

Love of the mercy of God invokes forgiveness. Too much suffering is embedded in injustice of systems and structures. Often the justice that must be done is to confront the sinful structures that cause suffering. However love of the mercy of God must love even those who inflict the injustice. This seems impossible from any human point of view. There are those whom it seems impossible to forgive. But mercy comes from the One who makes even the impossible possible. Sin is a visible sign that offers knowledge of what is not; that is, of injustice. Along with a love for those who suffer, the love of mercy must love even those who inflict the injustice. One must desire to love mercy so that one forgives those who do injustice in order to break open the impossibility of seeing God, even in one’s enemy. Love of enemy, as Jesus demands, is the ultimate act of loving mercy.

Love of the mercy of God is what constitutes our lives. In the Original Rule Catherine McAuley writes, “Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following him, has . . . excited the faithful in a particular manner, to instruct and comfort the sick and the dying poor . . .” Love of the mercy of God is a way of being in the world that marks the world and history as the place of God’s profound presence. Here in this place we encounter the desire to love God’s mercy in our service to others who summon forth this desire to love from us. Love of the mercy of God is what stirs our hearts “to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God (Mic 6:8).

Notes


Incorporation
Committing to Wisdom and Community for the Reign of Mercy

Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M.

Introduction
Reflecting on the process of incorporation in the Constitutions evokes many graced memories of serving in this ministry. Memories include meeting dedicated Sisters of Mercy from all over the world. It was also a privilege and, at times a challenge, to accompany candidates and novices from Erie and Merion and many participants of the collaborative novitiate. Much has changed in this ministry over the last decade, even language. However, the heart of the matter is rooted in the Constitutions and my passion for this ministry endures over time.

Language and Meaning
We live in a fragmented world known as the postmodern era. The modern age is past and with it the dream of reducing the burden of human labor with great machines. Today the stress of work continues and the poor know this burden well as the gap between the rich and the poor and the digital divide widens. Philosophers name this age postmodernity, which is a code for changes in thinking and experience in the wake of WW II.

We also attempt to find contemporary language to express the process of incorporation. The classical age of religious life is over and with it language such as mother general and postulant. It is not easy to rename some realities without coming upon mixed meanings. “New members” conveys an assumption of membership, while we understand that Mercy membership comes with first profession. Language is charged with meaning and significance for each person in the conversation.

Originally, novice directors designed the novitiate program for the collaborative novitiate with suggestions from leadership and from women in “formation.” It was a surprise to learn that some novices thought the term “collaborative” meant that they would design the novitiate program together. Common language holds different meanings for living processes like collaboration and incorporation.

From conversations with sisters in formation ministry in Latin America, I understand that the word “incorporation” is rarely used among Mercy communities outside the United States. In different areas, we use different language for similar experiences.

In my memory, a discomfort with the word “formation” arose in the U.S.A. in the 1970s and 1980s. Applicants were often formed in practices of spirituality and even had experience in Mercy ministries. There was a need to value these formative experiences. So “formation” evolved into the “process of incorporation” and participants became known as “new members.” This is now the language of the Constitutions. This change is important, but I believe that formation and transformation are still at the heart of the process of incorporation.

Incorporation Process
Incorporation begins with application to a regional community. The process calls for learning the essentials of religious life and the opportunity to live the practices of vowed life (Const. §33). In my experience, new members, as well as professed...
ministering with them and communities providing a reality of Mercy life and ministry all experienced transformation. A spirituality of transformation is inherent in the image of incorporation.

**Images of Incorporation**

Images arising from the word “incorporation” are inspiring when we consider our religious tradition and ambiguous when we think of corporate reality today. I will reflect on the ambiguity first and then the theology of incorporation.

**Corporate Reality**

Few countries are spared the conflict of giant corporations marketing commodities such as clothing, computers, or cars. Images flow from designer logos, corporate greed, and seductive advertising seeping through tightly secured international borders. These images may arise even as we consider the meaning of incorporation in our design for the Institute, the Constitutions.

**Theology of Incorporation**

In the Christian tradition, incorporation has deep roots in Paul’s words, “... all the members of the body, though many, are one body, in Christ” (1 Cor 12:12). This scripture arises from Paul’s conversion experience when he heard the risen Christ say: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Through his mystical experience, Paul realized that all Christians are members of the risen body of Christ. Later, he realized that all humankind is incorporated into this sacred reality, the Living Body of God (1 Cor 12:13).

Through baptism, we share in the mystery of the Spirit as members of this body. Through profession, we become a particular community of the body of the living Christ, members of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy.

**Community as Communion of Saints**

Reflecting on incorporation as community brings to mind the work of Elizabeth Johnson. She reminds us that as a community of faith we share in the life of the communion of saints. This mystery includes not only our beloved departed, but all humankind alive in grace. As a community of Mercy, we are one with the communion of saints whose primary vocation is to “partner with Holy Wisdom to bring about the reign of mercy and peaceful justice.”

The process of incorporation is founded on our belief in the Body of the Risen Christ as living members of the communion of saints. This mystery summons us to re-member ourselves in the inclusive Body of the Living God. We extend God’s liberating Mercy through our service to others.

**Incorporation into Membership**

The Constitutions describes membership as a privilege and responsibility (Const. §30). The process of incorporation is woven through the membership section (§ 30-50) which states that every sister is provided religious formation. Previous sections of the Constitutions on mission (§§ 4–9), prayer (§§ 10–17), community life (§§ 18–19) and the vows (§§ 20–29) provide important content for this process.

Images arising from the word “incorporation” are inspiring when we consider our religious tradition and ambiguous when we think of corporate reality today.

Membership calls us to growth in holiness (§ 31), which centers our life in the quest for God. The Constitutions describe formative processes as religious (§ 30) which calls us to ongoing conversion. Self-knowledge sought through human development is the root of conversion, prayer, and authentic discernment. Discernment for profession requires the human and spiritual freedom of a true self to be given away for the reign of God’s mercy.

Growth in human and spiritual freedom is part of the process of incorporation. New members learn to participate in Catherine McAuley’s response to God’s mercy. They are encouraged to hear anew the call of Jesus and to reach out with courage and love to the needy of our time (§ 1).
Catherine’s faith supports new members in a spirituality that unites us in the communion of saints, as friends of God and prophets.

The call to holiness in the Constitutions is set in the reality of common life and mission. All are challenged to serve in a ministry compatible with our mission in the church, to contribute to the life of the Institute, and to commit to the ideals of the Sisters of Mercy (§ 31). These ideals are steeped in Catherine’s instructions on union and charity and challenge to speak the truth in love (§ 18). Such instruction adds wisdom to the incorporation process.

New members are provided with an introduction and ongoing formation in the charism, heritage, and mission of the Sisters of Mercy (§ 33). In this responsibility, we are richly blessed. The research available on Catherine McAuley, her companions and Mercy history has grown considerably over the last thirty years. All manner of resources are available from retrieved primary sources to a pilgrimage to Baggot Street in Ireland in preparation for final profession.

New and professed members come from varied experiences. The Constitutions give wise direction, but the lived experience and the meaning of the vows, prayer, a common life, and ministry compatible with the mission of the church are complex.

However, new and professed members come from varied experiences. The Constitutions give wise direction, but the lived experience and the meaning of the vows, prayer, a common life, and ministry compatible with the mission of the church are complex. The Constitutions call us to provide new members with learning opportunities and reflection around the essentials of the vowed life. It is hoped that this will lead to discernment of an authentic call to Mercy (§ 33).

Theological reflection is a process often used during incorporation to facilitate reflection (§ 33). It is designed to help members become aware of the wisdom of the Living God, Sophia, in their experiences of life and ministry. This transformative process supports a critical search for the Spirit in the context of the church and the world of lived experience. It engages current theological and spiritual resources to reveal living wisdom. Doing theological reflection prayerfully can help discern a more prophetic response for the reign of mercy. Contemplative theological reflection empowers new members to be partners with God and helps foster a free response to God’s love (§ 33).

Discernment and Decisions
Stages of incorporation evolve from application to final profession. It is the responsibility of the regional community to provide, facilitate, and discern the successive stages leading to perpetual vows (§ 34).

In practice, this movement is mutually discerned with the new member and the Sister delegated with this responsibility. Leadership teams trust in this process as they also discern. Region community presidents, with the advice of councils, participate in the decision making for movement at each stage (§§ 33, 35, 38, 39, 40, 43). At final profession, the regional president recommends a sister to the Institute president who grants approval with the consent of the council (§ 43). This process indicates the close relationship between the regional community and the new member. Full incorporation in the Institute occurs at final profession.

Stages of Incorporation
Regional community Directories contain the particulars of incorporation stages and elements of programs, including the pre-novitiate. The Constitutions includes references to universal (canon law) and proper law (Mercy provisions) that apply to the various stages of incorporation. All programs conform not only to Institute norms but also to the universal law of the church (§§ 35, 44). These legal directives describe the responsibilities of the congregation, and protect the ecclesial rights of both new members and congregation.
The Novitiate

The novitiate is a time and space for a novice to intensify the gospel values of prayer, community, and service. It provides a process for novices to understand the charism of mercy within the church. Steeped in the charism, the novice discerns the authenticity of her call to profession (§ 36). She responds by dedicating herself to God in chastity, poverty, and obedience, as well as to service for the people of God, especially the poor.

The Director of Novices

Each regional community appoints a director of novices who is responsible for the novitiate process. She is to be perpetually professed and prepared for this ministry (§ 37). Given the values of the Constitutions and the complexities of these times, preparation for incorporation ministry requires creative wisdom.

Recently the National Religious Formation Conference of the U. S. looked to the wisdom figures of their history as they sought direction for the future. Sister Elizabeth Carroll of Pittsburgh was among the women honored for her leadership and contribution to “formation.” Betty, as she is affectionately known, speaks of religious life as a process of “falling into God” with age. We might seek such wisdom figures as mentors for those preparing for incorporation ministry as we reconfigure.

Novitiate Setting

The novitiate house is designated by the Institute president with the consent of the council and the recommendation of the regional president. The novitiate includes a required twelve-month period (prescribed by universal or canon law) and a period (usually one year) of ministry experience. This may be extended six months for further discernment before profession (Const. §§ 38–39). The current culture is a questioning one and new members require reflective time for authentic discernment. However, because of the intensity of the novitiate, the Constitutions wisely limits its duration.

At present, we have an Institute novitiate house. However, the process of designating directors is not in the Constitutions. In practice, directors are named through a discernment process, which involves representation of personnel from the Institute and regional communities. This is balanced with the responsibility for the process of incorporation, which rests with the regional community. Having a collaborative novitiate requires confidence and collaboration among all involved in these relationships.

First Profession

At first profession, each sister formulates her own expression of vows, which is approved by the regional president and council. It includes names of the newly professed, the regional and Institute presidents, the date, and the promise of perseverance for a specific length of time or until death at final commitment (§ 40). The formality of these details heightens the reality of the commitment.

The current culture is a questioning one and new members require reflective time for authentic discernment. However, because of the intensity of the novitiate, the Constitutions wisely limits its duration.

This personal expression of profession includes the vows promised to God: chastity, poverty, obedience, and service of the poor, sick, and ignorant according to our Constitutions (§ 40). Creative expressions surrounding this formula often inspire the community and guests attending this commitment.

First profession is the occasion for a sister to make a valid civil will. In both canon law and the Mercy Constitutions, this provision acknowledges that a member of the Sisters of Mercy who takes simple vows is an owner of property. This requirement of making a will is less a formality than in years past. Today, women more typically enter the Institute with existing financial assets and investments. The newly professed appoints an administrator of her property and provides for its use and the disposition of any income from it (§ 41).
Temporary Commitment

Newly professed have a period of time to participate fully in Mercy life by integrating prayer, community living, and ministerial commitment (§ 42). The normal time for temporary commitment is from three to six years, but may be extended by another three years if necessary (§ 43).

A growing concern during temporary commitment is the difficulty of all dynamics coming together. Hopefully, prayer is a deep commitment, but ministry and living arrangements are not always easy to connect. Support from the regional community requires much creativity perseverance at this time of mutual discernment (§ 42). A hope for reconfiguration is that there may be more shared resources to address such concerns.

Perpetual Commitment

A Sister may request to renew vows after three years, but not beyond nine. At any point of renewal, she is free to leave the Institute. After three years, a new member may be admitted to perpetual profession. This is the climax of the incorporation process (§ 43).

Incorporation Responsibility

Some members have primary responsibility for the incorporation process, but all professed Sisters are to share life experiences with new members (§ 45). This is an important responsibility as we remember that we are incorporated into “one body.”

Changes and Transfers

Changes within the Institute and transferring from another religious institute are considered processes of incorporation (§ 48). Changing from one regional community to another may be less needed as reconfiguration evolves.

Reconfiguration and Reimagining

Reflecting on incorporation leads me to consider reconfiguration with new enthusiasm. In faith, we are invited to reimagine our call to holiness, the vowed common life, and the complexities of ministry. The call to mutuality and shared resources is rooted in the gospel mandate that we be “one body.”

As we move through reconfiguration, I hope that the women in incorporation observe our core values directing this movement. We may each know the effect of sharing resources in our every day lives in a way that never occurred in our call to be Institute.

Conclusion

In closing, I pray that our faith in the living Body of Christ and the communion of saints inspires us to be friends of God and prophets of wisdom for the reign of mercy. May these mysteries summon us to ongoing transformation at this historic time in the life of the Institute.6

Notes

1 Although using direct words from the Constitutions, I will not quote each word or phrase. References are to the paragraph.
3 Elizabeth A. Johnson, Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints (New York: Continuum, 2003), 91.
6 I dedicate this article to Rosemary Gavin, R.S.M., who served in incorporation ministry from 1998 to 2002. She was born to new life on February 4, 2004.
Community Life in Mercy

Mary Ann Nolan, R.S.M.

