Reflections on Constitutions and History of Women Religious Conference Papers

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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

The Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, founded in 1986, has consistently carried out its mission in its annual meetings and its thrice-annual publication of this journal. Its original goals were re-affirmed in a special twentieth anniversary meeting in 2006 coordinated by Marie Michele Donnelly, outgoing executive director. In the recent articulation of its mission, MAST has as its purpose, first to give voice to women of Mercy, promote studies and research in Scripture, theology and related fields, and to provide a forum for members to address current issues within their disciplines. Second, MAST’s mission is to act as a collective resource for the Institute in nurturing spiritual and religious life, theological and scriptural reflection, and the exploration and research of the Mercy charism as we evolve as a community of women in the Church. Third, MAST fosters the vocation of its members as theologians and scholars in service to the Church, animated by the charism of Mercy within the Institute for the sake of the Church.

There has been a remarkable consistency and persistence of MAST’s work for more than two decades. What is the source of this energy? It did not arise because members were voted upon and elected by their regional communities as official MAST representatives for a term of office. The energy did not arise because anyone in congregational leadership appointed certain Sisters to roles as MAST attendees to perform an ad hoc task. Nor did anyone in authority assign this or that Sister to MAST as her official ministry. No bishop founded MAST nor did any member of the Church hierarchy give it an official approbation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of MAST is its charismatic spirit and vitality. It arose as a grass-roots initiative, in a way similar to Catherine McAuley’s sense of urgency and timeliness that such a project as Baggot Street needed to be undertaken. MAST continues to exist because of a common, spontaneous desire, of warm invitation extended to each other over the years, an evident sense of meaning and importance about connecting one’s own work with MAST’s projects, and a loving respect and regard for each other’s presence, research and conversation. MAST has always valued the personal research of its members and called on the individual talents of Sisters to support the infrastructure and flow both of the journal and the annual meeting. Members are encouraged first to do their own work, coming as a call from their own mind and heart and research related to their professional life. This is what they then offer as a resource to Institute-related projects.

While much of Mercy discourse focuses on the importance of ministry to the poor, MAST embodies the same aspect of Catherine McAuley’s charism as our Mercy colleges and universities. MAST’s dynamic shows the power of the original charism bubbling up in service as educators of women and providers of instruction in the faith as integral to any other form of training. To educate the uneducated, at any level, there must be institutions to sustain that commitment. MAST, as a sisterhood of Mercy scholars and professionals in religion, theology, spirituality, Scripture and related fields, partakes of this same passion of our foundress for the instruction of women. Just as Catherine read and educated herself through consulting with the Church’s teachers, so do MAST women today. Those who give religious instruction in any venue must continuously educate themselves in the wisdom of the Church’s scriptural heritage and doctrinal tradition. MAST embodies the commitment of women religious, baptized and vowed, to think new thoughts for the Church, and shape its communion with believers according to the mind of Christ.

It is usual for MAST members to reflect on the Mercy Constitutions as an important aspect of our identity in the Church as women religious. MAST exercised theological initiative and intellectual leadership in 2004, dedicating two issues of The MAST Journal to Religious Life and Constitutions (vol. 14, no. 1 and 2). MAST writers produced sixteen articles on constitution-related themes, as a form of theological renewal and spiritual focus for the Institute Chapter of 2005.

Again at the MAST meeting of June 2007 held in Philadelphia, several members prepared reflections on the Mercy Constitutions under general theological themes of reconciliation (Marilyn Sunderman) prophetic witness (Katherine Doyle) and ecclesiology (Eloise Rosenblatt). Marilyn King, executive director of MAST, creatively introduced these reflections by a reference to Vatican II. She proposed that these reflections be received with the Church’s official invitation to the kind of dialogue that encourages diversity of viewpoint, honest discussion, kindly respect for each other, and dedication to the common good even when interpretations and opinions of it may fundamentally differ:

August, 2007
... it happens rather frequently and legitimately ... that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter ... They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good. (Lumen Gentium §43).

Marilyn Sunderman, a recognized Merton scholar, delightfully shared her latest study of Thomas Merton's affective life. "Thomas Merton and the Seasons of Solitude and Love" is based on his recently released diaries in which he recorded his deep friendship with a woman he met late in his life as a Trappist monk.

At the end of June, 2007, Notre Dame University in Indiana hosted a conference of the History of Women Religious, an event held once every three years. About 200 academics, archivists, and historians were in attendance, with about two-thirds of attendees women religious. A cadre of lay scholars in universities also dedicate their research to the history, founders, and ministries of women's congregations in Europe, Canada and the United States. Among them was Dr. Anne Hartfield, whose field is American history. She delivered the paper, "An Unconventional Group of Women: The Sisters of Mercy and the Struggle against Clerical Control in San Francisco 1854-1898." This study is probably a microcosm of Mercy ingenuity in many other ministerial settings.

Several Mercies were on the HWR program. Three gave presentations on the ministry of Sisters of Mercy in relation to minority populations, and the papers are included in this volume. Jolitta Konecny described the foundational work of Mother Austin Carroll to serve African Americans in the South, and the outgrowth of Austin's vision, still alive in contemporary Mercy ministries to the same population in Arkansas, Mississippi, and New Orleans. Her research, much done through conversation with Mercy Sisters with long memories, is a model for history writing that can easily be lost unless archival data is connected with what living Mercies remember and what Mercies are actually doing today.

Mary Paulinus Oakes surveyed Mercy Sisters' ministry to Native Americans and reviewed primary documents from the St. Louis archives concerning Mercy sponsorship of schools for Indians in the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Arkansas, and New Orleans. She notes the collaboration between Mercy Sisters and Katherine Drexel. Tribal peoples served included the Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaw, Seminole, Pottawatomie, and Sioux. Mary Paulinus's research involved not only unpublished diaries, but also interviews with Mercy Sisters who have Native American ancestry and heritage.

Maria Luisa Vera offered a challenging paper, "Is the Community Catholic Enough?" It questions, not whether women of color have vocations to religious life, but whether the Sisters of Mercy in the U.S. are prepared to receive them. Racism in our history, repented of, does not mean congregational awareness has been sufficiently raised. She describes the eleven-year history of the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color in the United States, and she reminds readers that the Institute's prior Chapter commitment to address racism has yet to be carried out.

Finally, Victoria Vondenberger offers a reflection on Immaculée Ilibagiza's Left to Tell, a harrowing story by a Tutsi woman who survived the Hutu-Tutsi massacres in Rwanda in 1994. It is also a story of spiritual transformation and reconciliation, despite the dehumanizing savagery through which she lived. The reflection carries forward the themes of the last issue of The MAST Journal 17.1, which treated violence and non-violence. Journal readers are invited to submit similar theological reflections of shorter length for publication, and Victoria's essay is a good model.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Editor, The MAST Journal
Reconciliation is a way of being that engages a person or group in an ongoing process of forgiving another or others' debts. A life of reconciliation is steeped in mercy. According to Megan McKenna,

If we are forgiven and accept the mercy of God, then we are required in justice to forgive all who walk with us. We can exclude no one from the experience of that forgiveness... whether for trivial slights or monstrous injustices.1

Reconciliation is a key theme in the Scriptures, which portray salvation history as God’s leading humankind back to Godself after the Fall, which disrupted the harmonious relationship of all of creation with God. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus, the Word of God, who combined the creator/creature relationship within himself and effected the new creation of global reconciliation through his life, death, and resurrection.

At the heart of Jesus’ public life is reconciliation. During these brief years, He spoke of the need to be reconciled to one’s neighbor before bringing one’s gift to the altar (Matt 5:23). Jesus told Peter that he should forgive others seventy times seven times (Matt 18:22). In one of his beatitudes, Jesus emphasizes the importance of engaging in peacemaking activity (Matt 5:23–24). In his parable about the prodigal son, he sketches a portrait of a contrite son and a father with a forgiving heart who provides a lavish feast to celebrate the return of his own flesh and blood who deeply offended him.

On Easter Sunday evening, the resurrected Jesus committed his ministry of reconciliation to his disciples (John 20:23). Thus, he commissioned all who follow him to continue his healing mission. Such peacemaking activity entails living a life that promotes harmony in our world. To engage in the ministry of reconciliation is to act as Jesus acts, i.e., to say repeatedly to those who offend you: I love you.

According to Robert Schreiter, the “perspective gained in the moment of reconciliation is the perspective God takes.”2 This is so since the reconciliation process entails consciously focusing, as God does, on the good of the other and acknowledging and affirming his or her worth. It involves understanding that another’s doing is never the totality of his or her being.

Essential to reconciliation is humility, i.e., viewing oneself as one really is, with strengths and weaknesses, pluses and minuses, virtues and faults. Through embracing one’s humanness, one is able to accept the humanity of others. Prayer is of utmost importance in this regard, for, in communicating with God, one develops a heart like unto God’s compassionate heart.

Reconciliation is a liberating act that sets the other(s) and oneself free. By forgiving another, one walks in the freedom of fellowship with God, for without interpersonal reconciliation, one cannot be reconciled with God. Bernard Cooke notes the ongoing need for reconciliation when he asserts:

No human group, no Christian community is without some friction and some alienation of individuals from individuals or groups from groups. One of the most common mistakes we make in communities is to hide such differences, to carry on as if they do not exist, to avoid admitting them lest they openly divide the community. Yet, these divisions can be healed only if they are recognized and dealt with.3

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According to Doris Gottemoeller, R.S.M., “members of a [religious] congregation are on a shared spiritual journey in which the efforts of each are meant to be a gift for the others.” Called to be signs of God’s loving forgiveness, Sisters of Mercy, who reconcile after offending or being offended by another, spread the gift of healing love in our world.

Various paragraphs of the Mercy Constitutions refer directly or indirectly to reconciliation. Paragraph 8 reads:

We strive to witness to mercy when we reverence the dignity of each person, create a spirit of hospitality, and pursue integrity of word and deed in our lives. Recognizing our own human weakness, we know that only through God’s mercy can we be merciful.

This statement attests to the truth that reconciliation requires humility and honesty in word and deed and that hospitality, which undergirds the reconciling process, entails reverencing the other’s dignity.

Paragraph 17 of the Constitutions reiterates the importance of reverencing each community member and sharing the truth in love when reconciliation is needed. It also stresses the importance of prayer in alleviating alienation when it occurs.

Paragraph 17 of the Constitutions states: “Rooted in God we are drawn into deeper bonds of friendship and reconciliation and are empowered for mission.” These words proclaim that God is the source and end of reconciliation and highlight the fact that, by participating in the mission of Mercy, one collaborates in Jesus’ saving ministry of reconciliation.

Paragraph 18 of the Constitutions affirms that

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 ... 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.

This excerpt reiterates the importance of reverencing each community member and sharing the truth in love when reconciliation is needed. It also stresses the importance of prayer in alleviating alienation when it occurs.

Finally, paragraph 26 of the Constitutions emphasizes the necessity of reconciliation with creation. It asserts: “We value the resources of the earth as gifts of God and use them in a spirit of stewardship.” By being attentive and trustworthy earth tenders, we incarnate the spirituality of reconciliation at the heart of Mercy life. Community members may have experience of reconciliation or lack of it in community life. However, Mercy community life is weakened by critical and judgmental attitudes toward one another. Practically speaking, when lack of reconciliation exists between individuals in community, in some cases, this alienation can border on violence. A spirit of reconciliation can be related to a member feeling she does or doesn’t belong, whether she has been deeply hurt by being ignored or not appreciated in community, and whether she feels she hasn’t been supported in ministry by leadership. Developing skills of conflict resolution and communication is essential, from a human perspective, to preserving an atmosphere of reconciliation.

From an ecclesial perspective, reconciliation is needed in Mercy’s relation to the institutional Church, since the Church is commonly seen as exclusionary and power/control ridden and driven. Since Catherine McAuley was involved in countering social injustices, isn’t it consistent with her charism when her daughters challenge injustices in the institutional Church?