Community is about relationships. Community life in Mercy is about relationships in Mercy. Community life in Mercy is about "knowing ourselves as sisters," sister-to-sister, individually, and "forming bonds of union and charity" that draw us together, collectively, as our Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

Margaret Wheatley has written a wonderful book, unlike any of her other books, called Turning to One Another. She writes of her beliefs that motivate her actions in these days. One that struck me most forcibly concerns the nature of relationships:

"Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone." 1

Our ever-deepening understanding of our universe confirms the reality of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all of creation. The last line of the quote is as equally a reality. We are immersed in and deeply influenced by our culture of individualism and alienation. All of us, if we are honest with ourselves, struggle with aspects of community that impinge on our individual wants and needs.

Also know times of feeling alone and separated even in the midst of the communities to which we belong. In the same way as we think of ourselves as isolated and separate from the rest of the universe, so we tend toward thinking of ourselves as separate from all other persons.

Individualism and Interrelationship

Another of Wheatley's beliefs concerns the unnaturalness of isolation:

"We humans want to be together. We only isolate ourselves when we are hurt by others, but alone is not our natural state. Today, we live in an unnatural state—separating ourselves rather than being together." 2

Wheatley says that, in our culture, we try to live as if we do not need each other. We live lives separated from others. If we think about it, alone is not our natural state. God did not create us as totally self-contained beings, who at some stage in life chose or decided to be in relationship with others. From the first moment of our existence, we needed another, a parent, a foster parent, who was in turn providing for us and caring for us. From our origins, we are related to others. The words of that old song "No Man is an Island" (or as we would say today, "No human person is an island") are profoundly true: "No human person is an island. No human person stands alone. We need one another . . ."

Besides the need, the reality is that we have become who we are in and through our relationships. Each person whom we have encountered has had an impact or influence on our lives, for weal or for woe. Diarmuid O'Murchu said in an address at a Spiritual Directors International Conference, "We are the sum of our relationships." Jeffrey Gaines, the executive director of S.D.I., enlarges on this principle of interrelationship:

"We are who we are because of each person we have met, talked with, encountered, all of us, if we are honest with ourselves, struggle with aspects of community that impinge on our individual wants and needs."
loved, liked or disliked. We are who we are, because of one another. We do not live in a vacuum. We touch one another in deep and profound ways, regardless of whether this "touch" is positive and life-giving or the opposite expression. Our very cells hold memories of all of our encounters. Simply put: we need each other. We are a communal people. 3

Jesus gathered around him a community of women and men whom he commissioned to spread the reign of God, which in time came to be known as the church.

Community is intrinsic to Christian life.

Community in God

Mary-Paula Cancienne, R.S.M., in her MAST article “Root Metaphor” and Rublev's Icon “The Holy Trinity,” invites us to ponder Rublev’s icon of three figures around a table, and to revisit the Trinity as a root metaphor.4 She follows in the footsteps of a highly respected theologian, Catherine LaCugna, who has helped us to see that the mystery we call God has always been profoundly relational.5

From all eternity Creator, Son, and Spirit have always been interacting with each other. This most lofty expression of who God is reveals that God is not alone or separate. Rather, God’s very essence is constantly in the process of giving and receiving love, of being in relationship. And the love of the persons of the Trinity for each other has spilled out into creation. “God is Love that overspills,” as Michael Downey says in his book, Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality. “God is Love that overspills, that pours itself out because Love cannot be contained. God’s life-giving love is directed toward us, for us, with us and in us.”6

Community in Christianity: Scriptural Tradition

As God is a community of interrelating persons, as we as humans were created to be in relationship, so too, our lives in the context of Christianity are intrinsically communal. The first story of creation tells us that humanity was created in God’s image “male and female,” that is, as a community from the very beginning. The second story of creation has God saying, "It is not good for the human (ha’adam) to be alone.” God entered into a covenant relationship with a people, the Hebrews, as a community. Jesus was born into a human family that was part of the community of Israel. In his own ministry, Jesus gathered around him a community of women and men whom he commissioned to spread the reign of God, which in time came to be known as the church.

Community is intrinsic to Christian life.

Community in Religious Life: Gospel-Based Friendship

How is the religious community life of the Sisters of Mercy distinguished from all the other communities, even the Christian communities, to which we belong?

Sandra Schneiders, in her book, Selling All, addresses this question. She says that members do not belong to a religious community in order to satisfy their own or one another’s emotional and affective needs, but that they are drawn by the love of Christ and commitment to the reign of God. In response to God’s call, we give ourselves totally and completely to God, we make God the center of our lives and we seek God in Christ to the exclusion of all other primary life commitments. Because all of us share this primary love and commitment expressed though our vow of celibacy, we bond together in community.7

Schneiders uses as the model of relationships in religious community, not family, not the military, not even a gathering of freely chosen partners, but the model of gospel friendship as explicated in the fourth gospel.

In John’s gospel, Jesus both demonstrates what friendship means and explains it in words. To be a friend is to share life in continuous companionship, to accompany, to care for, and even to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Jesus offers the image of the vine to explain the intimate life-giving relationship between himself and
his friends... The vine and the branches do not differ in nature but only in origin. The vine is the source of the branches which derive their nature and power from the vine. Without the vine, the branches can neither exist nor bear fruit, but astonishingly, the vine, which can exist without these branches or indeed any branches, cannot bear fruit without branches! The heart of gospel friendship is found in John 15:15-16: “I no longer call you slaves because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you.”

In our response to this choice of God, we have thrown in our lot with all who have been called to the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. Schneiders’s model of gospel friendship helps to describe our relationship with each other. She says friendship is mutual and equal. Each is in service of the other with no hint of superiority, domination, dependence, or condescension. Friendship also has a history and a gradual level of development. Friends grow closer as they get to know each other better, through ups and downs, conflict and reconciliation.

Friendship must either continue to grow and deepen or it will die. Friendships are not sustained by blood or genes but only by love freely shared. This makes them both more vulnerable and ultimately stronger than any other kind of relationship. A true friendship can actually call a person to lay down her life for her friend. The laying down of one’s life is not a sacrifice for “another” but a sharing of life with one who has become one’s “other self.” In religious community this sharing of life is expressed in many ways, but perhaps the most powerful is the mutual commitment of all one’s resources, economic, intellectual, professional, personal and social, to the shared life through the vows of poverty and obedience.

Schneiders continues by saying that friendship is also particular and individual. The community is made up of specific faces, those we find congenial, those we do not. While we will not have deep friendships with every member of the community, we can never write off any member because of the nature of our commitment to each other.

Reimagining Community in Mercy

The model of gospel friendship challenges us to examine our understanding of religious community life in the context of Mercy. Schneiders continues by saying that friendship is also particular and individual. The community is made up of specific faces, those we find congenial, those we do not. While we will not have deep friendships with every member of the community, we can never write off any member because of the nature of our commitment to each other.

Reimagining Community in Mercy

The model of gospel friendship challenges us to examine our understanding of religious community life in the context of Mercy. What we believe and desire for community life among us can help us to form and shape the newness that we are developing in the reimagining/reconfiguring process. How able are we to articulate what we mean by community and how willing are we to transform our present way of living in order for that vision to become a reality?

As we actively examine ways in which we can deepen the bonds of connection among us, it seems to me that the variety of community lifestyles that exist among us and our ever-widening involvement in the Institute community call us to develop new (or maybe deepen) skills...
Katherine Hanley, a Sister of St. Joseph, says in an article in Human Development that today we need the skill of networking. She defines networking as “the ability to find and make connections.” Today we cannot wait for community to come to us. We need to actively reach out to contact others. Some people come by this naturally. But for others, it is a skill that can be learned. We cannot expect that others are always going to be taking the initiative to connect with us. Those of us who come from regional communities that are relatively local need to learn from those who know better than us how to be in relationship with community members at a distance.

Third, another important skill is conversation. The whole thesis of Margaret Wheatley’s book, Turning to One Another, is that human conversation is the means to restore hope for the future. She states in her book that “there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation.” Every regional meeting around a topic of concern is a chance to engage in meaningful conversation. Opening Worlds of Mercy has been a chance to engage in meaningful conversation. Institute gatherings are chances to engage in meaningful conversation. A comfortable cup of tea with a friend where each shares her concerns and struggles, where the other listens attentively is a chance to engage in meaningful conversation.

What prevents conversation? Some of us would rather watch television than call someone on the phone or initiate a get-together. Some of us do not feel comfortable conversing with those who do not agree with us. In our regional community, we gave some focused energy to community life from 1995 to 2000. Our theme was “Staying at the Table,” from an article on community written by Parker Palmer. Staying at the table, staying in the conversation, speaking and listening so that our hearts might be open to conversion, is challenging and uncomfortable and yet it is the hope for our future. It is, in fact, our hope for our future as Institute as we engage in the conversation of reimagining and reconfiguring.

**Final Word**

In conclusion, it is meaningful to remember what Sandra Schneiders says about the reliance of religious on each other in community life: “For religious who renounce family, both family of origin and an adult family life, as the relational context of their life, real community that is permanent, ongoing, committed, and reliable is not a luxury but a psychological and spiritual necessity.” Our challenge today is to tend the fires of that kind of community life for ourselves, for each other, and for our world.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 291–292.
9. Ibid., 295.
10. Ibid., 296.
11. Ibid., 296–297.
13. Wheatley, 22.
14. Journal source for Parker Palmer’s “Staying at the Table,” not available.
15. Schneiders, 372.
Rights/Responsibilities of Women Religious in the Church
A Canon Law Perspective

Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.

Before I can tackle a project such as deciding what to include in this brief article when I teach a whole course at the seminary about the rights of the people of God, I need to find a focus. A couple of years ago, a planning committee for the Cincinnati Area of our region asked me if I would portray Catherine McAuley speaking to us what Catherine might say in the face of the challenges of our world. My immediate question was, "What will I wear?" The tiny habits in our archives would never fit. Then I remembered the time in 1828 when Catherine went home to don again a fancy outfit and took her elegant carriage to pay a visit to the administrators of Sir Patrick Dunne Hospital, visiting men who had no time for Catherine and her women of Mercy, but men who readily received Miss McAuley, the heiress. I had my solution about how to dress.

Our Mercy Associate who was asking me to do this portrayal asked if I were concerned about what I would say as Catherine and I explained that would be no problem since I often reflect with our foundress as I ponder daily life. My remaining challenge was to limit my remarks to the expected time period.

I had a similar dilemma in planning this article. What would be my focus? How could I find a key phrase to inspire me and help me limit my remarks to the space allotted here? I was swimming at the YWCA near work when it came to me:

"Maturing from 'the good Sisters' who were sheltered daughters of the church to women of Mercy aware of and exercising our rights and responsibilities in our Church."

Those rights/responsibilities are human (from our very nature), ecclesial (from our being baptized into the people of God) and ecclesiastical (from our place in the formal structure of the church).

Our original Institute Direction Statement (my preferred one since there were only three points to remember and I could easily use it to make decisions in my daily life) included our pledge to commit our lives and our resources to act in solidarity with women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society.

Sometimes it is a challenge for church leaders to override their instincts to be paternal and protect the Christian faithful, their instincts to try to keep us in the role of daughters of the church. Sometimes a similar struggle to avoid being parental exists for those chosen for leadership in religious communities. We members of religious institutes need to invite ourselves to become of age with all the struggles that coming of age means, a kind of corporate teenage experience. Those of us who have taught teenagers know firsthand that the process of maturation is messy and often painful as well as exciting and energizing. Are we willing to die together in order to live more fully and to better minister together?

Rights are understood in the 1983 Code of Canon Law in light of Vatican II's consciousness of the dignity of each person, a principle that guided those who revised the code. Ecclesial rights are

Sometimes it is a challenge for church leaders to override their instincts to be paternal and protect the Christian faithful, their instincts to try to keep us in the role of daughters of the church.
both personal claims and responsibilities, entitle-
ments and duties as members of the Christian
faithful. There is a fundamental equality for the
people of God from baptism according to Canon
208. Often translated as "right" in English, the
Latin word ius implies obligation as well as right.
The 1983 Code of Canon Law lists rights of all the
Christian faithful, something with which some
church members were ill at ease. Some even
thought that protection of rights in the church is in-
apropriate.

In the church and in religious congregations,
members have rights/responsibilities that must be
protected. Once rights are indicated, grievance
procedures need to be put in place to protect those
rights. The right of redress is a basic right of any
system of law, including that of the church. There
have been canonical procedures for the protection
of rights from medieval times.

The right to appeal a decision is clearly traced
back to Gratian in the twelfth century.

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the church. There have been
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protection of rights from
medieval times.

Five principles to consider in evaluating such
procedures come from the Council of Europe's
Committee of Ministers: the right to be heard, ac-
tess to information, assistance and representation,
statement of reasons, and the indication of reme-
dies. It is essential that a religious institute as well
as a diocese have a reconciliation/appeal process in
which rights/responsibilities are safeguarded. How-
ever, even in these processes, conflicts of interest
arise and there needs to be a further procedure be-
yond conciliation such as mediation and/or
arbitration. Such processes are necessary to deal
with situations when members of religious insti-
tutes need assistance in conflict resolution and pro-
tection of rights/responsibilities since healthy adult
relationships are both the goal for religious congre-
gations and the basis for clear due process
procedures.

Anyone who ventures to speak to people about
justice must first be just themselves.

This has become a media focus in recent scan-
dals about clergy sexual abuse. The credibility of
the witness of women religious to the gospel de-
mands fidelity to justice among ourselves. We need
to develop clear and readily used processes to de-
fend the rights/responsibilities of all members:

- human rights/responsibilities based on the
dignity of each person,
- ecclesial rights/responsibilities that we have
from baptism as Christians and
- ecclesiastical rights/responsibilities related to
our formal status as members of a religious
institute in the Roman Catholic Church.