Sacraments of Reconciliation—Eucharist

From this general discussion of reconciliation, let us turn our attention now to Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation as sacraments that celebrate God’s forgiving love of human beings. Baptism is the basic sacrament of reconciliation, since it is the first sacrament for the forgiveness of sin. Birth into reconciled life with God occurs through reception of this sacrament.
Following Baptism, the premier sacrament of reconciliation is the Eucharist. As Jean-Marie Tillard notes:

... the Eucharist is ... the sacramental presence and communication of the act which remits sins; as the remembrance of the expiation of the cross, it applies that expiation to those who celebrate the memorial by putting them in touch, through the bread and the cup of the meal, with the "once and for all" of the paschal event itself, and calls down on the whole world the infinite mercy of God.9

In the early Christian Church, sins committed after Baptism were forgiven especially by the Eucharist and also by personal and communal prayer, fasting, almsgiving, good works, and fraternal correction. In the third century, the Church Father Origen stressed the importance of the Eucharist as the place for the forgiveness of sins. In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas taught that even the most serious of sins can be forgiven through the Eucharist. The 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church asserts that: "Through the Eucharist those who live from the life of Christ are fed and strengthened. It is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins."10

Paragraph 12 of the Mercy Constitutions notes that "By participation in the Eucharist, daily if possible, we celebrate in Word and Sacrament the Passover of Jesus and are drawn into communion with all creation."11 This statement indicates that the Eucharist unites us with all of reality and, hence, is essential in the ongoing process of reconciliation when alienation exists in some dimension(s) of creation.

Some women, however, find a male-only clergy and disregard for inclusive language in Eucharistic ritual painful and untenable. Theologically speaking, the Eucharist is of pivotal importance in the Church’s sacramental system. Inasmuch as the Eucharist commemorates and renews Jesus’ redemptive, reconciliatory activity through the mystery of his death and resurrection, it is important that we as Mercy Sisters engage in ongoing deep and honest dialogue, on both theoretical and practical levels, about the importance and value of this sacrament in our shared lives.

The sacrament of Reconciliation, which heals the whole person, celebrates the gift of God’s forgiving, shalom-blessing mercy and calls Christians to live in peace. According to Megan McKenna,

To accept the forgiveness and mercy of God is to accept the demand that we live justly and mercifully, forgiving as God does, with no strings attached.12

In the sacrament of Reconciliation, through the celebration of God’s forgiveness of the penitent’s sins, the true minister Jesus draws the person into a renewed commitment to the way of the gospel. The ritual of this sacrament insists that one’s sins harm others in Christ’s Body and, thus, reception of the sacrament includes reconciliation with one’s sisters and brothers who have been hurt by one’s sins.

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Historically, the earliest type of this sacrament was canonical penance, which emerged as a Church practice in the third century and was a once-in-a-lifetime event. The baptized Christian who had committed a grave sin came before the community during the Eucharistic celebration and entered into the Order of Penitents. In a gesture of blessing, the community leader imposed hands on the penitent and assigned him or her a penance that lasted several years on average. During the penitent’s period of penance, she or he would stand or kneel at the door of the Church and request the prayers of the community gathered for Eucharist. When the period of public penance was completed, the penitent was restored to fullness of life in the community through participation in the Eucharist. Noteworthy is the fact that this reconciliation did not include the utterance of any words of absolution of the penitent’s sin.

By the sixth century, Irish monks developed the modality of confessing one’s sins to a lay “soul friend” from whom one received the assurance of God’s forgiveness. There were no words of absolu-
tion involved in this ritual. Instead, there were prayers of praise and thanksgiving for God’s mercy and goodness.

The reconciliation experience that the Irish monks introduced gradually developed into sacramental confession of a penitent to a priest who pronounced words of absolution. So successful was private confession that the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 CE proclaimed that every Christian who reached the age of discernment had to make private confession once a year.

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In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent decreed that, at least once a year, Christians must confess their mortal sins. By 1903, frequent confession entered the scene as a result of Pope Pius X’s encouragement that Christians receive communion frequently. Christians presumed the necessity of going to confession before receiving communion. Since the number of Christians frequenting the sacrament of Reconciliation declined dramatically in the 1960s and 70s, it became obvious that the faithful no longer believed it was required.

The 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church repeats the Council of Trent’s decree regarding the necessity of annual reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Catechism enunciates other means of obtaining the forgiveness of sins, including “efforts at reconciliation with one’s neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one’s neighbor, the intercession of saints and the practice of charity.”

Regarding devotional confession of venial sins, the new Catechism asserts that it

... helps us form our conscience and fight against evil tendencies; it lets us be healed by Christ and

progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as He is merciful.14

Given this brief history of the sacrament of Reconciliation, let us note that paragraph 12 of the Mercy Constitutions states: “To foster that communion and to express our need for conversion, we frequently avail ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation.”15 Some Sisters disagree with the necessity of frequenting this sacrament. This view reflects the teaching in the Church tradition that there are various sacramental means whereby sins can be forgiven.

This being said, let us consider the following new Catechism excerpt regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.16

Despite the lack of gender inclusive language in this quote, it, nevertheless, positively points out that the experience of this sacrament can contribute considerably to the deepening of one’s commitment to radical gospel living.

A Modern Story of Reconciliation

To conclude this essay, let us reflect upon a story narrated by Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch author who survived the Holocaust. After being released from the Ravensbruck camp where her sister Betsie died, Corrie lectured widely on the need to forgive enemies. One evening after her presentation, Corrie was greeted by a man who had been an SS guard at the shower room in the processing center at the camp where she and her sister were imprisoned. The former guard told Corrie how grateful he was to hear her message that God had washed his sins away. Immediately, Corrie flashed back to a room full of mocking men, heaps of clothing and her sister’s pain-ridden pale face. Then, as the man attempted to shake her hand, Corrie found herself frozen, unable to respond to his gesture. As angry, vengeful thoughts raced through her mind, she saw the sin of them. She prayed to Jesus to help her
Corrie's narrative reminds us that it is only through God's grace that reconciliation can take place.

forgive this former enemy. Feeling not the slightest spark of charity for this former SS guard, Corrie asked Jesus for His forgiveness, since she was unable to forgive the man. When she finally took the man’s hand, she was amazed at the current of love that passed through her hand to his. And so Corrie Ten Boom discovered that it is on God's mercy and love rather than our forgiveness that the world's healing hinges.

Corrie's narrative reminds us that it is only through God's grace that reconciliation can take place. As already indicated in this essay, reconciliatory activities are multiple. No matter what are our entryways into the peacemaking process, it is important to remember that God's way of being and acting is forgiveness and mercy and that God calls and graces us to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Our foundress, Catherine McAuley, is a true model of what it means to exercise this ambassadorship. Reflecting on Catherine as reconciler, Angela Bolster writes:

Forgiveness and reconciliation were interwoven strands of Catherine's promotion of charity in her communities. Without this virtue, she cautioned her Sisters that their works would be “froth before God, devoid of all merit.” Indeed, her success in guiding her Sisters along this path towards the perfection of charity seems to have amazed her, given the following extract from her letter of December 1839 to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore: “One thing is remarkable: no breach of charity ever occurred among us. The sun never, I believe, went down on our anger. This is our only boast.”

As Catherine's daughters, we are called by God to commit ourselves to the ministry of forgiveness and healing love and to do so to the best of our ability in a world that hungers and thirsts for Mercy.

Notes
1 Megan McKenna, Rites of Justice: The Sacraments and Liturgy as Ethical Imperatives (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 144.
5 Constitutions (Silver Spring, MD: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1992), 6.
6 Constitutions, 8.
7 Constitutions, 8.
8 Constitutions, 10.
10 Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York: Doubleday, 1995), #1436, 400.
11 Constitutions, 7.
12 McKenna, Rites of Justice, 143.
13 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1434, 400.
14 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1458, 406.
15 Constitutions, 7.
16 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1469, 410.
Reflecting on the Prophetic Call of Consecrated Mercy Life

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

"Where one is present, all are present." This insight is in the forefront of my thoughts as I begin to reflect on what the prophetic call means for consecrated Mercy life. I am journeying with another circle of Mercy women who are probing their lives in Mercy through exploration of the pioneer women of the West-Midwest. They are listening for paradigms of practice and for the treasure of enduring wisdom that made it possible for our pioneer Sisters to overcome the cultural, economic, spiritual and physical hardships of their lives. They visit our heritage and roots not to glory in the past but to find enduring supports for our present and future. I think that is what we are about as Institute in multiple modes. We are struggling to understand and claim our Mercy identity at this moment of history, struggling to live into what we already are and, more importantly, what God calls us to be.

My reflection is focused on the prophetic dimensions of Mercy life. My observations will address three areas: (1) the understanding of the prophetic dimension of consecrated life underpinning my reflections; (2) five key themes about the prophetic aspect of community life and ministry; (3) challenges and questions.

What Is meant by “Prophetic Dimension of Mercy Life?”

Before anyone can analyze how the Constitutions or our lives are prophetic, a working understanding of what is meant is needed. Not all members of our Institute hold the same understanding; truly, some may reject that vision of Mercy life altogether. In *Vita Consecrata*, the Church speaks of the prophetic nature of consecrated life as "resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life.”¹ In a powerful portrait of the prophet, the church says:

True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with [God], from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God. And, having heard [God's] word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin.

Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's kingdom."²

This understanding of the prophetic life implicitly demands contemplation, solidarity, and liminality. The authenticity of the prophetic witness depends upon two factors: faithful attentiveness to the spirit and living what one proclaims. The implications in claiming for Mercy identity a prophetic dimension are more clearly illuminated by examining elements of prophetic call in the Scriptures. There we are able
to ascertain that the call to prophetic life is God initiated. The prophet is often reluctant to take on the mantle of prophetic witness, knows that it leads to suffering and is marked with a sense of unworthiness. They are only empowered to embrace their call because of their passion to follow God’s desire.

In her reflections on religious life in a time of exile, Nancy Schreck, OS.F., has identified seven characteristics of the prophetic lifestyle drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures:

1. Prophets challenge infidelity to the covenant way.
2. Prophets speak of God’s love and desire.
3. Prophets speak from God’s point of view.
4. Prophets are a voice that God lends to the voiceless.
5. Prophets mark a crossing point between God and humankind.
6. Prophecy is rooted in contemplation.
7. Prophets are directed to the contemporary scene; they focus on behaviors and motivation.

Feeling the pain of God’s people, seeing the failures to live our words, aching to be what God longs for us to be are part and parcel of the prophet’s reality. Prophets speak from the depths of their own brokenness and struggle, not a sense of having the right answers.

In the context of our reflections, then, the prophetic dimension of Mercy life encompasses not just what we do, how we speak out against the injustices of our time, but who we are. It is the totality of our life that is prophetic.

Prophetic Dimension of Mercy Life

Paragraphs 1–3 of the Constitution presents a difficulty in articulating a shared understanding of the prophetic dimensions of Mercy life. Where is the primary emphasis? The following Jesus Christ or our call to service? For some members, prophetic identity is rooted in a radical life response to the holy that proclaims God is the center and we are in communion with all our brothers and sisters. For others, prophetic identity is more clearly identified with our advocacy and actions on behalf of those oppressed and marginalized.

For the latter, concerns about global awareness, use of influence, confrontation with unjust systems in our world, church, and Mercy life, standing with those who are poor are elements of our life that rouse passionate responses and an urgency to do more, extend farther, stand at the margins. For those who take the whole of Mercy life as the prophetic element, anguish is expressed over the vitality of our lived witness to the reality of community, to the balance of life, to our lived expression of simplicity, to the fostering of a sustaining center from which our service and advocacy flow. Action on behalf of the oppressed is not seen as secondary but, rather, as the natural fruit of a fully prophetic life.

These two complementary elements of prophetic reality—community life and ministry—are sometimes in tension with each other as we live them out. There can be an inner struggle to live the prophetic witness we feel called to live. I would like to reflect now on five areas of prophetic community life.

1. Placing the Various Dimensions of Our Life in a Life-Giving Harmony and Balance

The activities of ministry and service can be in tension with a call to attend to God in contemplation. At the same time, our life in ministry flows from our prayer and contemplation leads to action. Constitutions § 10–17 express these values of both hunger for contemplative presence and our passion to be available to serve.

The struggle for the right ordering of the multiple dimensions of Mercy life, is integral to our prophetic call. If prophetic witness requires one to speak from God’s point of view and finds its roots in contemplation, then the absence of contemplative centering seriously jeopardizes the prophetic
power of our actions. The absence of such contemplative grounding can leave one vulnerable to illusion, discouragement, and an ownership or personal claim on both message and results.