Due Process according to Church Law

Only due process for addressing the abuse of
rights/responsibilities guarantees that there is pro-
tection of rights/responsibilities. The rights of
members are at the heart of the church. This is an
issue dear to my heart since I am promoter of jus-
tice for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, which means
I am charged with seeing to the protection of rights
of all those involved in disputes and trials.

I also serve as one of the mediators and a chair
person of arbitration panels in our archdiocese. We
have found the process quite healing with the num-
ber of cases tapering off as clear personnel policies
have been put in place and as pastors have come to
realize they are not kings in their parishes but ser-
vant leaders subject to administrative review of
their decisions about the parish and individual
parishioners.

As I work with others to help the Catholics of
the Archdiocese of Cincinnati become aware of
their rights and the ways they may defend them,
and as I also help them become aware of their
responsibilities as members of the archdiocese, I often wonder about us as women religious and our lack of awareness of our rights and responsibilities as members of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Sometimes we do well, such as the large numbers of us returning the questionnaire about reconfiguring and many of us scheduling ourselves into cross-regional meetings to prepare for future changes in boundaries of sections of our Institute. But sometimes we go about ministry in our little corner of the vineyard not concerned about what others are doing or whether we might better serve the whole elsewhere. Sometimes we just ignore situations where others say their rights have not been respected. We turn away from situations where a Sister says she was treated unfairly by local or regional or institute leaders. We cling to the peace we enjoy in our own little plot of involvement ignoring wounded pain in another area of service or in the vineyard as a whole.

Resolution of Disputes

There are varied models for resolution of rights in dispute.9

I do not propose to describe the many variations of such models here nor to explain in detail the processes in place for our own Institute (processes that no one I know has used). Rather I will focus on just a couple of the rights/responsibilities we have as women religious and members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Due process is a term that comes from the Anglo-American legal tradition. A Sister (less clear about an Associate) who concludes her rights have been violated has the right to pursue the reconciliation/appeal processes of the region and also of the Institute when such conflicts about rights cannot be resolved privately between the persons involved.

If Institute processes do not bring a solution, church law recommends that the parties attempt church mediation or arbitration before taking a case to a church tribunal or, in the case of religious of a pontifical institute, making an appeal to the Roman Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (Canons 1446, 1713–1716).10

Vatican II called the church to specifically acknowledge the rights of the christifidelis, which very acknowledgement called for ways for the faithful to defend those rights. This required new ways of resolving disputes since the traditional appeal to a hierarchical superior is "a system well geared to protecting authority but not as well to defending individual rights."11

A member of a religious institute may address a grievance in the church by hierarchic recourse (Canons 1732–1729) which would be to the bishop for a diocesan institute and to Rome for us as a pontifical institute. I choose here to emphasize just two main values in any dispute about rights: confidentiality and the right of defense.

Sometimes we go about ministry in our little corner of the vineyard not concerned about what others are doing or whether we might better serve the whole elsewhere. Sometimes we just ignore situations where others say their rights have not been respected.

In any dispute about rights and responsibilities, confidentiality is extremely important, while secrecy is an instrument of evil. When information is withheld in order to maintain power over those who are denied the information or to put them at some disadvantage (particularly tempting for those in leadership or administration), then evil permeates the process. If you were to take a look at the rights in the Code of Canon Law for those involved in canonical trials, you should remember that parallel interpretation in canon law means a woman religious may defend all those rights in any dispute within her institute.

Canon 220 warns us that no one may harm the good reputation a person enjoys or violate a person’s right to privacy. No woman religious in leadership may “black ball” a member who has a right
to due process and protection of her rights, especially the right of defense. Even if there is a proven offense, all those involved must keep the situation in strictest confidence. How careful are we about such confidentiality as a community, especially if the person has been perceived as a thorn in the side of community leaders? As any administrator knows, we cannot defend ourselves as leaders at the expense of violating the privacy of an individual or hindering a person’s reputation.

**Right of Defense is Fundamental**

Besides strict confidentiality, canon law is particularly careful about the right of defense. Pope John Paul II in his address to the Roman Rota (sort of a supreme court in the church for marriage cases) on 26 January 1989 emphasized the importance of this right of defense. He reminded the canonists of the world that the Code of Canon Law specifically says a decision is irremediably null (cannot be fixed; Canon 1620, 7) if one is denied the right of defense. Canon 1598 again says the right of defense must always remain intact. The Roman Rota has always upheld the importance of the right of defense as a natural right, not one of positive law. The holy father goes on to say one cannot conceive of a just process in which a person is not afforded the right to know and contradict the allegations, requests, proofs, and deductions of the opposing party. If it is thus for church courts, it must be thus for disputes about rights of religious.

On 26 February 1979, ten years before the previously mentioned address, Pope John Paul II said to the Roman Rota (and through them to all canonists) that the right of defense is intrinsic to the essence of natural law. Even earlier than the current pontiff, Pius XII in 1946 (which I remember because it is the year I was born) said that the guarantee of a just and fair trial includes the right of defense.

The church has always understood that it cannot dispense from natural law. The right of defense, therefore, is a fundamental presumption of all church law. Therefore, any decree issued without protecting the right of defense is null and void . . . even a decision issued by the supreme pontiff himself, any decisions of Roman tribunals, decrees of bishops or ecclesiastical tribunals. Such null decisions or decrees do not have to be observed. By parallel law, any decision of a leader of a religious institute that does not respect the right of defense of the individuals involved is also null and void.

**Voice of the Individual and Culture of Obedience**

Women traditionally had no say in decisions in our church and some of our Sisters see it as disloyal to the hierarchy to demand our rights in the church, disloyal to superiors to demand individual rights in a religious institute. Ours is not an institute in which members have no voice. Ours is no longer a church in which women have no voice. But we do not all perceive that the same way. I am reminded of hearing our Institute leader Marie Chin speak of the different cultures out of which we operate: essentialist, existentialist, liberation, and feminist perspectives. Sometimes we have different meanings for the same words. What is seen as virtuous obedience from one perspective may seem to be failing to assume our responsibilities as mature women religious from another viewpoint. A Sister expressing her distress about exclusive language in the liturgy may seem disloyal.

Sometimes we have different meanings for the same words. What is seen as virtuous obedience from one perspective may seem to be failing to assume our responsibilities as mature women religious from another viewpoint. A Sister expressing her distress about exclusive language in the liturgy may seem disloyal.
archdiocese called "We Miss You" for those separated from our church over marriage related issues. At the end of one presentation, a woman from St. Matthias Parish told us that she left the Catholic Church before Vatican II after being told in confession to be more obedient to her husband so he would not abuse her. When she left the church, she said, no bishop would have spent an evening with divorced Catholics. She thanked him and then said to him, "And then you say you are not really the expert but "she" is and she proceeds to tease you in her examples and you clearly enjoy it. With tears in her eyes she concluded: "This is a church I want to come home to." Sometimes who we are speaks more loudly than anything we say, and, in the church today, more attention is being paid to the being and voices of women.

All women can have a voice in our church. As chrisitifideles there is no distinction between clergy and lay and also no distinction between men and women. Traditionally, women were never involved in the law-making process in the church until Vatican II. Then Perfectae Caritatis asked women religious to write our own particular law, our Constitutions, which we did in obedience to the church. Those constitutions struggled through Roman approval by the men of our church—especially due to women’s experience of relationship in terms of connectedness rather than in terms of autonomy, which caused our expressions of law to be significantly different. Gratian’s Decretum (the first written formulation of church law) described women as submissive, inferior, and to be protected. It expressed a concern for women as part of the poor and oppressed without any concern for the participation of women in the life of the church.

**Alternative: Collaboration and Review**

Fourteen years ago, I began work as a canon lawyer in the tribunal of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The next year I became the first non-priest director. Has it made a difference having a woman in charge of our tribunal? I think so. Let me offer just one example. When we revised the law sections for decisions in 1994, a priest from another diocese asked our oldest judge at the province meeting which of the new law sections he had composed and he nodded toward me telling the group, "Oh, I didn’t. She got us to work together.” They then explained to me that previously several priests would compose a law section on the same ground for nullity. The group would meet and fight it out until one was chosen to be used. One won and the others lost.

Unaware of that process, I asked three judges to work on each law section submitting it to the whole group for review and suggestions and then we did a final vote to agree to use the new law sections with me having editing rights since I taught English for twenty years. Such cooperation is natural for us as women and sometimes alien to men used to functioning as heads of parishes never consulting the neighboring pastor lest one appear weak in one’s job.

There is a natural networking that comes to the tribunal with a woman in charge, a more cooperative than competitive atmosphere, a circular rather than hierarchical style of leadership. Such changes respect the universal law of the church and carefully follow prescribed processes and procedures, but do so in a creatively new manner. However, respecting procedural law is always essential, including ensuring the protection of the right of defense.

**Following of Procedures in Revised 1983 Code**

A main underpinning of canon law about resolution of rights disputes and canonical trials is Canon 18, *Perfectae Caritatis* asked women religious to write our Constitutions, which struggled through Roman approval by the men of our church—especially due to women’s experience of relationship in terms of connectedness rather than in terms of autonomy, which caused our expressions of law to be significantly different.
which insists on very strict following of procedures with regard to any kind of penalty that must be a last resort for handling problems (Canons 1317 and 1341) and should be designed not primarily to punish but to restore justice, to repair scandal, and to reform the accused. No one is to be punished through church procedures except strictly according to law (Canon 221). All of religious institute procedures are particular law of the church and so are also subject to universal canon law.

A question some Mercy canonists raised about our processes is about the selection of members of boards of reconciliation. If such persons are selected by the leadership team or chosen by leadership teams from those nominated, does that not “stack the deck” in favor of leadership?

One of the simplest means for promoting rights in the church is to give those endowed with such rights a book that articulates them. Thus we have the 1983 Code! The whole church has that text, but have we used it? We have statements about reconciliation procedures in our Institute. Do we know them? Do we use them? Do they provide due process and protection of rights? A question some Mercy canonists raised about our processes is about the selection of members of boards of reconciliation. If such persons are selected by the leadership team or chosen by leadership teams from those nominated, does that not “stack the deck” in favor of leadership if there is a conflict about the rights of an individual member?

In 1 Cor 6:1–6, Paul wants Christians to resolve their differences among themselves. Matt 18:15–17 also refers to addressing grievances within the community of faith. We are a sinful church. Rights will be violated and conflicts will arise. It is important that rights can be vindicated if they are violated in the church or in a religious institute.

In summary of the first section of this article, remember that a woman religious has the right to defend her legitimate rights in her institute and also in the church through a canonical trial or through hierarchical recourse.

**Participative Decision Making**

I also want to address just one of the obligations/rights of members in the church and in our Institute as well as in each of our regions and in our local communities: participative decision making. In the church and in any religious institute, members have the right and the responsibility to be involved in decisions.

Response to this duty might be something so simple as the commitment of my local communities for the past twenty years. We pledged that we would read everything that was sent to us by our Institute, our region, our area. That sounds simple until whole forests die to contribute to the deluge of papers we receive at times. It also meant those of us who are physically able committed ourselves to attend all those area, regional, cross-area and cross-regional gatherings that led up to the formation of our Institute and that now pave the way for reimagining and reconfiguring ourselves. That is not a light commitment. In coming to consensus about such participation and trying to encourage each Sister with whom I lived to realize she is an important part of decision making in our local community and at every level of our Institute, I have often paraphrased Bob Kennedy’s explanation of decision making in our church.

In a paper presented to the fourteenth annual meeting of the Canadian Canon Law Society in Quebec City, Canada in October of 1979, Rev. Robert Kennedy from Catholic University of America talked about participative administrative decision making. For some, decision making connotes a power struggle. Some find themselves immediately asking if they are to make decisions or merely be advisory or consultative. That very question betrays a too simplistic mind-set about the process of decisions.

Decision making is more than the final choice or even power to make the final choice. It may well be an initial voice in the consultation that actually
determines the final choice for action that is made. The final choice is only one element in decision making and not always the most important or the most influential element.

Decision making is a complex process involving many stages. Participating in the process in our church as well as in our Institute is one way to share responsibility and it is an important right as well as a responsibility.

Making a choice demands at least two alternatives. One person might propose an alternative not previously considered that could shift the whole outcome of the decision-making process. If the final deciders choose the alternative proposed by the one person, who really exercised power in the process? Surely it is not only those who have a final vote.

**Consultative Process**

Richard Henry Lee of Virginia was the single voice who introduced the resolution that proposed independence from Britain for the American Colonies, which was adopted on 2 July 1776, two days before Congress approved the Declaration of Independence.\(^{18}\)

The Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 and proposed a new constitution for an unprecedented form of government, a union of interdependent states.\(^{19}\)

Now the names of those who signed are known worldwide and they are considered national heroes. Seldom do we allude to the fact that they had no authority to decide to do anything. The Constitutional Convention was merely and completely consultative. It proposed and the legislative assemblies of the thirteen colonies made the final choice. Yet the role of the final choice makers was so much less than the role of those whose ideas envisioning a new way persuaded those who held the authority to make the decision.

Even the making of the choice does not conclude the decision making process. It merely creates a good intention that must be put into action if the whole process is to bear any fruit. [In canon law there is the ancient concept of “receptio”: law that is never received does not exist.]

Implementation with attention to detail, allocation of personnel and resources, coordination of duties, delegation of authority, effective communication, and sensitivity to all those involved, as well as adaptation for unforeseen circumstances are all necessary parts of the process as is evaluation of the process to help the group do better in the future. We are called to be responsible members of the church and responsible members of the Institute, the region, and the local community. We are responsible for what we do and for what we refuse to do.

**Post-Vatican II: Responsibility of Members to Challenge Leadership**

One of our responsibilities is to challenge decisions of leadership that seem irresponsible or poor choices. The real leader need not be the choice maker nor the creative idea person nor even the one who implements or evaluates. As the servant of the servants of God, the leader needs to have the gift of bringing forth the giftedness within the group like the conductor of an orchestra who does not play a musical instrument during the performance nor sing an aria. Nevertheless, that conductor renders an indispensable service drawing out the gifts of others: coordinating, motivating, inspiring. So too would be the role of one leading participative governance and shared responsibility.

While I was still in high school, John XXIII pledged to open the windows and allow in the fresh air of aggiornamento to blow strong in our church.

We are called to be responsible members of the church and responsible members of the Institute, the region, and the local community. We are responsible for what we do and for what we refuse to do. One of our responsibilities is to challenge decisions of leadership that seem irresponsible or poor choices.
We need to invite all Women of Mercy to assume their responsibility to protect their rights in our church and in our Institute. We need to call ourselves to mature from being those sheltered daughters of the church to become ecclesial women accepting coresponsibility in our church.

New structures began to emerge. I entered religious life in the postconciliar church studying the documents of Vatican II in college where my professors were just pages ahead of us reading those new documents as they were published. My formation in religious life happened at a time when subsidiarity eased into reality with the understanding that the best place for decisions to be made is at the lowest competent level. Gone was the process of a general council who never met Sisters in formation deciding if they were to remain or be forced out of the community. Gone was the experience of waking up one morning to find someone in your class had been sent home for reasons she never knew with no opportunity for her God-given right of self defense.

In 1969, the Canon Law Society of America first proposed model procedures for local churches to resolve conflicts of rights between the Christian faithful and church officials. The Canon Law Society of America began to implement the concept of due process in the church in the United States to protect rights. This grew out of the long history of canon law’s concern for justice within the church. In 1971, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published its decree, “On Due Process” with approval of the Apostolic See.

The guardians of such processes are the canon lawyers of the church, no longer primarily charged with maintenance of the system. We are called to shoulder the right/responsibility to challenge our church to live up to its mission of bringing justice to Christ’s kingdom. I hope that no longer would Shakespeare have Dick the Butcher, one of the rebels in Henry VI proclaim, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”

Conclusion

Some in our church have seen the pursuit of due process as disloyalty to church leaders or disrespectful of hierarchical reality. Some women religious see the pursuit of due process within an institute as similarly disloyal or disrespectful. We need to invite all Women of Mercy to assume their responsibility to protect their rights in our church and in our Institute. We need to call ourselves to mature from being those sheltered daughters of the church to become ecclesial women accepting coresponsibility in our church.

This article began with my account of coming to a focus for the content while swimming. It ends with an image of a different kind of swimming. During our regional elections a few years ago, I was part of the group of those nominated for regional leadership, part of what we called the leadership pool. We came together to discern whether or not to leave our names on the list. At that time, all of us who decided to remove our names pledged ourselves not to leave those who did remain in the pool swimming alone once they were elected. We called ourselves to coresponsibility, which we took seriously. Such adult interdependence supported by well-used due process procedures and a commitment to participative decision making is my hope and prayer for all of us in this Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.
Notes

15 While this talk has not been published, there is a video tape of it in the Life Development Office of the Region of Cincinnati.
18 Christine Compston and Rachel Filene Seidman (eds.) "1776 Lee Resolution" in Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 10.
19 Sharon Holland, "Equality, Dignity and Rights of the Laity," in The Jurist, 47 (1987), 103-128. [Presents a good summary of how the statement of basic rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in American history have been upheld in church tradition.]

The Editorial Board wishes to broaden the voice of The MAST Journal. Sisters of Mercy and Associates in all fields are invited to submit editorials or opinion pieces on theological concerns arising from topics featured in the journal. Forthcoming issues will address Reading Contemporary Theologians, Perspectives on Mercy Association, Contextual/Cultural Theology, and Racism. Another welcome genre is reflections on the discussion questions of each issue. Such short pieces are normally between 400-800 words and publication includes the author's name. Submissions should be sent electronically or by mail and disk to Kathleen McAlpin, R.S.M., MAST Editorial Board, Regis College, 15 St. Mary's Street, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2BR. E-mail: k.mcalpin@utoronto.ca.

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The Reconciliation Process
An Ecclesial Structure for Protecting Rights of Members

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Introduction: The Two Households

Growing up in southern California in Whittier, I found it a welcome break from inland heat and daily routine to escape to my grandmother’s house at the beach at Playa del Rey, an hour’s drive away. When I was in high school and old enough to drive myself across town, I would pack my clothes with my books on Friday morning, and right after school, gun the clunky Ford out of the parking lot, and take off for the beach. I have no memory of heavy traffic because I was always full of anticipation. The signal that I was close was a slight breeze, about twenty minutes from her house, of salt air through the car window. I would take a deep breath, my eyes widening in the clear afternoon light of the late sun letting itself slide down toward the ocean, start to relax, and feel the weeks of school’s rules and class schedule unravel as knots undid themselves in my shoulders and down my back.

As the oldest of six children, I also treasured these getaways as a break in the family routine with its “givens,” and responsibilities, the set rhythm of homework, meals, night prayer, and lights out. To walk in, hug my grandmother, and feel so loved and welcome, aroused a soul-deep sense of relief, the realization, “Here, there are no rules, no pressure.” She would typically pat my cheek and say, “Now, dear, go to the refrigerator and get yourself something to eat. We’ll have dinner later.” And after I settled into a living room chair, simply to establish how long I could stay and what we might do together, she’d ask, “So, tell me your program.”

Community and Institutional Church: Two Houses

The house I lived in with my parents and siblings had many rules and requirements. Like most teenagers, I felt resistant to a system I didn’t invent, yet I had to be obedient to it because I had no other place to go. I was torn between the need for security and predictability because my parents took care of me, and the need for emotional freedom. My grandmother provided a “safe house,” and once I walked in the door of her rambling four-story refuge, I knew I’d found what felt truly home—a restorative atmosphere. She let me do whatever I wanted, and instead of telling me what to do, would ask, “What is your program?” suggesting I could make my own rules.

Most of us have a concept of a “grandmother’s house,” the alternative space that represents freedom from parental discipline, laxer expectations, elastic timetable, and welcome suspension of the normal schedule and routine. Our concept of the ideal community may also represent a kind of “safe house” within the institutional church. In the welcoming household of community, we are free to be ourselves as women and we can “get away” from whatever we find oppressive in the patriarchal ecclesial system. In the relaxed, unforced, and welcoming atmosphere of community, we can define our own “program,” make our own

In the welcoming household of community, we are free to be ourselves as women and we can “get away” from whatever we find oppressive in the patriarchal ecclesial system.
rules, and let our own decisions rather than the institutional church’s requirements govern our life together.

A respected Sister professed more than fifty years, a former novice director, expressed this perspective on community a couple of years ago. During the annual assembly, there was a short presentation about the fact right. But, with some reservation, slightly shaking her head in kindly wonderment, she found the concept of a Sister seeking a canon lawyer for help in resolving disputes within community out of character with Mercy spirit. “But why would a Sister ever need to do this, since we are family?”

Was “reconciliation” a cover-up term that distracted Sisters from dealing with some of the darker facts of life? Would the ideal that “the sun never went down on their anger” be compromised if the word “grievance” were used instead of “reconciliation”?

If members had disputes with other Sisters, they could seek help from a canon lawyer and also get representation; i.e., have the advocate speak on their behalf, if they desired. Another Sister who worked in the archdiocesan tribunal affirmed this as an understanding everyone she worked with took for granted—that the church guarantees all the baptized the right to be represented by an ecclesiastically trained advocate. This right extends to all religious women as well. The regional president gave the assurance that there was a budget line, if needed, to cover the costs of such canonical service.

The senior Sister reacted with surprise, admitting she had learned something new, because she had never heard of such a community gospel truth that it was better to forget wounds and ignore wrongs than to claim justice for themselves? Had they never experienced the injustice of being refused spiritual development or educational opportunities that were granted to others from common funds? Had they never been burdened by restrictions applied to them in secret directives, but not to all Sisters? Were long-professed Mercy Sisters never aggrieved by a superior’s ultimatum, forcing them to choose between a conscience-rending “obedience” or leaving the community, sacrificing their retirement benefits, to preserve their sanity and peace of mind?

Since they were fundamentally members of a loving family, did Mercies only have spats with each other, like Amy, Beth, and Meg in Alcott’s Little Women, momentary differences that could be smoothed over and quickly restored to right relations? Was “reconciliation” a cover-up term that distracted Sisters from dealing with some of the darker facts of life? Would the ideal that “the sun never went down on their anger” be compromised if the word “grievance” were used instead of “reconciliation”?

**What to Call Family Dispute Resolution: Grievance or Reconciliation?**

Some years ago, when I read through the Institute Reconciliation Process of 1992 inserted in my regional community Policy Handbook, I wondered why it hadn’t been called “Grievance Procedure.” Was “reconciliation” a way of trying to use “good family” or “safe-house” language? Was “reconciliation” a form of denial, that Mercy Sisters in a model congregation characterized by union and charity, never had real disputes? Did Mercies never suffer from judgments based on accusations by complainers without opportunity to defend themselves? Had they never had long-term friendships betrayed, never had their reputation damaged by community gossip? Had they never wished for redress of these wrongs, nor felt entitled to some kind of restitution from their Sisters? Had they never been summarily fired from a Mercy-sponsored institution and left to swing in the wind with no redress, no appeal available to them within the institutional structure, and no help from leadership?
I tested my theory. The colleges, seminaries and universities where I had worked all had a section of the faculty handbook called "Grievance Procedure." This was the provision whereby a faculty member, members of the "university family" could ask a standing committee elected by faculty at large, to hear his or her written complaint and decide if there was a basis for review of a decision, or a change of policy.

A faculty member might complain that he or she had been treated unjustly by a department head who denied funding for a research project, not honored an agreement about a course assignment, or was trying to force a member to retire against his will. Another sort of complaint could be that a decision about tenure or promotion by administration was discriminatory and should be reviewed. Or a grievance committee might receive a complaint, through a professor fighting a charge of improper behavior with a student, that the university's policy on ethical standards for faculty-student relations failed to provide due process safeguards for the accused. Or another might be a complaint from a minority faculty member that hiring policies within departments were privileging only one ethnicity, rather than being broad-based and designed to increase general ethnic diversity on campus.

In each case, the recourse to a grievance procedure was a way to seek review and change at the administrative level. Going to a grievance committee took a more urgent case "one notch higher" than a discussion at a faculty meeting where administration might ignore the issue. It certainly was preferable to taking the matter to a civil court where a judge would normally not want to interfere with internal disputes over university policy, relationships, and administrative decision making.

A staff doctor, denied privileges because of a disciplinary proceeding, could submit the matter to the hospital grievance committee. The internal process was aimed at both reconsidering the basis for the disciplinary proceeding and the fairness of the denial of privileges. This was an alternate to the doctor suing the hospital in civil court, in an external forum.

The policy was clearly the fruit of a long evolution in dealing with many substantive de-

**Health-Care Model**

I also had occasion to visit a first cousin, a podiatrist at Kaiser Hospital in San Jose, California. Waiting in her office until she finished seeing patients so we could go to lunch and catch up with each other, I fingered a skeletal model of a foot and ankle, with all its bones wired together, discovering all the particulars of what my shoe and skin covered when my toes wiggled. Then, as a distracted academic in need of text, I leafed through her Kaiser Handbook. Under "Grievance Procedure," I read a very detailed series of provisions whereby a staff doctor, denied privileges because of a disciplinary proceeding, for example, could submit the matter to the hospital grievance committee. The internal process was aimed at both reconsidering the basis for the disciplinary proceeding and the fairness of the denial of privileges.
petition at each stage, which reflected an effort to establish a common basis for evaluation. The aim was to outline a due process procedure that would follow the same steps and use the same standards of review in each case. There was also a revision policy, whereby hospital administration would periodically reconsider the grievance procedure and make adjustments to it in light of feedback and changing situations.

A grievance procedure creates the possibility of a different dynamic to alter relationships that may have become hardened by a history of reciprocal miscommunications.

Grievance as Three Moments

Thus, I found "grievance procedure" describes at least three moments. It refers first to real-life disputes, wrongs, and injustices, what causes a person to feel aggrieved. "Grievance" describes what an individual person names as the occasion and dynamics of what they suffered, either undeservedly or disproportionately. A grievance can be brought by one member of a group suffering from a policy that is unfair. By bringing the grievance personally, the individual seeks reconsideration and revision on behalf of the others. "Grievance" refers to the expression that basic human values of fairness, reasonableness, and objectivity have been violated by a particular decision, policy, or directive. A grievance procedure creates the possibility of a different dynamic to alter relationships that may have become hardened by a history of reciprocal miscommunications. As the sequence at the mass for Pentecost prays to the Holy Spirit, "What is rigid, gently bend. What is frozen, warmly tend."

Second, "grievance" names the petition itself, the act of expression, which a person submits to a committee for an objective hearing so both sides can be heard and reexamined. In the workplace of education and healthcare, "grievance" is a formal way of complaining and seeking the assistance of colleagues so that disputes can be resolved and peace restored through in-house processes. Rather than engaging in self-help (i.e., personally demanding restitution or punishment of the wrongdoer) the aggrieved person entrusts the dispute to peacemakers who are also coworkers. "Grievance" is a formal way of admitting that one-on-one conversation is not sufficient to resolve the issues; that the dispute needs the assistance of another kind of process.

Third, "grievance procedure" is a task entrusted to particular persons in the name of the group. It refers to the written policy and dynamic by which a community commits itself to select representatives to serve in the capacity of peace restorers. It describes the general occasions or matter that justify a person bringing a grievance. It outlines the steps the committee members follow and the various outcomes that will affirm for the group that the grievance committee has performed its work.