2. Constitution § 18-19 Can Invoke Different Understanding of Community Life

Ideals of community life can include a commitment to conversion of life, as well as the ultimate ideal of communion and oneness toward which we strive. However, while some Sisters can experience community as a source of strength, support, and empowerment for Mercy life, others can experience current community modes as draining our energies. Community is also a witness as a prophetic sign to an individualistic, sometimes violent society. Community can be a sign to society because its members, in the spirit of Catherine McAuley, strive to live in a spirit of nonviolence, union, and charity.

If the prophetic dimension of consecrated life is found primarily in our service to others, then the issues of community might not have to be confronted. If, however, it is the shape of our life that constitutes its prophetic element, then these tensions and challenges must be addressed.

Community can be understood through a focus on its inner quality, as well as a focus on its outer effect—what community means for the world, or its prophetic potential. Mercy community life has been open to the cultural impact of individualism, judgment, inability to embrace differences and a weariness born of overwork and diminished energy. At the same time, community life has the potential to affirm that communion among us is a witness to our common humanity. Timothy Radcliff, O.P., speaks of that potential asking: "How can we religious be a sign of humanity’s common home in God? Being a sign of humanity’s common home in God requires of us that we seek the words that are large enough for us to live in peace with strangers."

The ideal of being a witness and sign to the world is intertwined with community and its effect on our living of the vows. Vows are a form of public witness in the world, an expression of countercultural identity. However, an independent lifestyle and the effect of the individualism of the culture on us can compromise the living of vowed life in community and its capacity to be a witness in society. From the standpoint of prophetic witness, the clarity of our witness can be diminished by our embrace of professionalism, fiscal concerns, individualism, and failure "to call each other forth so as to avoid confrontation."

If the prophetic dimension of consecrated life is found primarily in our service to others, then the issues of community might not have to be confronted. If, however, it is the shape of our life that constitutes its prophetic element, then these tensions and challenges must be addressed. The ideal of Mercy communion, as a prophetic sign, challenges our human weaknesses, especially when there is a gap between our words that celebrate the richness of community and our actions.

3. Naming Ministerial Priorities

It is inevitable that society's "busy-ness" has an impact on our ministries. Members sometimes voice concern that our sponsored works have become a corporate business where Sisters end up in the boardroom, but have few actual leadership roles. A common question is whether we take on service as a ministry or a job to earn money.

Traditionally, Sisters of Mercy have served the needy, yet we have also served persons other than those who are economically poor. Our ministry includes those who are poor in spirit or in education who belong to the middle class. When Sisters are working in individual ministries, however, it is not always evident that there is a clear corporate mission. The multiplicity of forms of service can impact the sense others have of our community identity.

From the standpoint of understanding the prophetic dimension of Mercy life, these five themes are vital concerns. If prophets give voice to the voiceless and challenge infidelity to the covenant way, then
our solidarity and presence with the voiceless and oppressed is a crucial element needed for authenticity. Direct service provides the immediacy and intimate knowledge of the needs and reality of oppression, but indirect service often provides the venue for influence. The pressure to take a position out of a need for a "job" rather than from a "call" challenges us all to evaluate how such a dynamic might hinder prophetic witness.

Our fourth vow of service has important implications for Mercy. How does prophetic witness influence our ministerial choices? What is the motivation that prompts our choice of how to be of service?

4. Living in a Countercultural Manner

The vow of poverty challenges the world's impulse toward materialism and consumerism. Living simply is a challenge to a cluttered, consumer society. While we recognize the witness value of our lives, there can also creep in a spirit of entitlement, an upper-middle-class lifestyle. There is still among us a lack of a common understanding of what constitutes simplicity of life and a disparity in our practices relating to gifts and possessions. Do we share with others only out of our surplus?

While our lives witness to the sufficiency of God and confidence in God's providential care, we also feel concerns about how consumerism and materialism have influenced our life styles. Living in a countercultural manner also touches the interrelationship between voluntary poverty and care for Earth. The sacredness of creation inspires us to limit our use of resources for the sake of those with less, a form of ecological asceticism. If a prophet challenges infidelity, speaks to behaviors and motivation of the times, then we must re-access our commitment to "speak from God's point of view" in this area.

5. The Hardships and Difficulty of Faithfulness to a Prophetic Call and Mercy's Relationship with and within the Church.

As the women of Mercy struggle with the institutional Church, the experience of hurt, diminishment, anger, and exclusion converge to create an emotionally charged context for reflection. For some, the institutional church prevents us from helping others attain full dignity. How is it possible to keep a close relationship with the Church?

Our experience of the institutional church can have a negative impact on our liturgical life. The estrangement from Eucharist and other aspects of sacramental life is of grave concern to Mercies who see Eucharist as the center of our life. Eucharist, as the center of our life, has been the grounding for communion with each other in community. Is there a common understanding of Eucharist and sacramental life? Despite these difficulties, theologies of Eucharist can expand outside the actual liturgical moment to include a sense of God's daily nurturing of us through the faith of other people, and through the outpouring of God through all creation.

Perhaps there is no other venue that asks as much of us as our relationship with the Church. It is a relationship of blessing and woundedness.

Perhaps there is no other venue that asks as much of us as our relationship with the Church. It is a relationship of blessing and woundedness. As Sisters of Mercy, we have committed ourselves to work for the equality of women in church and society. That commitment leaves us raw when we encounter experiences of sexism, abuse of authority or role, insensitivity to the reality of women, or exclusion within ecclesial venues. The desire to withdraw in the face of such pain is natural and tempting.

For the prophet, standing in that pain is their lot. The prophet witnesses to a different vision, sees with God's eyes out of contemplative listening. Faithfulness to standing in the gap is what gives authenticity and immediacy to the prophet's proclamation. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., remarks:

I suspect that the polarization within the Catholic Church today is partly rooted in the pain of living with those who are different from ourselves. The Church has always been fractured by battles, from the time that Peter and Paul slogged it out in Antioch. What is new is our difficulty in reaching across these divisions in a common language. We cannot find words to share communion with those who are different, even within the Church. Now, in
When one reflects on the role of the prophet through time, one is struck with the realization that the prophet speaks to what is, to what God's desire is. The prophet does not offer a solution or a definitive description of the future.

If consecrated life is a charism given to the church to call itself to be faithful to its most authentic self, then it follows that it most needs its prophetic witness in this troubled time. The prophets embraced the pain of their task. They simply did what God asked of them. They had no control over anyone's response to their message.

When one reflects on the role of the prophet through time, one is struck with the realization that the prophet speaks to what is, to what God's desire is. The prophet does not offer a solution or a definitive description of the future. In the absence of a commitment to dialogue, theological differences, divergent world views, differing expectations of Mercy life grow in their potential for divisiveness. Gaps become fissures over which there are no bridges.

Questions Yet to Be Explored
Mercies I speak with have a longing to be faithful, to live with integrity, and to be signs of God's mercy to the world. I am aware that we are in a time of wrestling, wrestling with the meaning of our lives, with common understandings, and with the gaps between our ideal and our lived experience. My sense is that Sisters desire, with honesty and willingness, to ask hard questions. For our future conversations on our Constitutions, I would like to offer five questions for further probing and conversation:

1. Do we as Sisters of Mercy believe that our consecrated life is a prophetic witness to the world in and of itself?
2. How do we live in communion and union with our Church? In its worship, its mission, its brokenness? How is such communion a prophetic witness to God alive among us?
3. What are the negative forces of contemporary society that are confronted by our fully lived life of Mercy?
4. What would be lost to the church and world if we do not discover how to more fully witness to the bonds of communion and union among us?
5. What signs of the times are asking us to revisit the quality of our Mercy life together?

As I bring this reflection to a close, I am conscious that you are listening to one person's thoughts. What I have shared is limited and incomplete but it is the truth of what I see at this moment in time. Each of us must hold it in relationship to our own experience and name what affirms us, what discomforts us and what asks of us the courage to change and change again.

Notes
1 Vita Consecrata, § 84.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
"Church" in the Opening of Mercy Constitutions

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

The first paragraph of our Mercy Constitutions has a phrase that may evoke some feelings about our connection with the institutional Church. In a word, these seem to be difficult feelings, rather than comforting feelings to process. It is, "She founded the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy to involve women as religious in the mission of the church in the world." This phrase identifies Mercy's existence and work with the mission of the official Church.

The overarching question I want to propose for reflection is whether a consistent—and deserved—critique of the Church's patriarchy and authoritarianism is, in our experience, changing the Church for the better, or whether this decades-long sense of alienation is actually eroding our own spirit as women religious, both individually and collectively.

Do we need to find a better strategy for fostering systemic change in the Church, as our Direction Statement challenges us when faced with evidence of injustice? Has the long-standing script of grievances against the Church been a Band-Aid, but not the source of the cure?

Difficult, Rather than Comforting, Feelings

The question of Mercy women's relation to the institutional Church has been unsettled and unsettling for several decades. Experienced Sisters lost their jobs in parishes when a new pastor entered the scene. They got evicted from convents. They had terms of their contracts trampled on, and found no way to seek redress or review of one-man decisions. They were not paid just salaries, nor were they provided retirement benefits for their decades of service in church-sponsored service. As a consequence, it is not unusual for women religious to do their ministry in settings that are not defined by a contract with a diocese or parish.

Over the years, they read a series of Vatican documents that laid out the principles of religious life they should be following—generally written by men—that seemed to blame them in some way for the vocation shortages suffered by the Church. If only faithful women had been even more faithful and observant. In light of the last eight years of attention focused on the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy, women religious rightly feel that blame for vocation shortages may not lie with faults in their own observance. The wearisome burden of the revelations of clergy abuse and the high-profile litigation in dioceses eclipses the deep loyalty of women religious to their ministry and their communities, but further distances them from a sense of ease with the institutional church.

Thus, there has not been good feeling between religious women and the entity understood as "the institutional church," which is associated with the male clerical governance structure of pope, Vatican secretariats and dicasteries, cardinals, bishops and pastors. This is not merely a tension for Sisters of Mercy, but for women in reli-

Is our critique of the Church’s patriarchy and authoritarianism changing the Church for the better, or is this decades-long sense of alienation actually eroding our own spirit as women religious, both individually and collectively?
gious life generally, as well as for laywomen ministering in church-sponsored works. For some, the ultimate form of patriarchal sexism in the Catholic Church is its insistence that ordination is reserved only for men. According to another analysis, "no women priests" is simply one of many manifestations of the Church's patriarchy and sexism. "Kyriarchy" as Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza terms patriarchy in the Church, reflects society's long-standing preservation of male superiority through subordination of women. The Church's expression of patriarchy denies women meaningful roles in decision-making about doctrine, pastoral governance, sacramental ministry, and financial management. But this is also true of women's subordination in many family structures, in the workplace, in political life, and in ownership and management of property.

What is the way back to reclaiming a more comprehensive vision of Church? Can the Sisters of Mercy take up a different conversation, one that affirms the congregation as an ecclesial, pontifical institute in a way that is liberating, fruitful, and harmonious with our enduring values?

It is perhaps a modest observation that there is erosion of trust that the institutional Church is a reliable friend and supporter of women in religious life. In such a climate of alienation, how can women in religious life redefine and reclaim a different relationship to "Church"? Are resources for redefinition available from Catholic tradition? Church scholars would be the first to offer somewhat ironic comfort that this is not the first moment in ecclesiastical history when the faithful felt betrayed by church leadership, disillusioned with its manifestation of sin and human weakness, scandalized by the conduct of its clergy, and ignored as laity capable of actively contributing to the spiritual welfare of the community of faith.

After a long period of unspoken resistance, a stand-off, a cold war with the institutional Church even, is it fruitful to retain the tried-and-true script that the Church is patriarchal, parental, authoritarian, and repressive of women? Is it the most desirable result that some Mercies retreat into a safe-zone of integrity, regarding the sisterhood as effectively a separate entity, a church within a church?

What is the way back to reclaiming a more comprehensive vision of Church? Can the Sisters of Mercy take up a different conversation, one that affirms the congregation as an ecclesial, pontifical institute in a way that is liberating, fruitful, and harmonious with our enduring values, kindly forms of caring for each other, those in need, and our earth? In some ways, the present organizational tasks of re-aligning regional communities into larger groups distracts from this essential question. Just as there is external reconfiguration into geographical areas, it would be fruitful to attend to the internal reconfiguration of our ideas and feelings about the Church.

The urgency of this intellectual and spiritual task about our relationship with the Church was already acknowledged as an issue twenty years ago. Patricia McCann, R.S.M., expressed her concern:

[A] central, underlying issue is our relationship with the Church... If our life in community cannot express this feminist reality because of patriarchal authoritarian structures in the church, religious women may move further and further away from formal identification with those structures.