Persons who serve on grievance committees are implementers of the basic values that define the character and mission of the group. Their role is to examine closely the basis for an administrator's decisions, directives, and policies as they impact the person aggrieved. They review the facts so all sides are heard and they measure such decisions against what the generally applicable law says and stated institutional policies. They determine whether the original decision, directive, or policy is fair as to the particular facts of the situation, and just to the petitioner as to the procedure in which the decision was reached or the directive given. They mediate communication between the parties in dispute and seek a resolution in-house.

A Few Allusions: "Reconciliation" in Scripture

The fact that the word "reconciliation" was used to name the Institute appeals process in 1992 evokes the spirit in which Mercy sisters give expression to a grievance. Its intent is to restore right
relations and bring about a just outcome for the petitioner. The primary aim of those serve on a reconciliation board is peace making, not fostering a win-lose scenario that polarizes the parties. Disputes arise typically in community, not between peers, but between members and those in leadership. Thus, the role of board members is to consider whether rights that protect members have been acknowledged and laws that limit leaders’ authority have been observed. Ladislas Orsy, a noted theologian and canonist, roots all ecclesial juridical processes in the gospel:

Let us begin with the obvious: no interpretation of the law that goes against the spirit of the Gospel can be correct. The overriding duty of the church is to proclaim the good news. No law may ever contradict that message. In the practical order, whenever a conflict seems to arise, the Gospel must prevail, if necessary through the application of equity or any other of those devices which are there to temper the severity or tame the excesses of the law.

Reconciliation, for Christians, is based on scriptural images and tradition. In Hebrew Scripture, the directives for the Day of Atonement in Leviticus describe a series of liturgical actions made to atone for sin. The ritual led by the priest culminated in laying of hands on a goat and releasing it into the wilderness. The “letting go” of sin, letting it be carried away, expressed the reconciliation of a once morally estranged people with a loving God (Lev 16:20). Paul invoked that mysterious process of restored relationships to the Corinthians when he described a spiritual renewal that he insisted had fundamentally changed the relationships of Gentiles to God. “See, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

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Paul’s theology established the foundation of reconciled relationships between God and believers as the basis for reconciliation between the resistant, suspicious Corinthians and Paul himself. “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry” (2 Cor 6:3). Further, Paul describes his entire preaching mission as a “message of reconciliation” that emphasizes God’s forgiveness. He understands himself primarily as a reconciler: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

This theological appeal was apparently necessary because Paul had earlier made himself a lightning rod when he antagonized many Corinthians and reprimanded them for failing to deal with their own disputes internally. Believers were taking their disputes to the external forum and suing one another in civil court. Paul taught that reverence for one another as members of the same believing community should be expressed in an internal grievance procedure. He took for granted that such disputes would arise on a regular basis and that a stable process should be in place for resolving discord in-house. Such a process should involve the selection of wise peacemakers. “When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? ... Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another? ...” (1 Cor 6:1, 5).

Matthew’s Internal Review Process

Several decades after Paul, Matthew counseled his particular community to follow an internal procedure for reconciling grievances between members (Matt 18:15–17). First, the
Rosenblatt: The Reconciliation Process

wronged party was to go directly to the offending person and try to reach an understanding. If this failed, the petitioner was to seek two other members of the community as mediators or witnesses. If this effort failed, the matter was to be brought to church administrators. The directive, "Tell it to the church," implied there was a general public policy for providing a hearing, seeking reconciliation and providing redress for the wrong the petitioner suffered.

If these three internal levels of review failed, then the wrongdoer was to be regarded as "a gentile (ethnikos) and a tax collector." This resolution is subject to varying exegetical conclusions. Some scholars regard it harshly, as the equivalent of, "Regard the offender as an out

For Matthew, the spirit guiding the internal mediation effort, review process, or semi-juridical investigation is readiness to forgive wrongs and reconciliation of the community with God.

Such a spirit of unity does not require a judgment, hearing, or endorsement by the entire congregation. The words of Jesus allude to the self-understanding of mediators. They are not unchallengeable agents who wield exclusive power to punish or forgive wrongdoers. Rather, their service is a readiness, after a review process, either to "bind" (hold someone accountable) or to "loose" (judge them released from obligation), whatever the situation manifests is most just. The mediators are to understand they undertake God's own work of forgiving and restoring relationships.

In the context of this pericope, "asking anything of the Father" suggests that mediators are engaged in prayer, for they know their dependence on God and seek divine help for their difficult work. Their prayer is a petition to God by the "two or three," the small number that is attending to the dispute and seeking to bring peace. "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:18–19).

Matthew concludes the description of the internal grievance procedure by modeling, through Peter, what should be the petitioner's state of mind in submitting a grievance: readiness to forgive, let go and start over. "If a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Jesus says "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt 18:22). If interpreted humorously, the number might indicate that a reconciliation board could expect to be employed in full-time ministry if the Mercy community is anything like Matthew's.

Modern Church Teaching about Dispute Resolution: Protection of Rights

In the church today, structures for dispute resolution grow out
of reflection on the dignity of the person. This foundation leads to increasing clarification of what particular entitlements belong to each person—man, woman, and child—in virtue of their humanity. The church’s juridical tradition has always articulated every believer’s right of defense and right to a fair hearing prior to a judgment or imposition of a penalty. The church has always preserved a believer’s right to appeal a decision that has aggrieved her through its juridical structures of diocesan tribunal, Rota and Signatura. However, it is not commonly known that religious women have access to it for dispute resolution.

A strong impetus for making visible the church’s dispute-resolution structures was the international recoil after World War II against dehumanization and mistreatment of persons, which dramatized the loss, at national levels, of a sense of the dignity, worth, and value of humans as unique individuals. Further, if the church taught reconciliation and peace as ideals, what practical means did it offer for preserving peace when disputes arose within the household of the faith?

The international community affirmed the principle of human dignity as the foundation for establishing peace between victors and vanquished, for reconstructing destroyed cities, for repeal of racist and discriminatory laws, and for reform of political institutions so that the rule of dictators would be replaced by democracies. The shock of the Holocaust in Europe and exposure of wartime brutalities in the Far East confronted both national governments and religious institutions with violations of fundamental principles of humanity: mistreatment of prisoners of war, state-sponsored degradation of minority groups, enslavement, torture, and mass murder of millions of civilians based on nothing but their ethnicity or nationality.

The response of the new United Nations in the late 1940s and 1950s was to reformulate the Geneva Conventions enacted after WW I. The member states enacted a series of international treaties based on the dignity of the person. These enunciated a universal standard of basic human rights, from which flowed the fair and humane treatment of all persons, whether combatants or civilians.

As the women’s movement of the 1970s found international voice, subsequent treaties specified these human rights as applicable specifically to women as civilians. They proscribed violence, rape, torture, and mental abuse as instruments of war used against noncombatants, affirming women’s rights to bodily integrity both in war and during times of peace. The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the U.S.A. and a series of federal civil rights acts referred to as “Title VII,” implemented and applied these principles of human rights to U.S. social institutions. Legislation proscribed discrimination in employment, housing, and education based on race, gender, national origin, color, and religion. From 1963 to the mid-1990s related legislation based on the dignity and equality of all persons provided remedies against unequal pay scales based on gender, less favorable treatment in employment based on disability, age, and pregnancy, and the loss of one’s job when a dependent family member got sick and needed care. State legislation became more refined in naming domestic violence and marital rape as prosecutable offenses.
Ecclesial Implementation of Due Process after Vatican II in the U.S.A.

Documents of Vatican II from the mid-1960s reflect this international thrust toward affirming the dignity of the person as the basis for naming the rights of both men and women. Protection of these rights required a legislative guarantee to fair and equal treatment within political and social institutions. Within the flow of thought, it is not easy to say where the human rights, as defined in international treaties, are differentiated from those human rights named and affirmed by church teaching. It seems a fair analysis to note that international discourse about human rights, as defined in international treaties, are differentiated from those human rights named and affirmed by church teaching. It seems a fair analysis to note that international discourse about human rights, as defined in international treaties, are differentiated from those human rights named and affirmed by church teaching. It seems a fair analysis to note that international discourse about human rights, as defined in international treaties, are differentiated from those human rights named and affirmed by church teaching.

This was done, and the NCCB strongly and fully endorsed the C.L.S.A. study, acknowledged "the urgency of the problem," and counseled the "prompt implementation on the diocesan, provincial, and regional levels of this and other well-conceived plans" that would "secure protection of human rights and freedoms that should always be among the goals of the Church." In 1970, an appointed committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men made a report to its membership about due process, personal rights, and the need for internal conflict resolution procedures, as those applied to members of men's religious orders. In 1972, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, relying on this 1970 study, made its own report, outlining a model set of procedures for internal dispute resolution for vowed women. It recommended a board of reconciliation, a due process procedure, as well as a model for a conciliation process and arbitration process. The twenty-five-page report concluded with a recommendation that L.C.W.R. establish a standing committee to assist religious institutes in establishing programs for due process within their communities.

The report acknowledged that a number of women's congregations had undertaken studies of due process prior to 1972: the Wisconsin Province of the School Sisters of St. Francis, the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, and the Sisters of Charity, B.V.M., of Dubuque, Iowa.

In the introduction, the goal of instituting a board of reconciliation was:

... the need for a method to resolve conflicts as they arise, not so much for the sake of peace, but, hopefully, for the purpose of arriving at a deeper understanding of truth and of facilitating experience of deeper, stronger personal relationships among members.

Right after Vatican II, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops requested that the Canon Law Society of America undertake a study of due process for all persons in the church, with "concrete suggestions for procedures which could operate to safeguard rights and freedoms where existing procedures are found to be inadequate." This was done, and the NCCB strongly and fully endorsed the C.L.S.A. study, acknowledged "the urgency of the problem," and counseled the "prompt implementation on the diocesan, provincial, and regional levels of this and other well-conceived plans" that would "secure protection of human rights and freedoms that should always be among the goals of the Church." In 1970, an appointed committee of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men made a report to its membership about due process, personal rights, and the need for internal conflict resolution procedures, as those applied to members of men's religious orders. In 1972, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, relying on this 1970 study, made its own report, outlining a model set of procedures for internal dispute resolution for vowed women. It recommended a board of reconciliation, a due process procedure, as well as a model for a conciliation process and arbitration process. The twenty-five-page report concluded with a recommendation that L.C.W.R. establish a standing committee to assist religious institutes in establishing programs for due process within their communities.

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Implementation by the Pittsburgh Mercies

I thank Patricia McCann, R.S.M., (Pittsburgh) who recently shared the L.C.W.R. study with me from her congregational archives, along with other documents. They include a press release of 1977, announcing that both Mercy and the Seton Hill Charity orders had established "systems of due process within their congregations for any member with a grievance that normal channels fail to resolve." Sister Ignatius Rooney, R.S.M., served as chair of Pittsburgh Mercy's Mediation Board, and Sister Melanie
DiPietro, S.C. (both a civil attorney and a canonist) had led the final preparations for her order’s system.

DiPietro’s position was summarized: “Even religious authority must always be conscious of human rights and human dignity and provide safeguards against possible abuse of it.”

A mediation board guided by due process principles was “meant to protect each Sister’s rights and guard against an abuse of authority or what the individual views as an abuse.” While the system was not meant “as a remedy for every misunderstanding that may occur in religious life,” there was a clear process for dealing with substantive disputes. A mediation or reconciliation board would receive a complaint, and first decide its merits. If warranted, the case would go through a conciliation process; failing that, the complainant could take the case to binding arbitration.

In 1977, it was anticipated that “availability of the procedure is expected to enhance unity and harmony . . . and rather than undermining authority, to created greater respect for it because of this concern for human rights.”

Archival documents from Pittsburgh include a six-page policy document, “The Mediation Board of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy, October, 1981.” The stated purpose was, “to provide for a process of reconciliation (hereafter called conciliation) and, if necessary, a process for arbitration of major disputes involving an alleged violation or (sic) rights which are not resolved between members of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy by the practices prescribed by the Decrees 1968-1982.”

It struck me on reading this finely crafted policy that it would be profitable to retrieve and study the appeals processes that were in existence prior to the founding of the Institute, both within Mercy and other women’s congregations. It is probably safe to say, however, that most congregations of women did not have such formalized procedures in place, despite the availability of the L.C.W.R. model of 1972 and the endorsement of the N.C.C.B. of the canonical report.

In 1991, the Canon Law Society of America published a second study on due process, called “The Protection of Rights of Persons in the Church.” This was done in light of the promulgation of the revised Code of Canon Law in 1983, and as an update and streamlining of “the model procedures for conciliation and arbitration and to develop models and a commentary for diocesan and regional administrative tribunals.”

Contemporaneous with this C.L.S.A. report, theologians were calling attention to the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law as a liberating document, trying to break the stereotype of canon law as a patriarchal, oppressive document, alien to the values of women religious. Canon law in its revised version resisted an older culture of “blind obedience.” It protected the rights of the individual, countered capriciousness with rational and deliberate procedures, and didn’t give license to ecclesial authorities.

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Institute Implementation of Due Process and Reconciliation Board

In the opening to Mercy's Reconciliation Process published in 1992, there is a citation to the Institute Constitutions § 77 that echoes ecclesial concerns for safeguarding human rights: "The regional communities maintain structures for the guarantee of the rights of all and for the exercise of authority with appropriate accountability between leaders and members."10

Mercy documents do not mention that presenting a grievance through a diocesan tribunal is also an avenue of recourse for a member of a religious community.

The protocol of the reconciliation process outlines three stages of recourse: conciliation, mediation, and arbitration. These reflect the procedures outlined by the Canon Law Society of America in its 1991 Protection of the Rights of Persons in the Church. However, the C.L.S.A. protocol for disputes between persons and diocesan personnel names the stages of review as conciliation and arbitration. These two efforts precede taking the dispute to a more formal process of the diocesan administrative tribunal. In contrast, Mercy documents do not mention that presenting a grievance through a diocesan tribunal is also an avenue of recourse for a member of a religious community.