One question for readers of the first paragraph of the Mercy Constitutions, ratified in 1991, is whether Sisters of Mercy have moved from this deteriorated sense of relationship with the Church, or whether this sense of alienation fairly describes an emotional distance from Church structures that is now the norm. Where we are today? Has the prophecy of Patricia McCann sadly been fulfilled? Is this a desirable result of the way our feelings about the Church have been handled over the last several decades?

Angela Davis, professor at the University of Santa Cruz was commencement speaker at Grinnell College. She spoke of education as the practice of freedom because education provides the intellectual
tools a person uses in getting behind words and facts to identify hidden ways of thinking. This searching examination of others' hidden ways of thinking allows the educated person to suggest alternative frameworks, and new human relations "freed from persisting hierarchies":

I hope that you will treasure the approaches and ways of thinking that you have learned more than the facts you have accumulated. For you will never discover a scarcity of facts, and these facts will be presented in such a way as to veil the ways of thinking embedded in them. And to reveal these hidden ways of thinking, to suggest alternative frameworks, to image better ways of living in evolving worlds, to imagine new human relations that are freed from persisting hierarchies, whether they be racial or sexual or geopolitical—yes, I think this is the work of educated beings. I might then ask you to think about education as the practice of freedom.

I wonder if such a direction would help us extricate ourselves from the repetitive script and clichéd criticism that the Church is patriarchal and authoritarian. Extrication is desirable—not because the assessment is false—but because of the script's effect on eroding our own spirit, thought, emotion, and imagination about the Church and our own place in it.

Two Models of Church in Vatican II Documents

One limitation that can interfere with our power to imagine the Church differently is, ironically, our very lifestyle. The relation of women religious to the Church has tended to focus only on the fact that we are vowed women, one of the "states of life" in traditional theology. We are not single persons in the world and not married. We are members of a religious community. Nevertheless, we find ourselves assigned an ambiguous place in the hierarchy of persons in the Church composed of bishops, priests, and laity. Where are religious? Singled out as an exceptional category (Lumen Gentium §§ 43-46), which can be read as both within and outside the hierarchy.

In this document, the Church is described as a pilgrim in the midst of an unbelieving world that is passing away, which needs the witness of Christ's truth (LG §§ 8, 48). Women religious can feel out of alignment with this articulation of the church's role in the world, because it implies a separatist relationship, or one distanced from other persons. At the same time this sense of place in the Church as "higher" or "separate" has been a cause of embarrassment in relation to laity. Women religious, resisting an elitist position, have tended to adopt both an egalitarian view of Church, and consequently, a different sense of the spirituality of holiness for religious. Much of this revision is not yet articulated.

At the same time, the spirituality of religious life is sometimes described as "prophetic." In sociological terms, the description "liminal" refers to groups at the edge of where the majority locate themselves. Some theologians summon women religious to be "liminal" and reclaim their place at the cutting edge of society, rather than allow themselves to become integrated within it and compromised by its gravitational cultural forces. Such a theology is consistent with Lumen Gentium's vision of the Church as an exile, separate from the world. As noted, this stance requires women religious to wrestle, for example, with placing priority on a sense of solidarity with all women or to put the emphasis on defining their unique, distinct relation to women as receivers of their ministry.

The document that gives an alternative, socially inclusive view of the church, Gaudium et Spes (Church in the Modern World), describes the people of God as the Church, and does not treat the
“states in life” as *Lumen Gentium* does. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, all men and women of faith are on a pilgrimage; all share the sufferings and joys of humanity; all are called to follow Christ; all have a mission to bring the good news to the world and live out the healing and teaching mission of Christ (*GS* §§ 1, 4). There is something attractive and democratic about *Gaudium et Spes*. As for where Mercies tend to focus today, we find here a baptismal grounding and a common mission with all the people of God as a form of “solidarity.”

In brief, *Lumen Gentium* describes our special commitment and role in the Church, and *Gaudium et Spes* our commonality and identification with the baptized. The tension in the spirituality of religious life, and in striking the path for ministerial priorities, involves clarifying what notion of “Church” is governing our reflection, and what notion of our “place” in the Church is governing our ministerial purpose.

As resource for determining what image of “Church” is affecting our conversation, it may be worth retrieving the classic distinctions proposed by Avery Dulles in his 1978 volume *Models of the Church*. These were Church as institution, as mystical covenant, as sacrament, as herald, and as servant. When he revised the work in 1991, he added to the list the church as community of disciples. 3

A Re-Hewn Christology for Women

The theme of Church as community of disciples is an attractive alternative to the Church as hierarchical institution. It leads a believer to imagine relationships in the Body of Christ as egalitarian, as the disciples among themselves as followers of Jesus. However, it still requires women believers to imagine their relationship as disciples, in some kind of human model of “following” another person. The traditional social model for women “following” a male leader, as subordination and submission, makes it difficult for women religious today to imagine a different relationship for themselves in the Church as disciples and followers of Jesus.

Women’s Christology must be hewn as a distinctive theology within the Church’s patriarchal culture, where Christ is celebrated the head of the Church, just as men are authorities over women. This distinctive Christology requires a communal intellectual commitment and hard work at clarifying hidden ways of thinking embedded in women’s habitual responses to conflict, which are typically accommodation and surrender. Such a newly formulated Christology arises because of necessity. It takes shape because women religious find a sense of purpose and solidarity with all women who suffer oppression and discrimination precisely because they were born women.

One task for women religious is a rereading and reclaiming of the gospel in light of Jesus’ affirmation of their dignity as persons at a time and place where similar patriarchal norms for women operated socially and religiously. Many narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning women also challenge the subordinated position of women in family, society, and community of faith.

Conclusion

Whether women religious adopt one of the classic models of Church proposed by Avery Dulles, or fashion other descriptors of their own, a preoccupation with Church as institution seems to have reduced the capacity of women to embrace the Church with positive, expansive feelings. It is probably timely to ask whether an unrelenting critique of its governance structures as patriarchal and authoritarian has been effective in bringing about externally visible changes in the Church. Has a critique exclusively focused this way, instead of effecting systemic change, instead worn down the spirit of women themselves and made them ineffective as change makers?

What other stance will arouse imagination “to suggest alternative frameworks, to image better ways of living in evolving worlds, to imagine new human relations that are freed from persisting hierarchies”?

Notes

1 Patricia McCann, R.S.M., “What Do/Can Constitutions Mean to a Religious Congregation in 1990?” Unpublished paper circulated to Sisters of Mercy working on the draft of the core constitution.


Thomas Merton and the Seasons of Solitude and Love

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.

During his lifetime, Thomas Merton, the celebrated monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani, experienced various seasons in his inner journey. He knew moments of the intense joy of mystical union with God. He also suffered times of spiritual doubt. During the last years of his life, he came to a deeper appreciation of the seasons of solitude and love. Through the pleasure and pain of being in love with another human being, Merton gained rich insight into the relationship of the love of God and neighbor and solitude.

Throughout his life, Merton wrote a great deal about the importance of solitude in the spiritual life. He described solitude as the "doorway by which a person enters into the mystery of God."

Merton believed that solitude is soul cleansing and "as necessary . . . as silence is for language and air for the lungs and food for the body." In his writings, he stressed that experiences of solitude clarify the need to love others and loving others, in turn, draws a person back to God in contemplative solitude.

This essay treats the interrelationship of the seasons of solitude and love in the life and writings of Thomas Merton, with emphasis on the insights that his journal, Learning to Love, sheds on these realities. In this journal, with honesty and forthrightness, Merton discusses the various stages in his life-changing experience of loving Margie (hereafter referred to as M.). M. was a nurse who attended to Merton's medical needs after he underwent spinal surgery at St. Joseph's Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky in March, 1966.

The Season of Solitude

For Merton, solitude enables a person to become profoundly attentive to God. In the silence of solitude, one experiences within oneself the "presence of the three Divine Persons: The Father, the source and giver of Love; the Son, the image and glory of Love; and the Spirit who is the communication of the Father and the Son in Love." In solitude, one disappears into God, the Source and Ground of all love, and experiences the "rugged purification of the heart."

For Merton, authentic living requires solitude. To grow in solitude, a person must embrace "emptiness, an aimlessness, a going nowhere, a certain 'having nothing to do,' especially nothing that involves the . . . assertion of one's 'image' and one's 'career.'" According to Merton, solitude has its seasons of shifting emotions, including times of loneliness and feelings of lostness as well as deep moments of hope and elucidation.

Solitary experiences enable one to enter into the revelation of the present moment and, thus, to become fully awake. Concerning this, Merton writes: "I see that it is to face what I cannot face that I am in solitude and everything in my life is affected by the change—my ordinary anxieties, my writing, my attitude toward the world, my attitude toward myself . . . my life in Christ."

True solitude leads to the wide-openness of loving others in the great All who is Love. Pondering the natural outflow of the solitary experience of communion with God in love of others, Merton discusses the various stages in his life-changing experience of loving Margie (hereafter referred to as M.). M. was a nurse who attended to Merton's medical needs after he underwent spinal surgery.
notes: “We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them but to find out the way to do them the most good.”

According to Merton, only one who has experienced loving others can know anything about real solitude. Reflecting on what his relationship with M. taught him in this regard, he asserts:

Who knows anything at all about solitude if he has not been in love, and in love in his solitude. Love and solitude must trust each other in the man who means to live alone: they must become one and the same thing in him, or he will only be half a person. Unless I have you with me always, in some very quiet and perfect way, I will never be able to live fruitfully alone.

According to Merton, only one who has experienced loving others can know anything about real solitude.

The solitary life also enabled Merton to grow in affection for his brother monks at Gethsemani. Considering the nexus of solitude and loving his fellow Trappists, Merton muses: “I can see that there is a fruitful and happy obligation to love them here (in the hermitage) and pray for them, and to share their burdens in solitude . . . to believe that I can be for them a source of healing and strength by prayer.”

In essence, for Merton responding to the grace of solitude involves letting it soak into one’s bones, learning to breathe and feed on it, and turning one’s life into a living and vigilant silence. The solitary person encounters God who is Love and recognizes that she/he is inseparable from all those whom God has created. The experience of solitude enables a person to extend God’s graciousness to others through genuine and gentle care of them as they are.

Merton’s Vocation to Solitude

Throughout the twenty-seven years of his monastic life, Thomas Merton desired deeper and deeper experiences of solitude. As early as 1949, he journaled: “Everything in me cries out for solitude and for God alone.” During the last few years of his life, when he lived in a hermitage at Gethsemani, Merton realized that he preferred quieti contemplationes, i.e., the quietude of inner repose that the grace of the hermit life afforded him. As a hermit, Merton faced the fact that if he were to become a completely forgotten, invisible person, he would be content. Flashes of truth such as this nourished him as he continued his spiritual journey.

When the fifty-one year old hermit Merton fell in love with M., he struggled with how this unexpected experience could relate to his life of solitude. Initially, being a hermit and being in love with a beautiful young woman seemed to him to be totally at odds with each other. Gradually, however, Merton realized that it was possible to integrate this relationship into his vocation to solitude. In the sea of his solitude, he found a place wherein he would always know, reverence, and love M. Regarding this, Merton journals:

I love the aloneness of the night. In a way I cannot be without you: you are part of my life itself, and of my very loneliness. I know we are together in our hearts. . . . To be alone in a solitude that is with you, though without your bodily presence, is certainly a special kind of freedom.

Another strong indication that Merton believed that his life of solitude in Christ and his love for M. were compatible lies in his following assertion: “[I]f I love her purely and unselfishly—as I surely do here in solitude—then my love for her is part of my offering of myself to God.”