The Institute Constitutions has no direct reference to "due process," "mediation," or "reconciliation process." However, reverence for the dignity of each person and a gospel spirit of reconciliation are endorsed as congregational values. The framework for an internal grievance procedure and its outcome might be implied from such allusions as "speak the truth in love" and "restoration of harmony."

"By our life in community and by sharing our faith and mission, we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity. Reverence for the unique gift of each member—the young and the old, the well and the infirm—helps us to live together in affection and mutual respect. When breaches of charity occur, we encourage each other to speak the truth in love and to bring prayer and patience to the restoration of harmony" (Const. § 18).

While not designated in the Constitutions, the existence of a reconciliation process is stated in the Regional Directory. The phrase "due process" occurs in 77.0.2 and the reader is directed to the policy on reconciliation "in the Regional Community Policy Handbook." Provision for nomination and election of members of the Regional Community Board of Reconciliation is described in Regional Directory 77.0.3.

The Institute Constitutions uses the term "appeal" to describe one avenue members have to present grievances or seek administrative recourse in Article 65: Among a series of assignments, the president's role includes the responsibility to "serve as an instance of appeal." This is technical canonical language and describes her ecclesial duty to act personally and individually as a reviewer of policies and receiver of members' grievances from "below." By the Constitution, members have access to her one-on-one, for example, for review of a regional president's directives or decisions that have aggrieved them personally. It is the Institute president's duty to preserve the kind of administrative objectivity that will allow her to hear grievances of members without a conflict of interest, and her duty to respond to members by keeping the channel of communication open.

A second application of her responsibility to "serve as an instance of appeal" is her role in the reconciliation process. At different points in the process, a member may appeal directly to the Institute president: 1) if conciliation, mediation or arbitration at the regional level fails or 2) if conciliation, mediation or
arbitration at the Institute level does not have a satisfactory outcome for the petitioner.11

A third application of the Institute president's role might be understood to personify the responsibility of the Institute Leadership Team. It is a corporate responsibility to see that due process procedures are in place in each region to protect the rights of members, that members are educated in the existence of these procedures, that each region's reconciliation board is elected and named in regional documents, and that regular reports about its activities are made by the board to the regional membership.

A fourth responsibility, falling principally to the Institute Leadership Team, is to see to appropriate updating and renewal of congregational due process structures. This requires education of leaders and members alike, theological research, consultation with experts, and training of Board members. Most fundamentally, there is a need for raising consciousness and updating congregational culture. Recomposition of policies in existence during a sister's formation. For the completion of aggiornamento or renewal of religious life envisioned by Vatican II, it is necessary that administrative processes move with awakened sensibilities. There is need to "wake up" from the internalized and unquestioned bygone norm of "blind obedience" that resists the consequences of recognizing the human rights of all the faithful, including religious women, as those are described in official church teaching.

Even though the language of rights is not featured prominently in Mercy Constitutions, all references to rights and due process procedures that are contained in the 1985 revised Code of Canon Law are a resource for Mercy members and leaders alike. One important role of any leader is to seek to resolve disputes in-house. Echoing Paul's instruction to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6, the church in the revised code summons all the faithful, including religious women to take prompt action to resolve grievances:

With due regard for justice, all the Christian faithful . . . are to strive earnestly to avoid lawsuits among the people of God as much as possible and to resolve them peacefully as soon as possible. At the very start or even at any point during the litigation, whenever some hope of a happy outcome is perceived, the judge is not to neglect to encourage and assist the parties to collaborate in working out an equitable solution to the controversy as well as indicating suitable ways of reaching such a solution, perhaps even employing the services of reputable persons for mediation (Canon 1446).

Here, "judges" can apply to Institute leadership, Sisters on a reconciliation board, and any member of the Mercy congregation who believes that peace making is essential to the work of justice. Justice to Mercy members is both a precedent and a consequence of doing justice for the poor. Working to protect the rights of economically poor women and the weakest members of society has a reciprocal effect on members. The rights of the disempowered are also the rights of the religious women who minister to them.

Conclusion: What Rights Do Religious Women Have?

A Mercy Sister has four sets of rights and assurances. She has human rights that are universal and shared with all human beings, civil rights connected with her nationality, ecclesial rights as a baptized person, and ecclesial rights as a vowed religious. Her rights are permanent, enduring personal claims, guarantees, and entitlements, not granted by permission of someone in authority, compromised through ignorance. They are not contingent on someone's favor or her success at keeping people from getting mad at her. They come with being born into the human family, being a citizen of a particular country, baptized in the Roman Catholic faith, and taking vows that consecrate her to God in the church.

Rights are not a gift granted by her parents, the state or the church, nor are they revocable as a disciplinary measure. Even if she commits a crime, these entitlements to fair treatment endure. The requirement to respect personal rights governs all representatives in the judicial system, embodied in regard for the rights of the criminally accused. Every institution, whether secular or religious, has a responsibility to acknowledge these basic human rights and provide structures to protect them. The teaching of
the church about rights of all the faithful mirrors the convictions of free and democratic societies represented in post-WWII national constitutions.

Some of these fundamental human rights arise in all four contexts—human, civil, ecclesial, and being vowed:

1) the right to be treated with dignity and respect as a human being, no matter a person's gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability, education, religion, marital relationship, or status as a combatant or civilian;

2) the right to live in safety, without threat of sexual exploitation, physical harm, or emotional violence;

3) the right to seek redress from government or persons in authority when one is wronged or suffers injustice of any kind;

4) the right to be heard and defend oneself against accusations so that both sides are taken into account before a judgment is made;

5) the right not to be punished with a penalty or deprived of a benefit without a fair and objective procedure that applies to everyone without discrimination;

6) the right to one's good reputation;

7) the right to make personal decisions without coercion or fear;

8) the privacy rights—freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and freedom to live in peace;

9) the right to consult a professional for legal advice and to appoint a representative.


Notes


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid., 1.


Colored Vocations
Women of Color in Religious Life

Maria Luisa Vera, R.S.M.

A Sketchy History

"Is the order Catholic enough to accept colored vocations?" The year was 1946, and a priest posted in a black parish in New York City posed the question to the Sisters of Mercy in a letter referenced by Regina Werntz, R.S.M., in Our Beloved Union.1 Whether or not to accept women not of the dominant culture into the community was an issue for Sisters of Mercy in the United States of America long before 1946. What were the admission policies of the Sisters of Mercy with regard to black or "colored women"? And what about other non-white women seeking admission into the Sisters of Mercy?

There are only three pages in Our Beloved Union that treat "Admission of Minorities into the Union." There is a letter from Mother M. Carmelita Hartman (Baltimore), the Union's first Mother General, to Mother M. Ignatius Green (St. Louis) in 1929. A young woman from Mobile, Alabama had been accepted into the community, but Mother Hartman decided she could not be allowed to remain because "the young woman was a Creole whose grandmother was black and everyone in Mobile knows it."2 As far as we know, the young woman did not stay in the community.

Mother Bernadine in 1953 acknowledged, "We realize that the admission of Negro and other dark-skinned girls into our Institute is a local problem. The feeling against them differs in different sections of our country."

Nine years later, the question reappeared in British Honduras. The principal of St. Catherine Academy in Belize asked what the policy was about "native girls from Belize being accepted into the novitiate."3 The General Council Minutes from Providence, Rhode Island of 30 April 1938, record, "The question was kept in abeyance for the time being."4 In 1946, the response of Mother Bernadine Purcell that should be given to the priest in New York was, "I see nothing for you to do but to tell Father O'Brien that we do not accept colored applicants."5 In 1951, the question came from Chicago and later from Cincinnati. Excerpts of letters, with responses from the mother generals to the provincials, suggest that policies about the admission of black women and dark-skinned women to Mercy were inconsistent.

While there was no official prohibition against the admission of such women, Mother Bernadine sent a letter to provincials and novice directors in 1953 that acknowledged, "We realize that the admission of Negro and other dark-skinned girls into our Institute is a local problem. The feeling against them differs in different sections of our country." She recognized the need to protect such women when they did apply. Thus, they should not be accepted as applicants for domestic work. Rather, candidates should be "above average in character and education, with a good social and religious background—one who could compare very favorably with the other Sisters, so that she would not have other disadvantages to add to those that might result from her color."6

It is difficult to know if the references in these policies applied only to black women, or rather more generally to "dark skinned" women, "non-white women;" or about anyone not of the dominant culture. There are some real gaps in the history of the Sisters of Mercy with regard to "admission of minorities" into the community.

Today, Sisters of Mercy of color are generally accepted into the community, and some of us are not sure how this happened. When was the question of color no longer a question? What made it possible for women like myself to be admitted to the Sisters of Mercy? Was it the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s? Was it the 1958 case ending segregation of schools, *Brown vs. Board of Education*? What happened in the period of the mid-1950s to early 1960s within the Mercy communities that brought about the change in practice if not policy? We need to do the work required to help us understand this part of our history in order to keep moving toward a future where we can “act in solidarity with one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.”

The Action Plan of 1999–2005 states, “We Sisters of Mercy admit, own and ask forgiveness for our racism as individuals and as Institute.” The statement continues, “Accordingly, we will identify and participate in existing programs and organizations within and outside the Institute that are designed to examine and challenge the attitudes and behaviors of cultural domination and racism within us and our ministries.”

It is hard for me to stay calm whenever I read these words. I find myself filled with questions and want to scream out, “How long will it take?” The statement continues: “We will facilitate members’ participation in cultures distinct from their own. We will provide for adequate preparation and follow-up in order to process the learning from these experiences.”

Out of the deep desire to take concrete steps to respond to the Action Plan, many Sisters of Mercy have participated in a variety of immersion experiences, solidarity retreats, workshops, conferences, and days of reflection, but there is still much more work waiting to be done.

What Has Been Done by Sisters of Mercy of Color

This is the story of a group of Sisters of Mercy committed to responding to our Institute Direction Statement and Action Plan from the perspective of women of color who are also Sisters of Mercy living in the United States of America. I am a part of this story. I am a Sister of Mercy of color. For nearly ten years, a group of twenty to thirty women have gathered annually. They call themselves and they are called in the Institute: “The Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color in the United States.”

The first formal gathering took place in 1996 after many informal conversations among smaller groups in various settings since the creation of the Institute in 1991. During the first two years, much time and energy was given to storytelling, sharing experiences and establishing some common ground. The third gathering in 1998 was key to the future or to the demise of the group. Before the group set out to define “who,” “what,” and “why,” there had to be consensus on one basic assumption: “No one has the right to define anyone else.” With facilitation by Sisters María Elena González and Jane Mary Hotstream, the group plunged into the work ahead. Clarity came to the group and kept it going during its short history.

Who gathers?
Sisters of Mercy of color living in the United States of America temporarily or permanently and who can identify with the statement of purpose.

Statement of Purpose: (1997)
Responding to our Institute Direction Statement, which impels us to embrace our multicultural and international reality, we the Sisters of Mercy in the United States of America are establishing a process to foster self-growth and liberation by focusing on issues of our races, our cultures, and our languages; by listening and speaking our truths with understanding; and by challenging and supporting each other in our truths.

Why Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color?
A clear distinction was made between coalitions and alliances. As Featherston says, “Coalitions are temporary, often single-issue covenants, formed with specific goals in mind, and as such need to be disbanded as soon as the objective is achieved. Alliances, on the other hand are a manifestation of our shared visions for a better society for all people.”


Before the end of the third gathering, each sister present was invited to indicate her ability to identify with the outcome of the first three years of deep prayer and reflection. The group was made painfully aware that the term "of color," has to be understood in terms of ethnic and racial heritage, and is not only a reference to the color of the person's skin. Most of those present were able to respond in the affirmative. Some, though, were not able to identify with the name and purpose of the group and indicated they would not continue on this particular journey.

It has not always been easy for some of the sisters to attend the annual gathering of the Alliance. Time, travel, expense, level of comfort or discomfort with the multiple questions from others about the Alliance were challenges and in some cases even obstacles to some of those desiring to be part of this group. In some cases, it was necessary to justify to other members of the community why one would gathering with other women of color: "Is this not self imposed segregation?" was a question often asked by women who desired to attend the gathering.

To support and to help the group grapple with some of these questions, we reflected often on a reading from Law's, The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community:

In order for an intercultural encounter to be truly "Pentecostal," the church must first value mono-cultural gatherings. For people of color, a mono-cultural gathering serves as a time to be in community, to gain self-esteem in the context of who they are. It is time to learn that they are blessed, that in their endurance they are resurrected into the new life of empowerment. It is time to embrace, and a time to speak. For whites (persons who are white), a mono-cultural gathering is a time to clarify and understand what it means to be white in this society. It serves as a time for reflection on how they have taken their power and privilege for granted. It is time to keep silence. It is a time for repentance, a time to accept the burden of the cross, a time to break down denials, and a time to cast away stones that built and supported the foundations of the racist system. There is a lot of resistance to this kind of movement because on the surface it looks like segregation again. However if we know the purposes of these gatherings, we will not allow permanent segregation to happen. Only after the powerful and the powerless have done their homework can they come together in a true "Pentecostal" encounter.11

Our journey from those small, informal conversations before 1996 up to now has been challenging, painful at times, exhausting yet exhilarating, and always blessed. Here are the stepping stones that mark the journey thus far, the themes that drew us together as the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color in the United States, and framed our gatherings from 1996 to 2004:

1996–In the Story in the Path–Through sharing our stories, we found solidarity and safety. We feel a call to continue the challenge of accountability to the multicultural initiative of the 1995 Chapter.

> 1997–Building Bridges for Our Journey–There was a call to share our identity and to name who we are as a group. With this clarity came the strength and sense of peace and awareness of the richness among us.