On September 8, 1966 (the Feast of the Nativity of Mary), Merton chose to live in solitude as a hermit-monk for the rest of his life, insofar as his health would permit. In formally deciding to live out the rest of his life as a hermit, Merton was convinced that he was following God’s call within the depths of his being to be what he was supposed to be.
Merton described the hermitage as a marvelous place where he could enjoy the pure delight of being utterly alone in a quiet, cozy environment, which restored his peace and sanity. Here he relished the tempo of long, quiet days and, in this sacred space, faced his truest self with all its frailness, limitedness, fears, and anxieties. Some of Merton’s reflections on the life he knew in his hermitage include:

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence in the hermitage, reinforcing the solitude. I like it. 16

I don’t know what happens to time in the hermitage. Three and four hours in the pre-dawn go by like half an hour. Reading, meditation, a few notes, some coffee and toast—there is not much to show for it but it is probably the most fruitful part of the day. 17

Yesterday was quiet and lonely in the hermitage with rain battering down interminably and a fire on the hearth. 18

The Season of Love

According to Merton, the season of solitude makes possible the season of love and vice versa. Love, which is the key to the true meaning of human existence, deepens, intensifies, elevates, and strengthens life. Love is the most profound, creative, and transforming power in human nature. Reflecting on love as the act of self-surrender in freedom in his own life, Merton writes: “I cannot live without giving love back to a world that has given me so much. And, of course, it has to be the love of a man dedicated to God—and selfless, detached, free, completely open love.” 19

This open love, which roots and grounds itself in God’s love, promotes the peace and well-being of the other. To love is to reverence another’s being as the dwelling place of God. To reach out to another in love is to enter more deeply into the mystery of God who is Love and, thus, to grow in greater union with God.

Merton’s Love of M.

When Thomas Merton met M., his understanding of the meaning of love took on new existential dimensions. He viewed his relationship with M. as a tremendous grace from God and a sacred trust. Regarding this, he wrote: “She is the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me and her love is a gift from heaven…. Her love is as precious to me as life itself.” 24 According to biographer Michael Mott, M. was “the one person to whom Merton felt he could open his whole mind without restraint.” 25

Merton’s relationship with M. transformed him; it took him out of himself in greater vulnerability and changed him forever. For the first time in his life, he experienced the tremendous depths of his inner capacity to love and be loved by another human being. About this, he journals:

I realize that the deepest capacities for human love in me have never even been tapped, that I too can love with an awful completeness. Responding to her has opened up the depths of my life in ways I cannot begin to understand or analyze now. 26

Merton surrendered to the creative action of this love and, in doing so, reached a new level of wholeness through self-transcendence.

Through his relationship with M., Merton came to understand, in a powerfully existential way, that loving another creates a spring of happiness.
Merton experienced a full range of emotions (doubt, fear, panic, overwhelming gratitude, and delight) concerning his relationship with M. He considered his love for M. a "sacred gamble."

Merton experienced a full range of emotions (doubt, fear, panic, overwhelming gratitude, and delight) concerning his relationship with M. He considered his love for M. a "sacred gamble," which he described as a "risky, hard-to-handle reality." Sometimes the sexual dimensions of this relationship deeply disturbed him because he feared what might happen if the emotional and physical expression of this love ever got out of hand. Merton dared to love M. and bore the anxiety that doing so brought into his life. He feared that the contradictions involved in this relationship could eventually hurt both of them but contended, nevertheless, that their love for each other was stronger than any possible hurt they might experience. Merton characterized M.'s love for him as tender, sincere, and utterly beautiful. Aware that she loved him in his limitations, he wrote: "I am known to her as I am, and many of the things she loves in me are things I find humiliating and impossible." Merton loved M. fully, freely, and spontaneously. He expresses the all-absorbing nature of his love for her in the following way:

June 5, 1966. We talked and loved and scarcely ate anything, but drank Chianti and read poems... The thing that was most clear was the simple perfection of our love, the total "givenness" of it and our complete surrender to its delights and perfection, its peace, its freedom, with no care and no afterthought. Nothing was ever so clear as the fact that we really, truly, completely love each other.

Eventually, Merton concluded that the spiritual plane was the appropriate level at which he should love M. In the following communication to her, he makes explicit his movement to this way of relating:

Only one thing I ask: that all our life we consider each other most faithful, most loving and most special friends, united by a deep and unique bond that was made by God rather than by ourselves. It is on this level that I will always love you, always think of you, always want to know how you are and how things are going with you.

Merton desired that his relationship with M. be a "deep lasting union of hearts." He believed that the love that they shared would endure the test of time. He reflects: "There is something completely permanent and irrevocable in our lives: the love that we have known in each other, that has changed us, that will remain with us in a hidden and transfigured and transfiguring presence." Merton believed that, finally and forever in heaven, M. and he would be united in God because their love for each other had an eternal quality.

M.'s perspective on her relationship with Merton remains an untold story. Commenting on this, Lawrence Cunningham states: "One cannot but feel... that too much has been made about the agonies of the monk to the detriment of the young woman whose own voice is silent and whose story we know only from one side which is not hers." Though this is the case, one can speculate that M. would concur with Merton that an aura of timelessness surrounds their love for each other.

Conclusion

In and through his relationship with M., Thomas Merton learned a great deal about the nexus of solitude and love. Within the context of his hermit-monk vocation, he courageously faced the paradoxical nature of loving M. On the one hand, he declared: "I can't go on like this... After all I am supposed to be a monk with a vow of chastity and though I have kept my vow—I wonder if I can keep it indefinitely..." On the other hand, he later confessed: "We are terribly in love and it goes very deep... I have never loved anyone so much, never wanted to give myself so much to anyone, and it is totally impossible." During some moments, he
felt that the only way to resolve his dilemma was to go away with M., live with her, surrender to their love, and forget everything else. But then deep within, Merton listened to God’s call to him to lead a solitary life.

Within the parameters of his monastic calling, Merton learned both the joy and anguish of loving another human being. As John Laughlin notes: “This relationship ... helped him [Merton] confront and reconcile his long held doubts about his ability to form an intimate relationship.” Through this experience, Merton came to understand, in a very existential way, that solitude and love are able to bear fruit only in mutuality.

In the final analysis, Merton recommitted himself in a more complete way to the hermit life, which he described as a “life of silent adoration” and “complete dependence ... upon the hidden mercy of our Heavenly Father.” Merton was convinced that “The hermit has a very real place in a world like ours that has ... lost all respect for that awesome loneliness in which each single spirit must confront the living God.”

According to Merton, the choice of the solitary life is an act of real courage. In Thoughts in Solitude, he asserts that “the solitary must be a man who has the courage to do the thing he most wants in the world to do—to live in solitude.” Biographer Monica Furlong notes that Merton’s experience with M. left him with “a new awareness that he was able to love and be loved, but ... also the discovery of how totally he was given, body and soul, to his life of monk and hermit.” Furlong also indicates that the recommitted hermit Merton anguished over the suffering he had caused M.43

Merton requested that, after his death, a twenty-five year period elapse before the publication of his journal, Learning to Love. Poignantly aware of what he had learned from his relationship with M., Merton was convinced that this part of his life needed to be shared with others. He insisted that it “... needs to be known, too, for it is part of me. My need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a 'solution.'” Lawrence Cunningham reflects that “it may well be that he [Merton] left a record of that experience precisely to fill out his portrait as a deeply human and flawed person.”

The awesome beauty of loving M. enabled Thomas Merton to embrace his humanity in a new and deeper way. To be a fully integrated monk he had to be a fully integrated human being, to accept his yearning for reciprocated love; he had to move beyond sublimation, abstraction, and platonic love to a concrete, particular, and incarnate love.

Through his relationship with M., Merton “experienced, at a radically new depth, God present in another human being and God in one person loving God in another.” He once wrote: “When people are truly in love ... they are ... more alive, more understanding ... They are ... new beings. They are transformed by the power of their love.” This certainly was the case in the intersection of M. and Merton’s lives.

The awesome beauty of loving M. enabled Thomas Merton to embrace his humanity in a new and deeper way. As Michael Higgins rightly indicates: “To be a fully integrated monk he [Merton] had to be a fully integrated human being, to accept his yearning for reciprocated love; he had to move beyond sublimation, abstraction, and platonic love to a concrete, particular, and incarnate love.”

In the midst of the joys and sufferings of his profound experience with M., Merton rediscovered his vocation to solitude and, with every fiber of his being, could finally pray with utmost confidence to God:

In solitude I have at last discovered that You have desired the love of my heart, O my God, the love of my heart as it is—the love of a man’s heart.
Notes

23 See Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 102. Here Merton states that "The mature man realizes that his life affirms itself most, not in acquiring things for himself, but in giving his time, his efforts, his strength, his intelligence and his love to others."
31 Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 34.
47 Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 34.
49 Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 121.

THE MAST JOURNAL, begun in 1990, is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. Members of the Editorial Board are Sisters Eloise Rosenblatt, Editor (Burlingame), Marilee Howard, Managing Editor (Auburn), Patricia Talone (Mid-Atlantic), Marilyn King (Burlingame), Aline Paris (Northeast), Kathleen McAlpin (Mid-Atlantic), Mary Sullivan (Rochester), Marie Michele Donnelly (Mid-Atlantic), Carol Rittner (Mid-Atlantic), and Maureen Crossen (Carlow College). Subscriptions and correspondence to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., Managing Editor, at Sisters of Mercy, 555 Sacramento St., Auburn, CA 95603, e-mail mhoward@mercysisters.org. Manuscript submissions to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., at 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129, e-maileloros@sbcglobal.net. Layout, design, and printing by BIBAL Press, an imprint of D. & F. Scott Publishing, Inc., PO. Box 821653, North Richland Hills, TX 76182. Back issues at $5.00 may be ordered from BIBAL Press at (888) 788-2280, sales@dfscott.com or www.dfscott.com.
An Unconventional Group of Women
The Sisters of Mercy and the Struggle against Clerical Control in San Francisco, 1854–1898

Anne Hartfield, Ph.D.

In 1854, a group of seven Catholic Sisters and their mother superior from County Kinsale, Ireland, arrived in San Francisco and began visiting the sick and poor in their homes. Solicited by the archbishop of San Francisco to assist him in his new diocese, these Sisters of Mercy who came to the mission territory of San Francisco, brought their own set of priorities and goals that informed their ministry. Upon arrival in the developing city of San Francisco the Sisters actively initiated and pursued a host of philanthropic projects that included providing outdoor relief for the poor, ministering to smallpox victims at the city's Pest House, and visiting prisoners in San Quentin prison. Additionally, they established a number of social welfare institutions, including a hospital, a home for the aged and infirm, an industrial training school for girls, a temporary home for unemployed domestic servants, and a Magdalen Asylum for "wayward girls." As the Sisters' presence expanded beyond the boundaries of their convent community, they often came into conflict with male clergy. These conflicts centered on control of space, and ultimately power, as the Sisters sought to enact social service projects in accordance with the Mercy spirit and to retain control of their institutions, while adhering to their vows of obedience.¹ This paper will consider the interactions between the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco and diocesan priests and bishops in the second half of the nineteenth century and will illustrate ways in which female religious were dependent upon the male church hierarchy and ways in which they exerted independence as they negotiated for spiritual and institutional space. Convent annals, the correspondence of Mother Mary Baptist Russell, the mother superior of the convent from 1854 to 1898, the letter books of Joseph Alemany and Patrick Riordan, the archbishops of San Francisco during the time period of this study, and the financial records of the Sisters of Mercy shed light on these relations.² Despite a fair amount of friction with both priests and bishops, the Sisters of Mercy, through both persistence and manipulation, were able to negotiate some middle ground, guide the direction of their work, and create female space in San Francisco.

Histories of Roman Catholic Sisters often applaud the strength and industriousness of the women who founded female religious orders, but credit for much of the work of their orders has been given to male priests and/or bishops. Archbishop Alemany received applause upon the celebration of his twenty-fifth anniversary as archbishop of San Francisco for his "monuments such as Hospitals . . . [and the Magdalen] Asylum" despite the fact that the Sisters of Mercy built these institutions. And, as late as the year 2000, historians Kevin Starr and Richard Orsi echoed similar praise, giving credit to the bishop for building the "infrastructure of Catholic life in San Francisco during the 1850s" and providing "his rapidly growing flock with parish churches, schools, orphanages, and hospitals," many of which were initiated and operated by the Sisters of Mercy.³ Such emphasis further discounts the fact that, as the Sisters actively pursued their ministry, they often came into conflict with male clergy and frequently fought to uphold the Mercy

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vision of service to the poor, especially to the female poor, which remained low on the list of male ecclesiastics priorities. Analysis of the friction inherent in these relationships will add to the growing body of scholarship concerning Catholic Sisters and will serve to redress the imbalance in Catholic historiography, restore agency to the Sisters themselves, and move Sisters away from the periphery to the center of historical debate.

Negotiations between the Sisters of Mercy and male ecclesiastics began before the original eight pioneer Sisters left Ireland for San Francisco.