> 1998–Weaving the Threads of our Life into the Fabric Called Mercy–Reflecting on our statement of purpose once again, the group spoke of inviting others to journey with us in the exploration.

> 1999–Understanding Our Differences–Our sessions together brought us to the point of being able to say to one another that we will challenge racism in our communities and places of ministry; that we will continue to learn our own culture and share our learnings with our sisters; that we will learn more about diversity; and that we will challenge the Mercy community to look at all cultures of color in the USA.

> 2000–Walking the Path/Challenging our Racism–We affirmed the elements of the Institute Action Plan dealing with "multiculturalism and the elimination of racism" and deepened our commitment for action.

> 2001–Whispering Sage/Native American Spirituality - We took the initiative to interact with persons whose life experience is different from our own.

(continued on page 52)
Locating Ourselves in Theology and Ministry Where I Am

Elizabeth McMillan, R.S.M.

Introduction

You have asked me to “situate myself as a citizen of the world, as a Catholic theologian, and as a Sister of Mercy” in this time and place. I can’t help but share with you that my “existential situation” has been definitively shaped in part right here on Philadelphia’s Main Line, where I lived for seventeen and a half years before entering the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy.

This is more than a frivolous comment, as you theologians know. The past out of which we come, the circumstances of our birth and our subsequent experience shape us. They help to mold our worldview and the forms of our religious faith. The Irish philosopher, John Donahue, in Anam Cara invites the reader to imagine how different would have been her life, had she been born of the woman next door. That’s a provocative question in any time or place. But what is so challenging now, it seems to me, is that whoever we are, wherever we are, and wherever we come from, we have to keep reorienting ourselves—even if we never leave home geographically. Yes, our family background and personal history shape us, but so do the unexpected adventures and major challenges that life offers us.

In this postmodern world in which we find ourselves, there are so many messages coming at us that have the effect of “decentering” us, distracting—even disorienting—us. This apart from the geopolitical instability we are experiencing at the global level. You must feel, as I do, that we are living in world-changing times. Our Institute leadership is asking us to “reimagine and reconfigure” ourselves so as to be more present to each other as Sisters, and more present to the poor, sick, and ignorant who share this historic moment with us.

In this scenario, it has become urgent for us to take the time to reflect in the light of faith on what is it that is essential in life, and to share the fruits of our reflection with each other and with those to whom we are sent. The world needs theologians and spiritual guides as I feel it never has in my lifetime. In the first packet of materials for our theological formation as Mercys of the Americas, you included a text (a festschrift for Joan Chittister) by Sandra Schneiders that I use in my teologia fundamental class. You’ll remember that Schneiders asks,

What is the most important spiritual question of our time?" The question carries within it another that is likely to reveal something of the identity of the questioner: The other question: “Are we talking about the important or the urgent? International economic justice is enormously important, but a plate of food, today rather than tomorrow is an urgent concern for many in Sahara Africa, as is shelter in sub-zero climates for the homeless in the streets of the North. So, there’s the question, important for whom? For the east or the west, the north or the south? For whites or people of color? For women or men? For the human race, or for the entire cosmos? For the privileged or the poor? For believers or non-believers?

For Schneiders, as for us, I assume, the most important spiritual question is: whether God exists and what kind of God this is that we affirm.
Surely we could find people in the east and the west, the north and the south, whites and people of color, the privileged as well as the poor, believers and even non-believers who would name the "God question" as the most important spiritual question of our time. But as we theologians know, once we engage the conversation about what kind of God we affirm—even among us R.S.M.'s with a common religious heritage, the words that we speak and the resonance that they have in the minds and hearts of our own sisters can startle and even cause pain.

So here goes, my halting, even somewhat anxious, attempt to express where in God's world I find myself, as well as where I am within the Catholic Church and in the deep and broad sisterhood of Mercy.

**Where in the World Am I?**

As you know, I live in Honduras. Although Honduras is above the equator, it is located geopolitically in the part of the world called "the South." We are a community of eight Mercys and a novice. Two are doing rural ministry on the coast, and one runs a Mercy high school in La Ceiba, also on the coast. The other six of us live in two communities in San Pedro, the "industrial capital" of Honduras, so-called because of the industrial parks where young people—mostly women—sew clothing. These are the *maquilas* you have heard about, sweat shops, most of which are owned by United States and Korean companies that contract with clothing labels such as Gap. We Sisters of Mercy sponsor a home in San Pedro for twenty-three children orphaned by AIDS, and the Mercy associates run a women's cooperative, "Weavers of Dreams."

I've been in Honduras for five years. I was in Guatemala, where I had been since 1992 when I was asked by the R.S.M.'s to go to Honduras to accompany Sandra Hernandez and Masbely Del Cid in their discernment for final vows. My ministries are vocation and formation ministry, leadership of the Honduran Mercy community of nine, and teaching theology to novices and lay people. The courses for lay people are part of a one-year diploma program in theology developed by the Dominican friars. It draws a wonderful mix of people: wealthy lay people, some of whom are members of the several charismatic movements, young Spanish missionaries, simple folk (catechists, leaders in their parishes, delegates of the Word), junior Sisters. Each year I get to teach two modules in the program: fundamental theology and theological anthropology. I say, "I get to teach" because each class has been a wonderful experience. The program occasions a socioeconomic mix that is rare in Honduras.

Honduras, like all of the Latin American countries, is culturally Catholic. But as the Latin American Episcopal Conference acknowledged in 1992, the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America, there was a need to "re-evangelize" the continent. The people's understanding of their faith is very superficial—and often contaminated by superstition. What is remarkable about this generation of Honduran Catholics is a great hunger to know their faith better.

We Mercys who live and work in the south are within the Mercy world, of course, but ours is a world where our daily life is very different from yours. It is the grace of our common Mercy sisterhood that offers us spaces for sharing and spiritual resonance—and also for mutual challenge.

So Honduras is where I am in the world, not only geopolitically, but also morally. We Mercys who live and work in the south are within the Mercy world, of course, but ours is a world where our daily life is very different from yours. It is the grace of our common Mercy sisterhood that offers us spaces for sharing and spiritual resonance—and also for mutual challenge. This is a great grace, and I hope that
some of what I share will find resonance in you, offering one more opportunity for Mercy sharing.

Having situated myself in the "south," let me set the stage for this theological reflection on the vast and growing gap between the "developed" world of the north and the "developing world" of the south by citing the famous Columbian author; Gabriel García Márquez from his remarks upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 for his book, A Hundred Years of Solitude.

In our parish, people are shot to death daily. These almighty drug cartels are... trafficking in children for employment in the international sex trade. Women are exploited economically and sexually—even murdered with impunity.

Eleven years ago, the Chilean Pablo Neruda, one of the outstanding poets of our time, enlightened this audience with his word.

We have not had a moment's rest. A promethean president, entrenched in his palace, died fighting an entire army, alone [Salvador Allende]; and two suspicious airplane accidents, yet to be explained, cut short the life of another great-hearted president and that of a democratic soldier [Arbenz] who had revived the dignity of his people.

There have been 5 wars and 17 military coups; there emerged a diabolic dictator [Rios-Montt] who is carrying out, in God's name, the first Latin American ethnocide of our time. In the meantime, 20 million Latin American children died before the age of one—more than have been born in Europe since 1970. Those missing because of repression number nearly 120,000, which is as if no one could account for all the inhabitants of Uppsala. Numerous women arrested while pregnant have given birth in Argentine prisons, yet nobody knows the whereabouts and identity of their children, who were furtively adopted or sent to an orphanage by order of the military authorities. Because they tried to change this state of things, nearly 200,000 men and women have died throughout the continent, and over 100,000 have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. If this had happened in the United States, the corresponding figure would be that of 1,600,000 violent deaths in four years.

In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, nor famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death. An advantage that grows and quickens: Every year, there are 74 million more births than deaths, a sufficient number of new lives to multiply, each year, the population of New York sevenfold. Most of these births occur in the countries of least resources—including, of course, those of Latin America. Conversely, the most prosperous countries have succeeded in accumulating powers of destruction such as to annihilate, a hundred times over, not only all the human beings that have existed to this day but also the totality of all living beings that have ever drawn breath on this planet of misfortune.

It was twenty years ago that Garcia Márquez gave the world this shocking account of poverty and political turmoil in Latin America. His own country, Colombia, is still fighting a civil war that began forty years ago, now financed on both sides by drug money. Although there are no other declared (political) wars raging in Latin America at the moment, the levels of poverty and violence are desperately high. There are thousands of unregistered high power weapons in circulation. Gangsters and gangs of youth without hope roam the streets armed with weapons supplied by the drug cartels that operate out of Columbia. In our parish, people are shot to death daily. These almighty drug cartels are diversifying: now they are trafficking in children for employment in the international sex trade. Women are exploited economically and sexually—even murdered with impunity. Two weeks ago our Mercy associates organized a demonstration and letter writing campaign to call attention to the number of murders of women that had never been investigated.

And Garcia Márquez's observation about responding with life is shadowed by the cloud of AIDS. Honduras is reported to have 60 per cent of the 400,000 cases in Latin America. San Pedro
Sula, where we live, is known as the “AIDS capital of Central America.”

**My Perspective as a Catholic Theologian**

Let me reflect on my call to be a Catholic theologian in this world I have just described. Eleven years before García Márquez was awarded his Nobel Prize, the great Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, issued a theological call to liberating praxis with his magisterial work, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). As you know, this book provoked censorship from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the grounds that it was “Marxist.” It was seen as a theological justification for violent confrontation between the masses of poor and the ruling elite, with whom the hierarchy was identified sociopolitically. In time—after much patient, persevering dialog with Rome, this work and the subsequent elaboration of liberation theological discourse in Latin America as well as in other parts of the world have worked their way into the tradition of the Church.

One of the lasting contributions of liberation theology has been its questioning of the traditional distinction between dogmatic and pastoral theology. You have to wonder if this was not the real issue in Rome’s dispute with the liberation theologians, namely, the decentering of the locus of “truth” from doctrinal formulations to the hermeneutics of experience. Pastoral theology would no longer be relegated to the pastoral “application” of doctrinal truths arrived at in libraries and seminary classrooms. Theologizing would be done where the folk gather to reflect on the meaning of events in the light of the gospel. Pastoral praxis becomes the sacred space within which theological insight is born, brought to expression and refined. As you know, within this sacred space of pastoral experience was born the moral imperative, the “preferential option for the poor.”

This theological model also opened space for women to participate in the conversation. To cite the Brazilian theologian, Yvone Gebbara:

The theologizing of lower class women is expressed in gathering, in oral transmission, in the simple sharing of life . . . The practical knowledge of the important things in life is the soul of all theology.

Theological language gets expressed as prophetic denunciation of the present, prayer in a song of hope, prayer of lamentation, prayer in the form of counsel . . . It is as if with it we were trying to rescue the distance between discourse and reality, distance which formal and idealistic religious language has imposed upon us for a long time. It is as if we would be rediscovering now with more power, taking off from our own reality, the mystery of the incarnation of the divine in the human, not only because “we have been told” but because we experience it within the limits of our women’s experience.1

One of the lasting contributions of liberation theology has been its questioning of the traditional distinction between dogmatic and pastoral theology. You have to wonder if this was not the real issue in Rome’s dispute with the liberation theologians.

In Gutierrez’s meditation on the book of Job2 he reminds us that

> talk about God presupposes and, at the same time, leads to a living encounter with God in specific historical circumstances. It requires therefore that we discover the features of Christ in the sometimes disfigured faces of the poor of this world. This discovery will not be made apart from concrete gestures of solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are wretched, abandoned, and deprived.

Talk about God, theologizing, requires, for both Gebbara and Gutierrez, that we discover the features of Christ in the faces of the poor. Further, in this view, this discovery will only be possible through concrete gestures of solidarity with those who are wretched, abandoned, and deprived.

In Honduras, theological conversation always happens in the presence of the poor because most Hondurans are so poor and because there are so many
of them. In the workshops for catechists and delegates of the Word, the participants are an important part of the elaboration of theological discourse.

Gutierrez notes that "the problem of speaking correctly about God amid unjust suffering . . . is a challenge to every believer." Further, "this is especially true in situations in which the suffering reaches massive proportions . . . In such a situation, what content can be assigned to the "Abba Father!? That the Spirit cries within us (Gal 4:6)? How are we to proclaim a reign of love and justice . . .? How can we speak correctly about God amid unjust suffering? What criteria for correctness, for orthodoxy would be adequate? We go silent . . . But as theologians we cannot go silent. The God about whom it is impossible to speak adequately, especially when confronted with outrageous injustice, is the very one who reveals himself as Word. The impossible for us becomes necessary, morally obligatory."

I believe that on the one hand, faith cannot be delegated, but on the other, nothing is purely the faith of one person. By its very nature, faith leads to giving oneself to others, and to receiving faith from them.

Jon Sobrino, the Jesuit theologian from El Salvador, has an article that has some interesting clues for us theologians who have the task of keeping the theological conversation going in times like these. Sobrino acknowledges up front the difficulty of trying to articulate the faith of others, Rahner and Romero, when he can hardly articulate his own. But he makes the attempt. He introduces his reflection on the faith of these two iconic figures of the post-Vatican II Church with some preliminary comments about what he understands "faith" to be. "Generically, and within a Christian understanding, faith is a way of relating to reality, abandoning ourselves to it in total openness and hope, up to the end. Concretely, faith is trusting in the mystery of reality, what Jesus calls 'Abba,' and remaining open before this mystery which for Jesus is God."

Rahner was called to theologize in an intellectual climate that questioned the very possibility of faith. It was a climate dominated by the fruits of the Enlightenment, including a radical questioning of the cultural underpinnings of Christian Europe. He also experienced personally the brutality of the Second World War, and, as a theologian, he had to address its philosophical consequences: nihilistic existentialism. He lived, in the words of Sobrino, in a "whirlwind of secularization." Rahner has this to say about faith:

Inherited faith is always faith contested and contestable. But also I always experienced it as a question addressed to me: "Do you also want to walk away?" to which I could always respond: "Where will I go, Lord?"

Rahner affirms that the reason for his faith—when called upon to "give reasons"—is that he has never found anything better. The response is not meant to deflect the question, and certainly not to trivialize it. He means to say that it is faith that has the capacity to ground the human, to open us more to the "more" that we can be. He lived his life as mystical, ineffable, holy mystery.

Sobrino summarizes what he calls Rahner's "fundamental vision" thus: "in reality there is a mystery of goodness; to respect it and receive it is good for human beings." It is up to us human beings to "listen to the word" and to be attentive to the fact that "reality" wants to speak.

Oscar Romero's question was not Rahner's "How can we believe today?" nor Gutierrez's "How can we speak about God amidst unjust suffering?" Romero spoke fearlessly about what was for him the authentic meaning of faith in the face of its death-dealing counterfeits. For him, if faith was not expressed as justice and solidarity, it was not faith. Romero's vocation was to defend the faith not in the face of those who would deny the existence of God, but rather by denouncing the false gods of power and wealth. For this he gave his life, a martyr to the true faith.

Summing up the nature of Romero's faith witness, Sobrino writes:

I believe that on the one hand, faith cannot be delegated, but on the other, nothing is purely the faith
of one person. By its very nature, faith leads to giving oneself to others, and to receiving faith from them. That the faith of Monsefior Romero sustained the faith of others is clear. But I believe also that his faith was sustained by the faith of others. I believe there is something for us Sisters of Mercy here. It is the story of our past, each of us, counting on the others to sustain us in faith, as we have moved through moments of radical change in the structure and forms of our Mercy life. We face new challenges now, both in the structure and form of our Institute life, but also, I think, in discerning new ministries to the abandoned people of our time.

Sobrino’s witness to the nature of his own faith also speaks to me about the challenges I/we face as Sisters of Mercy today. He writes, “to have faith is to be in reality concretely, to be in the mystery without manipulating it or silencing it, allowing ourselves to be led by it wherever it leads us, with the conviction that in this mystery there is goodness, and that it is good that the mystery remain mystery . . . Unless there is openness to the mystery, there is no faith.”

Where in the Mercy World Am I?

I have already moved on to the third question you asked me to reflect on. It’s the question having to do with situating myself as a Sister of Mercy at this point in our common history. In my introduction, I noted that our Institute leadership was asking us to “reimagine and reconfigure” ourselves so as to be more present to each other as Sisters and more present to the poor, sick, and ignorant who share this moment of history with us.

The conversation is ostensibly about how to reposition ourselves in the future organizationally, geographically, and financially. Where will we live and with whom? Where will our leadership live? How will we shepherd our diminishing resources? These conversations, difficult as they are, inevitably have us talking about what is most important to us, and with whom are we able to share these values as Sisters of Mercy. This to me is a grace. I say this because I experience it as a call to renew our commitment to each other, not only the sisters I “grew up with,” as it were, but also those others out there in the Mercy world. I hear it also, as I have just said, as a call to refocus our energies and resources on the needs of the very poor.

We in the NYPAW communities have been talking for years, and in 2004, we will vote on forming an “area” with Buffalo, Erie, and Rochester. As for us in Central America, believe it or not, we have been talking about becoming a “region” since 1992. Within the context of the reconfiguration process, we are into serious conversation about becoming a formal region, or “area,” of the Institute. In the past couple of years we have been meeting more frequently to think through the implications of this move, especially around formation and ministry.

There are at present only twenty of us, counting two novices living in Guatemala, Panama, and Honduras. Of the twenty, eighteen are working with the neediest of the poor: rural ministries with campesinos, or the poor living in urban settings. In these conversations, we have not yet talked in concrete terms about sharing ministries, but if we became one area, the question of “our” ministries would have to come on to the agenda. This, the evaluation and possible reconfiguration of our ministries within newly-constituted areas, would enable us to be more present where we are most needed.

There are at present only twenty of us, counting two novices living in Guatemala, Panama and Honduras. Of the twenty, eighteen are working with the neediest of the poor: rural ministries with campesinos, or the poor living in urban settings . . . If we became one area . . . the evaluation and possible reconfiguration of our ministries within newly-constituted areas would enable us to be more present where we are most needed.
For the most part, I have been commenting on the liberation theologians' rationalization of the "option for the poor." This theological perspective is, I think, a "natural" for us Sisters of Mercy. It has become for me the only way to theologize. It may be just an accident of my personal history that I landed in Central America, but if it was, my mission to Guatemala and Honduras has turned into a genuine call. I made a reference earlier to the fact that theological conversation in Honduras always happens in the presence of the poor because they are so present. There are so many of them, and they are so poor. Let me share a little about my personal encounters with these poor Hondurans who are so present.

I cleaned the wound as best I could, and put a bigger bandage on it. She was stunned by my gesture. She kept repeating, "Nobody would do this for me."

Let me share one personal experience that really affected me. One Sunday morning as I was sweeping the patio in front of the house, I glanced up to say buenos dias to a woman who was passing. As she came closer, I could see that her thigh had been sliced open, and that she had stuck two band aids crosswise over the wound in an attempt to close it—without success, needless to say. I brought this scantily-clad woman—another prostitute—into the carport, cleaned the wound as best I could, and put a bigger bandage on it. She was stunned by my gesture. She kept repeating, "Nobody would do this for me." This is Ana, who has also become a regular at the door. What touched me so was her astonishment that I would do this for her. "Nobody," she said. "This is poverty!" I thought.

Let me close with one last quote that moves us back onto the global scene. It's a quote from Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez, a Honduran whose name circulates as a "popable." He is presently president of the Vatican Commission for the Forgiveness of the External Debt of the Poorest Countries. When asked recently by a BBC interviewer, "How is the struggle for forgiveness of the poor countries' external debt received in the Church?" he responded:

There are many members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who have never experienced what poverty means, who cannot imagine it. Even for those who are working on the external debt, those who look at poverty from an economic point of view, poverty is figures. Not for us. For us it is faces, concrete persons who are dying of hunger.

When the interviewer asked Rodriguez about the possibility of a Latin American pope, the cardinal, noting that more than half of the Catholics in the world are in Latin America, responded, "I believe it would be positive, because it would put more focus on this continent, which at this moment is not on the agenda of the globalized world." Not on the agenda. Not only out of the game. Out of the stadium. These marginated have become the excluded.

This is what the novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez meant when commenting to the Nobel Prize audience on his novel, A Hundred Years of Solitude. These masses of marginalized—excluded—people need the Sisters of Mercy. And we need them, it seems to me. When Ana said to me, "Nobody would do this for me," she caught me up short. I felt I was doing the normal thing in the
circumstances. Any one of you would have done the same. It's who we are and what we do, whatever our social background or professional formation has been. We are Sisters of Mercy, and our call is to the poor, the sick and the ignorant.

There are so many of them . . . And they are so poor . . .

Notes
1 Yvone Gebara, _La Teologia al Ritmo de la Mujer_.
5 Ibid., p. 192.
7 Sobrino, p. 198.
8 Sobrino, p. 139.

Colored Vocations
(continued from page 44)

- 2002–Diversity: Exploring the Deeper Questions–We grew in our understanding of "otherness."
- 2003–The Levels and Layers of Culture in Religious Communities–We committed to embracing complexity and to addressing internalized oppression. This same year, members of the Alliance were invited to participate in a day of reflection with members of the ILC. With guidance by staff from the National Multi-Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C., we all participated in processes of power analysis.
- 2004–Reclaiming Our Nobility–Beginning to probe our understanding of "internalized racism (oppression)" and its effects.
- 2005–(to be determined)

Eric Law poses a challenge when he says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," said the writer of Ecclesiastes (3:1). That is true. The question is, when is it the right time for whom to do what? This discernment is crucial and can be accomplished only by doing power analysis on ourselves as we relate to others based on the social, political, and economic context of the situation. “

Conclusion
The members of the alliance are clear that “we have not arrived, we just agreed to the journey.” Our Institute Action Plan, # 9, is waiting for a response. Will we, Sisters of Mercy, ever be able to “admit, own and ask forgiveness for our racism as individuals and as Institute?” “Is the order Catholic enough to accept colored vocations?” Can women of color really find a home in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas?

Notes
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 110.
4 Ibid. See note 23, p. 394.
5 Ibid., p. 111. See note 30, p. 394.
6 Ibid., p. 112. See note 33, p. 395.
12 Ibid.
Contributors

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Elizabeth McMillan, R.S.M., (Pittsburgh), teaches theology in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and is engaged in religious vocation and formation ministry. From 1992 to 1998, she taught at the seminary of the Missionary Fraternity of Mary in Guatemala City. Previously, she taught philosophy at Carlow College and Loyola University (Chicago), and was on the health care ethics staff of Catholic Health Association. From 1974 to 1981, she served as academic dean of Carlow College. She has a B.A. in Latin from Mount Mercy (now Carlow) College in Pittsburgh, an M.A. in philosophy from Marquette, and a Ph.D. from Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium.

Mary Anne Nolan, R.S.M., (Merion) holds an M.T.S. from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois, with a concentration in scripture. A spiritual director and adjunct professor at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Pennsylvania, Mary Anne is presently codirector of Mercy Spiritual Ministries, a mobile ministry engaging individuals and groups in prayer, reflection, and ongoing spiritual development. For nine years she was the full-time director of life development for the Merion Regional Community.

Mary Aquin O’Neill, R.S.M., (Baltimore) is a specialist in the areas of theological anthropology and feminist theory. Mary Aquin received her doctorate from Vanderbilt University and devoted twenty years to the ministry of higher education. She has taught at Mount Saint Agnes College, Vanderbilt University, Loyola College of Maryland, Salve Regina College, and the University of Notre Dame. Responding to the Direction Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Mary Aquin cofounded Mount Saint Agnes, a theological center for women, in 1992.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., (Burlingame), holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and a J.D. from Lincoln Law School in San Jose, California. She has been a professor of biblical studies in college, university, and seminary settings, and served in higher education administration. She is currently on faculty at Silicon Valley Law School in California, and is a founding member of the Restorative Justice Council on Sexual Misconduct in Faith Communities, which provides mediation services.

Maria Luisa Vera, R.S.M., (St. Louis) serves on the Institute Leadership Team. She has twenty years experience as a nurse in a variety of settings. She has nineteen years in congregational leadership, with ten in St. Louis Regional Community and nine at the Institute. She celebrates 62 years as a third-generation Mexican-American woman living in various parts of the U.S.

Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M., (Cincinnati) is a canon lawyer with a J.C.L. from St. Paul University in Ottawa. She is director of the tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as well as promotor of Justice and defender of the bond since 1990. She served for twenty years in secondary education—English, theology, journalism—and administration Her publications appear in canon law journals, Studia Canonica and Jusist, and in popular venues such as St. Anthony Messenger and Sisters Today. She is an editor of Jusist, and her contributions appear as chapters in the Canon Law Society of America’s Advisory Opinions and Roman Replies, and Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. She is author of Catholics, Marriage, and Divorce: Real People, Real Questions (2004).
Discussion Questions

(Crossen) When you consider your vocation story, what is the order in which you would arrange the values that express your religious commitment: love of God and relationship, focus on God’s merciful presence in the world through Jesus of Nazareth, participation in the mission of the church, sisterhood in the Mercy community, the desire to do the works of justice and mercy for the poor, doing whatever expresses love, compassion, and forgiveness?

(McAlpin) What image comes to mind when you hear the word “incorporation”? Do you find it better expresses your values than “formation”? Who do you think should have the final word on whether a Sister in first profession takes final vows?

(McMillan) What is your own response and self-description evolving from this central set of questions: Where in God’s world do I find myself? Where am I within the Catholic Church? Where am I in the deep and broad Sisterhood of Mercy? How are these reflections interrelated to your geographical movement and changes in ministry over the years?

(Nolan) Is gospel-based friendship based on mutuality different from relations based on “close family ties”? If conversation and close relationships are the foundation of Mercy community, what skills and behaviors are needed to day to deepen the bonds of connection among us as we reconfigure and expand our circle beyond our regions?

(O’Neill) “I think our very effort to be loyal daughters of the church has left us in great internal confusion.” How do you analyze the tensions between compliance with what ecclesial authorities say about the life of women religious, and what your own experience tells you should be the guidelines? What would be evidence for you that Mercy was providing an alternative to a “church-type,” top-down culture and model of governance?

(Rosenblatt) What is the reason that you would hesitate to use the Institute reconciliation process?
   - That it’s an Institute invention, not a regional community tradition?
   - Lack of information and education about its function?
   - It feels disloyal, not in the spirit of obedience and not the way we “do things in the family”?
   - Preferring to bear what feels unfair rather that calling attention to yourself and making an issue of it?
   - Fearing retaliation if you appeal a leader’s decision?

(Vera) From the description of the themes of yearly meetings from 1996 to 2004 of the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color in the United States, which one would you have wanted to participate in? What of this particular theme resonates with your experience even if you belong to the majority culture?

(Vondenberger) “Anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just themselves. . . We need to develop clear and readily used processes to defend the rights/responsibilities of all members.” Why does there need to be “protection” for the rights of members if we regard religious community as a family? What, in your experience of religious life, are the most important rights—i.e., what claims, entitlements, assurances, guarantees are most essential for your personal sense of peace and well-being? How do these personal claims correspond with your understanding of the common good and foundational values of religious life?
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MAST, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

MAST has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST’s executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Burlingame, CA, June 12–14, 2005.

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 Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Executive Director, Gwynedd Mercy College, Gwynedd Valley, PA 19437, (215) 641-5521, email: mariemicheled@aol.com

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.
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