Conflict between women in religious communities and male clerics was common indeed, but scholars differ in their interpretation of the relationships between priests and Sisters. Some scholars assert that passive submissiveness to male hierarchical authority characterized these relationships, while others emphasize the idea of Sisters as "coordinate workers" with priests and bishops, suggesting at least some semblance of respect and admiration. Still others posit that male clerics displayed misogynistic tendencies toward Sisters and that their relationships were often fraught with hostility. An examination of the relationships between the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco and the diocesan priests and bishops will help to develop a more complex historical picture.

Negotiations between the Sisters of Mercy and male ecclesiastics began before the original eight pioneer Sisters left Ireland for San Francisco. An exchange of at least six letters between Francis Bridgeman, the mother superior of the Mercy Convent in Kinsale, Ireland, and Father Hugh Gallagher, the representative of Archbishop Alemany of San Francisco regarding the establishment of a Mercy ministry in San Francisco, illuminates not only points of contention between male clergy and nuns, but also ways in which Sisters were able to retain their independence and ministerial focus as they did the work of the Lord for the Church. When Father Gallagher wrote to Mother Bridgeman and asked for Sisters to come to San Francisco, she reminded him that the purpose of the Mercy order involved "visitation of the sick, instruction for the poor, and the protection of distressed young women" and did not entail teaching girls "of a higher class." Father Gallagher responded that "tremendous good" could come from such a teaching vocation, but Mother Bridgeman insisted that her nuns not be employed in such a manner and suggested that perhaps San Francisco did not provide the proper "field" for their work. In addition to concerns about retaining the integrity of the mission of the Mercy order, Mother Bridgeman also expressed concern about possible alterations to the order's rule. Mother Bridgeman noted that some bishops had made "serious modifications" to the rule of other Sisters who had embarked upon a foreign mission and she asserted in no uncertain terms that the Sisters of Mercy did not "feel called on to go anywhere" where their Holy Rule might be modified. Father Gallagher assured her that no one except Rome "might dare to modify your Holy Rule" and promised her that the Sisters who came to San Francisco would be able to follow their Mercy vocation. Assured that the bishop of San Francisco would not attempt to alter their rule and that the Sisters would only have to carry out those ministries of which they approved, Mother Bridgeman finally and affirmatively concluded negotiations with Father Gallagher.

Dealings with Archbishop Alemany figure prominently in the annals of the Sisters of Mercy and illustrate how the religious vows of obedience restricted the Sisters' lives and their power to act. The Sisters sought Alemany's permission for a host of things—to have the religious service of Benediction in the convent (request approved), to send a group of Sisters to Ireland to find out about the running of a hospital there (permission denied), and to lend a Sister from the San Francisco convent to their convent in Grass Valley (request refused). However, the Sisters did not always accept the decisions of their bishop. In 1898, one of the Sisters at the San Francisco community was asked by her family to come home to Ireland to settle some personal affairs. The family also offered to pay the passage for another Sister to act as a traveling companion. The archbishop expressed his opposition to "religious traveling without good reason." The Sisters persisted in their request, and eventually were per-
mitted to go, after having stated their case in writing to two other priests before the archbishop would give them approval. But much of the language used in the Sisters' formal letters to the archbishop illustrates the deference paid by the Sisters to the male clergy and point to the hierarchical nature of this relationship. The Sisters beg Alemany's pardon for the "invasion on your attention" and letters are signed "your obedient servant in Jesus Christ." If the Sisters took issue with the archbishop, their disagreements were usually couched in terms of deference and humility.10

The rule of obedience as applied to the Sisters by male clerics often underscored a concern for female propriety. After his annual visit in 1874, Archbishop Alemany congratulated the community, but warned them that novices should not be left alone with male patients and suggested that male nurses be used in the Sisters' hospital. The Sisters reassured him that even the most senior professed Sister never remained alone with a patient unless the door to the room remained open. Alemany's successor, Archbishop Riordan required that the Sisters have his approval to accommodate nuns visiting from other convents or orders. He explained the need for this precaution to ensure that both groups of Sisters would not be "drawn away from the strict discipline of their conventual life," and that the visiting group would not "lose spirit" by staying away from their own convent too long. The bishop also suggested that the San Francisco community adopt divided recreation, or the practice of separating the novices, whom he considered naive and impressionable, from the professed nuns at leisure time. The Sisters did, however, resist this infringement on the long-standing Mercy tradition of interaction between professed Sisters and novices.11

At times, the Sisters were less than forthright in dealing with the archbishop and manipulated situations to their advantage. In 1882, Alemany attempted a more serious intrusion on the daily life of the Sisters, one that threatened the traditional structure of the Sisters of Mercy. Alemany proposed to institute the Office of a Superior Provincial for all of California. The vocals of the Mercy community would vote for this superior provincial, and while Alemany assured the Sisters that this provincial would not affect the rights of the local reverend mother regarding convent administration, he called for this new superior provincial to assign a sole house of novitiates and to appoint a sole mistress of novices.14 This proposed Rio Vista annexation would unite all the Mercy convents in the diocese and ensure uniformity of training. The archbishop demanded that the Sisters actually write down their vote ("I vote for annexation"), and sign their names, rather than using the traditional Mercy voting method of casting white and black beans to vote yea or nay. The majority of the Sisters opposed this plan, voted accordingly, and convent annals note with an air of finality, the "matter was dropped."15 Faced with such clear opposition in this matter, the archbishop backed down and the Sisters retained the original conventual structure envisioned by their founder.

The Sisters did not readily and passively submit to the requests of priests and bishops, but...
In some situations, the Sisters of Mercy held the upper hand in their relationships with clergymen and exerted power. Political maneuverings between the Sisters of Mercy and the archbishop of San Francisco point to the dependency of the bishop upon the Sisters who, in some instances needed the Sisters aid to further his own causes.

clearly expressed concerns about clerical proposals and carefully chose the projects they agreed to undertake. At one point in an ongoing discussion about how to raise money for the Magdalen Asylum, the archbishop suggested that the Magdalens support themselves by establishing a laundry. The Sisters, however, felt needlework to be less taxing on the "broken down, delicate creatures" and perhaps more genteel. And when the archbishop of Oregon invited the Sisters to open a hospital in Portland, they declined. However, when the pastor of St. Peter's Parish in San Francisco asked the Sisters to conduct the school for the children of parishioners, the Sisters voted in favor of his request.

In some situations, the Sisters of Mercy held the upper hand in their relationships with clergymen and exerted power. Political maneuverings between the Sisters of Mercy and the archbishop of San Francisco point to the dependency of the bishop upon the Sisters who, in some instances needed the Sisters aid to further his own causes. The archbishop hoped to secure half of an old hospital on Lombard Street from the city supervisors, who required in return a commitment to feed the hungry and provide shelter to women. Alemany suggested to the Sisters that this type of work remained "within the scope" of their order and asked them to give such a mission serious consideration. When the Sisters expressed excitement at the project, but an unwillingness to financially support it, Alemany suggested that they fund it by "collecting in markets." The Sisters responded that they would not beg, as it was contrary to their rule. Alemany explained that both he and the public preferred the Sisters of Mercy undertake this work, but understood that they might "not feel disposed" to do so, thereby acknowledging their right to chose. As only a small minority of the Sisters approved of this project, the Sisters decided against running the refuge. Both the Sisters and the bishop performed balancing acts at times, with the bishop walking the line between his reliance upon others to fulfill diocesan needs and his authority as patriarch of the diocese and the Sisters walking a tightrope between their desire to follow the Mercy ministry and their vows of obedience to the Church.

Much of the conflict with Catholic clergymen, which figured so prominently in the daily life of the Sisters of Mercy, centered around the consolidation of male power and territorial control of space. Through their myriad institutions, Catholic nuns assumed "spiritual leadership" of laymen and laywomen with whom they interacted on a daily basis. But such leadership often posed a challenge to Catholic canon law, which considers spiritual power to come through Christ, as a man, to his successors, male priests, and was often resisted by male clerics, especially by bishops who held ultimate authority within their diocese and who deemed it their role to determine which services the Sisters would provide. The sodalities, female lay charitable associations organized by the Sisters, presented yet another challenge to male ecclesiastical control. The Sisters’ Sodality of Our Lady grew to such "phenomenal proportions" that priests established their own parish sodalities and encouraged female parishioners to join these groups, rather than female formed sodalities, such as the Sisters of Mercy’s. The pastor of St. Brendan’s parish in San Francisco tried to force members of the Sisters’ Sodality for the Magdalen Asylum to attend his church and take communion there rather than at the Sisters’ chapel.

The establishment of female lay societies by the Sisters to further aid their social causes also demonstrates the balancing acts performed between priests and the Sisters over issues of power. When the members of the St. Mary’s Society Sodali-
ty approached the archbishop for his “Sanction” to collect funds to build a Home for Aged and Infirm Females, a disagreement over the manner of fund-raising arose. Rather than raise funds for this venture, the bishop suggested that young women who could be employed for doing laundry, perhaps from the Sisters’ House of Mercy, also be admitted to make the home self-supporting. The Sisters of Mercy adamantly opposed such a plan, fearful that if unemployed servants, generally considered lazy and not worthy of charity by the San Francisco public, were housed in the same facility as the elderly, donations would be scarce. They may also have been angered by the insensitivity of the archbishop toward the plight of both elderly women in San Francisco and unemployed servant girls. Young women from the House of Mercy rose early and worked hard all day in preparation for the “hardships of service,” while elderly persons might not be able to observe such stringent regulations. At one point, the bishop also suggested that most of the money in the St. Mary’s Society treasury be used toward the establishment of this house. Mother Russell objected strenuously to this suggestion. She sent a copy of the rules of the society to the archbishop and explained that the society was not formed to fund the Sisters’ projects, but as a mutual benevolent society, and funds were used to aid its sick female members and to pay for masses offered for its female members. Though Mother Russell assured Alemany that she remained at his “command,” she also suggested that a “respectable” pay school could be attached to the house to help finance it, as long as the school would also be open to those who could not afford to pay. This time, the Sisters had their way. With considerable effort, the Sisters retained the direction of their work and remained faithful to the special Mercy vision of commitment to women.

Alemany asserted his control in the Sisters’ financial affairs more forcefully, however, indicating the amount of female dependence demanded from the church hierarchy. Bishops oversaw all convent financial accounts.

The Sisters’ priorities often differed from those of the archbishop, which may provide further clarification about the financial disagreements between the two. In his report outlining the religious needs of California in 1853, one year before the Sisters of Mercy arrived in San Francisco, Alemany listed his priorities as the establishment of a men’s college, the establishment of a seminary, the founding of “Female Academies” run by nuns, and the establishment of orphan asylums. None of these ministries meshed with the Mercy mission of visitation of the sick and poor and the protection of “distressed young women.” Perhaps this explains why Alemany did not call a meeting to discuss steady support for the Magdalen Asylum, described by the Sisters’ as the “greatest of all works of Mercy,” until 1869, thirteen years after the informal beginnings of this ministry. Though Alemany acknowledged
the need for a Magdalen Asylum for “repenting sinners,” the Sisters complained that he allowed Father Gallagher only two months to solicit for funds to erect a separate building to house the Asylum inmates through the use of charity sermons. In 1866, when the California State Legislature appropriated a lump sum of fifteen thousand dollars to the Archdiocese of San Francisco to be distributed among all Catholic charities by the archbishop, Alemany allocated ninety-two dollars to the Magdalen Asylum. That the Sisters mentioned this in their annals and referred to the appropriation as “only” ninety-two dollars suggests that they perceived Alemany’s support for their asylum as less than wholehearted.

Purchase of property and control of space proved an especially contentious issue between the archbishop and the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco. Though the Sisters could buy and sell property, protocol dictated that the advice and permission of the bishop be sought. In the early 1860s, the Sisters had taken it upon themselves to purchase land for the Magdalen Asylum during one of the archbishop’s absences. When the archbishop, upon his return, expressed disapproval, the Sisters expeditiously sold the property and, in 1881, when the Sisters were looking for property upon which to build a new Home for Aged Females, Alemany insisted that they chose a site from the considerable amount of property that had been bequeathed to the archdiocese. In 1883, the archbishop discovered that the Sisters had incorporated in 1866 without his advice or consent and had purchased some property near Santa Rosa to be used as a vacation retreat without his permission. In a letter that condemned the Sisters’ actions as an evil act of self-will, Alemany suggested that the Sister responsible for the purchases be stripped of her convent voting privileges. Lack of knowledge of the actual culprit prevented him from enforcing this, but his response must have made an impression on the Sisters. When they decided to sell the property two years later, they asked for and received permission of Archbishop Alemany’s successor, Patrick Riordan.

Lack of economic autonomy restricted the Sisters’ ability to control the direction of their ministry and represents one of the more extreme positions of Sisterly dependence upon male clerics. The Sisters faced particular financial problems with Father Casey, the pastor at St. Peter’s, where they ran the parish free school at his request. The school opened in 1878, thanks in part to a $1,331 loan the Sisters made to the pastor. The debt on the school, however, continued to increase from $3,355 in 1879 to more than $6,000 by 1882. But Father Casey refused to give any financial support, and expected the Sisters to pay off the accumulated debt. In what may have been a retaliatory act, the Sisters began to charge interest on their original $1,331 loan. In 1882, Mother Russell suggested that a fair be held to pay off the debt, but the pastor thought a fair out of the question since the “priests could scarce get a living as it was from this poor parish.” Mother Russell enlisted Archbishop Alemany’s help in resolving the matter with this “inflexible” pastor and through his intercession, Father Casey agreed to hold a fair in order to cancel the debt. A few months later, however, when the Sisters brought up the subject of the fair to Father Casey, he told them he needed to have one first, and then they could hold theirs for the school debt. Ultimately, he never allowed a fair to be held on behalf of the Sisters. The Sisters appealed to the archbishop who referred the matter to a council, which called for the pastor to repay the Sisters their original loan of $1,331, but much to the Sisters’ chagrin, said nothing about the rest of the debt. To add further insult to injury, Father Casey never repaid the Sisters their $1,331, despite his promise to the archbishop. Such blatant disregard for the value of the Sisters’ work appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

In some of his writings, the archbishop of San Francisco expressed the high valuation he placed upon the Sisters’ work. When he asked them to open a House of Mercy and run it as up to “first rate business capacity,” he must have thought them up to the
task or would not have phrased it so. When Mother Russell went to help at the Pest House during the smallpox epidemic, Alemany wrote her that she must not take the post like a common soldier, but should remain at the "headquarters" (convent) like a general.28 And though they would not admit it openly, the Sisters seem to have viewed their time and work as equal in significance to that of the archbishop's. In a letter to Alemany, Mother Russell apologized for a delay in responding to one of his letters, but explained that she "happened to be unusually busy and had to defer it."

On many occasions, the Sisters in San Francisco worked together willingly with male clerics. Some priests became advocates for the Sisters' social services and established lifelong friendships with the Sisters. Irish-born Father Hugh Gallagher, who originally recruited the Sisters from Ireland, worked tirelessly to support the Sisters' causes, especially their Magdalen Asylum. In 1861, the California State Legislature, at his urging, granted five thousand dollars toward the erection of the Magdalen Asylum house, where he hoped to transfer all the women from the county jail, so passionately did he believe in the Sisters' ability to restore virtue to their charges.29 Gallagher also helped raise more than eighteen hundred dollars for the Asylum through a benefit he held on St. Patrick's Day.30 And Father Gallagher honored the Sisters by blessing the new addition built at the Magdalen Asylum in 1870. When he died, Father Gallagher left much of his ten-thousand-dollar life insurance policy to the Sisters.

Clergymen also occupied a place of revered significance in the spiritual lives of the Sisters. Priests offered daily mass in the Sisters' chapel, heard the Sister's confessions, led annual retreats, acted as confidantes and as advisors, and played a significant role in the promotion of spirituality in the Sisters' lives. Notes in the convent annals describing the presence of several clergymen and the archbishop at the deathbed of San Francisco Mercy Sister Mary de Sales Reddan, of the thirteen priests in attendance at her Requiem Mass, and of the sixteen priests who attended Mother Francis Bridgeman at her death in Ireland, attest to the honored place of male clergy in the spiritual life of the Sisters, despite their disputes over worldly affairs.

Relationships between the Sisters and the bishops and male clerics varied. The close relationships that developed between the Sisters and male clergy in San Francisco existed on both personal and professional levels and consisted of shifting layers of independence and dependence, assertion and deference in a struggle for power and control of both spiritual and institutional space. Though male clerics often interfered with the Sisters' day-to-day lives, acting upon their patriarchal role and upon the prevailing notion of women as mentally, physically, and spiritually weaker than men, they also acted as their friends, supported their institutional endeavors, and occupied a place of reverence in the Sisters' spiritual lives. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco actively initiated and pursued their own ministries, guided the direction of their work, and made autonomous decisions. Though they often faced opposition from male clergy, they did not passively accept their subordination and, through a process of ritualized negotiations, were able to realize many of their goals. Though constrained by their position as women in a male dominated, hierarchical church, the Sisters worked both within, and sometimes outside of, existing structures to follow their vocational vision and lay claim to female space in San Francisco.

Notes
1 For a discussion of the attempts of Sisters to exercise their authority and direct their own institutions, see Mary J. Oates, The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition (Bloomington, IN: University Press, 1995). Maureen Fitzgerald, "Irish Catholic Nuns and the Development of New York City's Child Welfare System, 1840–1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1992), 412, found that the Sisters of Mercy in New York, despite opposition from male church leaders, were able to control the direction of their work and "exert power and leadership" for most of the nineteenth century.
2 Though some records were either destroyed or lost in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, many of the San Francisco Sisters of Mercy's records from the time period 1854 through the end of the nineteenth century survived and are housed at the Mercy archives in Burlingame, California. Letter books of the archbishops and some of the financial records of the Sisters of Mercy, as well as other miscellaneous papers can be found at the Diocesan archives of San Francisco at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California.

7 The fact that The New Encyclopedia of the American West, rev. ed. of The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West, s.v. "Roman Catholic Church," referred to nuns as "coordinate workers" of bishops, calls out for studies that reappraise the roles played by Catholic Sisters in the growth of Catholicism in the West and of the relationships between Catholic Sisters and their bishops. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 6, assert that Catholic Sisters expressed "docility to male authority." Penelope D. Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), points out that while women did not always submissively follow male ecclesiastical authority, they tended to accept their role as women within a patriarchal church. Margaret Susan Thompson, "Women, Feminism, and the New Religious History," 136-163, however, asserts that Catholic Sisters did not necessarily accept their gender defined roles within the Church, but confronted and challenged them. Clear, "The Limits of Female Autonomy," 45, describes their relationships in Ireland as hostile and asserts that male clerics took a "divide and rule" attitude toward convents. She also posits that male clerics often viewed nuns with a mixture of both "misogyny and genuine respect," pointing to the paradoxical nature of their relationships. For a discussion of relationships between Sisters and bishops which includes race as a category of analysis, see Diane Batts Morrow, Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1850 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Kenneth A. Briggs, Double-Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church's Betrayal of American Nuns (New York: Doubleday, 2006), asserts that subjugation of Sisters by male clerics has contributed directly to the declining number of women religious in the United States. For an interesting discussion of what is described as a "pray and predator" relationship between Protestant ministers and their female congregants, see Karin E. Gedge, Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth Century American Culture (Religion in America Series, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).


10 Mother Bridgeman advised the Sisters in San Francisco not to say anything objectionable about the archbishop and reminded them that "The Bishop is our first Superior and we must not forget this at any time." She related a story about "great misery" that arose in a community from a Sister who turned the bishop's picture to the wall when he had not acted toward the community as they thought he should have. The Reverend Mother at that convent only laughed, but at the next episcopal visit, "some of the Community who disapproved of it told his Lordship and great indeed were the evils that resulted." She advised the Sisters to "restrain remarks on Ecclesiastics as much as possible" and to discuss difficulties with them only to the professed Sisters and only as a matter of business. Annals of the Convent of the Religious Called Sisters of Mercy of Divine Providence, San Francisco, California, archives, Sisters of Mercy, Burlingame CA, 1: 161.
In response to a letter from Mother Russell about how to handle the situation, Mother Austin Carroll, superior of the Mercy House in New Orleans, advised the Sisters to stand their ground. "Let him (the archbishop) refer to Rome if you do not want to do it. We will all be in Heaven or Purgatory before the answer is received." Annals, 1: 166. The Sisters in the San Francisco community often found support for their actions from other Mercy convents who also experienced similar tensions.

Relationships between the Mother Superior in California and Archbishop Alemany are not always easily discernable. Biographers often portray Mother Russell as having deferred to the archbishop on most decisions. Whether she did so readily or only as an obedient servant of the Church is difficult to determine, especially since early biographers were usually members of a religious community, whose studies required the imprimatur of a bishop before publication. In a more recent biography, Rose McArdle, *Mercy Undaunted: 125 Years in California* (Burlingame, CA: Sisters of Mercy, 1979) refers to Russell as consulting with the archbishop, which implies more of an equal relationship. As part of what Suellen Hoy, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago’s Past* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 31, identifies as the "first wave" of Irish Catholic Sisters who came to the United States during the nineteenth century, Mother Russell may have been "adventurous and self-confident" and viewed herself as a partner with bishops and priests in building the Church in California.

As an autonomous unit, each Mercy convent had its own novitiate and mistress of novices, agreed upon by a community vote.

Though, in 1882, the Sisters in San Francisco had opposed consolidation of Mercy convents, by the early part of the twentieth century, they voted in favor of consolidation and underwent a series of two amalgamations which altered the dynamic of the community. In 1917, another group of Mercy Sisters in Rio Vista, California, joined the San Francisco community, adding thirty-two Sisters to their community and three schools to their institutional endeavors. By 1922, Mercy branches in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Phoenix united with the San Francisco community, bringing the total number of Sisters to 338 and the number of institutions to twenty-six. And, by 1924, the Sisters of Mercy transferred their motherhouse from St. Mary’s Hospital in the city to a forty-acre estate in Burlingame, California and appointed a “Mother General” to oversee this vastly enlarged community.

Fitzgerald, "Irish Catholic Nuns," 350–51, notes that with the establishment of female sodalities, Sisters assumed spiritual leadership.

Religious orders, both Sisters and priests, were not allowed to incur indebtedness over five hundred dollars without a bishop’s permission.


It seems curious that he requested this particular order to come to San Francisco given his stated formal priorities. Alemany had also requested that the Presentation Sisters, an enclosed order who ran female schools, come to San Francisco from Ireland and perhaps felt comfortable calling upon the Mercy Sisters to deal with the less visible but important work with the sick and poor. Unfortunately, four of the original five Presentation Sisters who came to San Francisco at the same time as the Sisters of Mercy returned to Ireland. Annals, 1: 266.

Permission to make the House of Mercy for respectable servant girls self-supporting had already been granted in 1865 according to the Archbishop’s Council Minute Records, archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park, CA.

Correspondence of A. J. S. Alemany, 1844–1884, archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

The Jesuits in San Francisco also found themselves embroiled in a dispute with Alemany regarding the title deed to the property of St. Ignatius Church, suggesting that such power struggles were not always gender specific. See Sheridan, *And Some Fell on Good Ground*, 107. Letter to S. M.B.R from Archbishop Alemany, 1/12/1883, Annals, 2: 12.

Clear, "The Limits of Female Autonomy," 15, concludes that nuns often chose to acquiesce to male ecclesiastical superiors rather than risk losing all they had worked for.

Undated letter regarding St. Peter’s School, Miscellaneous papers, Alemany file, archdiocesan archives of San Francisco.


According to the annals, opposition to "giving the Catholic community too much power" prevented this from becoming a reality.

The Sisters note in the annals that Gallagher’s secondary reason for holding a benefit was to provide "amusement for the Irish."
Sister Austin Carroll was missioned to the United States in 1856 from Cork, Ireland. In 1860, she was sent down the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Several of the first Sisters assigned to the deep South died of yellow fever within a year or two. But Austin was one to survive.

Austin taught African Americans while on the river boat. She instructed the twelve-year-old daughter of the laundress and prepared her for First Communion and Confirmation. She also taught several of the African American cabin boys and deck hands.

Throughout the age of segregation of races and nationalities, Austin's hunger for justice impelled her to work against the odds to make education available for African American children. Bishops like Perche of New Orleans and Quinlan and O'Sullivan of Mobile were generous with encouragement. However, several pastors were reluctant for fear they would lose parishioners. Many African American parents had to be coaxed to allow their children to quit the work that contributed to the income of their family. Irish charm had to win over parish laity and neighbors, as Austin promised that there would be "no collision," as she termed a racial incident.

Austin opened more than a dozen schools for African Americans in Southern States. Much of Austin's energy flowed into projects that benefited women, and in assisting young women to improve their job skills, she followed the aim of Catherine McAuley. She put no limits on the capabilities of women if they were willing to give time to the necessary study and preparation. She paid all the costs of the schools from the earnings of her publications,
Ministry in Arkansas

In 1882, the Sisters of Mercy opened St. Mary's Academy, Hot Springs, Arkansas, for both elementary and high school students. On these same grounds, the Sisters opened a school for African American students. This school was opposed by many in Hot Springs, but the Sisters courageously refused to close it. Two letters from the Sisters to the bishop indicate that many of the parents were afraid to send their children to school because of threats by the white people. Apparently, some preachers in the area were leaders of the opposition that intimidated African American families and kept the children from attending school. The school eventually closed.

In September 1923, the Sisters of Mercy opened St. John the Baptist School in the African American district of Fort Smith, Arkansas. This enterprise was a successful one. Although there were few African American Catholics in Fort Smith, many of the students at St. John's were non-Catholics. Their parents appreciated the value of a Catholic school and were willing to make sacrifices to place their children in that environment. In 1926, the pastor wanted the Holy Ghost Sisters to assume the work in the African American parish. Later, the Benedictine Sisters staffed the school until the 1960s when integration became mandatory.

St. Anne's Academy opened in Fort Smith, Arkansas in 1853. St. Anne's was integrated in September 1961 with three African American boys who had attended St. John the Baptist elementary school. These boys came to St. Anne's for an education and to participate in sporting activities. African American basketball players were often taunted throughout a whole game with racial slurs and beans thrown on the court. St. Anne's school bus, on occasion, was painted with black shoe polish during a game. Some towns did not let African Americans in the town.

In 1966 at St. Anne's, an African American boy was chosen as cocaptain of the homecoming football game. The first maid, chosen by the student body, was a white girl. The students were proud of themselves for accomplishing the first integrated homecoming in Arkansas.

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At Mount St. Mary Academy, the administration and Board of Trustees wrestled with some of these issues—not so much for the students at the Mount, but for the teens in the greater Little Rock area. With a grant from the Sisters of Mercy Health System, Catherine's House became a reality. It was not a residence. It was a place where first-time pregnant and teen moms could come for counseling, tutoring, mentoring, parenting, and life skills, job skills development and day care. The goal was to keep these teens in school, prepare them for being good parents, and enable them to support themselves and their babies. The day care and after school program
Among the many success stories was a teen mom who finished high school, earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work by the time her daughter was nine years old.

was available for any child from a low-income or working-class family.

Even though Catherine's House would help any teen—regardless of race, color or religion—about 95 percent of the teens were African American. In 1997, thirteen teen moms from Catherine's House graduated from High School. In 2005, there were seventeen teen moms in the program with more than fifty children in the day care program and thirty in the after school program. With the aid of a grant, Catherine's House was providing Abstinence Education Programs in eleven public schools in the Little Rock area. This included instruction at their school, and at Catherine's House in the evening, some weekends and summer. They received tutoring, counseling, social interaction, and recreation.

Among the many success stories was a teen mom who finished high school, earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work by the time her daughter was nine years old. She maintains that she could not have accomplished this without the support from the staff at Catherine's House.

In spite of successful grant applications and generous support from Mercy sources, community support for building and administrative services was not forthcoming. In 2006, the board voted to cease operations.3

Ministry in Mississippi
Mound Bayou, Mississippi was founded on July 12, 1887. Benjamin Green, founder along with Isaiah T. Montgomery, was a slave of Joe Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis. Joe Davis gave Ben the responsibility of running the Post Office. He ran a good business. After the Civil War, when word finally got around that the slaves had been freed, Ben pur-chased four thousand acres of land from Joe Davis and founded Mound Bayou—where an Indian Mound and two bayous come together. It is the oldest African American community in the United States. Mound Bayou has been called the "third world in America." It was a safe haven for African Americans when the KKK and some white folks were killing African Americans for no reason. Even African Americans getting out of prison could come to Mound Bayou and feel safe.

In 1949, St. Gabriel Parish was established. In 1954, St. Gabriel School was founded by the Black Oblate Sisters of Providence of Baltimore, Maryland. At that time, prejudice and discrimination in Mississippi were very strong and African American children had little or no opportunity to go to school. The Sisters began a school for kindergarten through eighth grade.

In 1985, after thirty years, the Black Oblate Sisters left and the Sisters of St. Agnes of Fond du Lac came and stayed five years. In 1990, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart from Reading, Pennsylvania came. In 1994, the grade school closed and the school became an Early Childhood School for two-, three-, and four-year olds and kindergarten children. In 1999, three Sisters of Mercy arrived. In 2001 the Early Childhood School closed due to financial burdens. The school building then became a community center.

Mound Bayou Programs Today
Today the population of Mound Bayou is 2,100. There are virtually no large businesses. There is a small grocery store, one restaurant, one fast food eatery, a tax service, a florist, funeral home, and nineteen churches. Approximately, 84 percent of the income comes from Government subsidies, welfare, TANF, disability payments, and other government support. There are many needs to be addressed and very few monetary resources to meet these needs.

During the 1990s, Father Bill Cullin, superintendent of schools in the Jackson, Mississippi Diocese and Sister Cyrena Harkins, R.S.M., assistant superintendent, knowing the needs of the people of Mound Bayou initiated programs for the people. St. Gabriel Mercy Center is totally supported by grants, donations and volunteer services. It serves
seven communities around Mound Bayou. The Programs and Services offered at St. Gabriel's are:

PARENTS AS TEACHERS—Parent Educators work with parents and children for the first three years of the baby's life. They visit in the home and instruct parents in various areas of the parent/child relationship.

SERVICE OUTREACH PROGRAM—Each day a volunteer picks up participants from Mound Bayou and the surrounding areas. The seniors engage in games, listen to weekly speakers, go on field trips and have lunch at a local restaurant. A social worker and registered nurse work with the group.

AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM—Children do homework, read books, and participate in other educational programs. Computers are available. Recreational activities are provided as well as a snack each day.

MOUND BAYOU PUBLIC LIBRARY—opened in 2002 as a branch of the Bolivar County Library. It is opened on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. A “Summer Reading Program” is sponsored to encourage children to read during the summer.

GED—General Education Diploma Program began in 2002.

ST. GABRIEL'S CLOSET—accepts donations of clothes, shoes, furniture, and other household items. Clothes are sold sometimes for 25 cents or $5 a bag.

MERCY COMPUTER LEARNING LAB—the lab offers classroom and individualized instruction to persons of all ages.

EMERGENCY NEEDS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM—Funds are available to assist with utilities, rent, or medications. Their needs are assessed by a social worker. Money management and job awareness information are given to each client. Networking with other agencies is done to further assist the client.

JOBS PROGRAM—Unemployment is a major issue and jobs are hard to find. There are seven Sisters of Mercy serving in Mound Bayou at present.

In 1995, Sister Martha Milner, R.S.M. resigned from Catholic Social Services in Mississippi. After many years in advocacy, research, and organization, Sister realized that the only way that the unjust systems of society could be changed would be for low-income families to gain control over their own lives and demand their rightful participation in decisions that affect them. These unjust systems, built on racism and sexism, must be approached in a proactive manner.

Mercy Housing and Human Development is a Mississippi nonprofit corporation established in November, 1996 to serve low-income people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Its organizing purpose was to address the racism present in institutions of society, particularly housing authorities and financial institutions. In 1997, it was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in the State of Mississippi.

By designing the bylaws of the corporation to require that 33 percent of board membership be Mercy Housing homeowners, it assured the community that a percentage of its own homeowners would serve on decision-making bodies, evaluate the design and implementation of programs, and advise on community needs.

The only way that the unjust systems of society can be changed is for low-income families to gain control over their own lives and demand their rightful participation in decisions that affect them. These unjust systems, built on racism and sexism, must be approached in a proactive manner.

Programs are financed through grants, donations, and fund raising. HomeWorks is a Mercy Housing Program which supports low-income, first-time homebuyers and provides affordable homes for purchase. Home-buyer training combines education, technical assistance, and credit counseling. Post-purchase support is provided for
at least five years. Since 1998, fifty-four families became first time homeowners.

In the homeowner program, women learn skills that are usually associated with “men’s jobs,” such as basic plumbing, constructing window and door screens, and laying tile. Families are educated in community issues and encouraged to participate in local justice advocacy, especially with issues that negatively affect African American neighborhoods and the common good.

Mercy Housing and Human Development purposely serves low-wealth minority families who have traditionally been denied access to homeownership and those who live in public housing. Single mothers head more than 90 percent of households served. Ninety percent of both homebuyers and homeowners are African Americans. Two families are Mexican, two are Vietnamese and one is of the Choctaw tribe.

Mississippi Region VIII Housing Authority was selling off its public housing in its fourteen-county jurisdiction to private investors. Because the stock of affordable rentals in the area was limited, many families moved to substandard housing.

The food pantry served residents in Ladnier Homes. Of the sixteen seniors, fourteen are women. There are a few Caucasian families; however, most are African Americans. Mercy Housing and Human Development strives to provide opportunities for low-wealth families to achieve self-determination. All of this was pre-Katrina.

Sister Mary Ann Poeschl, R.S.M. is an assistant to the pastor of Holy Child of Jesus Parish in Canton, Mississippi. It was founded by the Trinitarian Fathers, but is now a diocesan parish. Thea Bowman attended and later taught in the school, which is pre-school through sixth grade. The town is 90 percent African American. In addition to planning liturgies and writing grants for the school, Sister Mary Ann works with other agencies to meet the immediate needs of the people, such as, rent, utilities, and medicine.

Ministry in Louisiana

Mercy Endeavors Senior Center began in the Irish Channel in New Orleans in 1997. It is a member of the Sisters of Mercy Ministries.

The primary purpose of the center is to provide for low to moderate income seniors opportunities for companionship, growth, recreation and enjoyment. The center is a faith-based, non-denominational organization that seeks to invite older adults to live life to the fullest by maintaining their independence, self-respect and vitality. It serves approximately one hundred seniors; 85 percent are African Americans. Sister Jane Briseno, R.S.M. has worked with Mercy Endeavors for nine years. She has worked in this community for eighteen years.

Post-Katrina, Mercy Endeavors has served a hot lunch to fifty homeless persons five days a week. Through various community donations, the center has been able to distribute food and clothing to the people on the street.

Prior to Katrina, St. Alphonsus School, New Orleans, was a full elementary school with grades pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. Although it is an archdiocesan school, the Sisters of Mercy have taught at the school for about 137 years. Initially, the school was predominantly white and served a working-class Irish community. When the St. Thomas Housing Project was built just a block away, the student population changed, so that by the 1970s the population became primarily African American.

Post-Katrina, St. Alphonsus School was prepared to open since it suffered only wind damage but no flooding. Two days prior to the reopening, the archdiocese requested that the school open as an Early Childhood Education Center (pre-kindergarten to kindergarten) since this was the greatest need as families moved back to New Orleans. The school has a current enrollment of 125 with a capacity for 185 students for the 2007-08 school year. The archdiocese has given permission to add the first grade with an additional grade being added each year thereafter based on need. The complicating factor has been that three- and four-year olds cannot go above the first floor because of fire...
regulations, so they are limited in the number of three- and four-year olds that they can take. Of the present students, 98 percent are African American and 70 percent have single mothers.8

**Mercy Sisters Challenge Segregation of Basic Services**

Before the 1960s, African American families with patients in a Kansas Mercy Hospital (in Fort Scott, Hutchinson, Independence and Fredonia) were fed in the Sisters’ dining rooms, because no restaurant in town would serve African American people.9 At Mercy Hospital, Slaton, Texas, all African American and Hispanic mothers and their newborn babies were admitted to rooms and a nursery on the ground floor, while Caucasian mothers and babies were admitted to the third floor. In July, 1961, Sister Mercedes Jefferies, CEO of the hospital directed Sister Janice Meiners, R.S.M., director of obstetrics, to move all mothers and babies from the ground floor to the rooms and nursery on the third floor. Gradually, desegregation changes were accepted throughout the hospital.10

In 1967, Sister Mary Isidore Lennon, R.S.M., CEO of St. John’s Mercy Hospital, St. Louis, opened Meacham Park Clinic. Meacham Park was located on the edge of Kirkwood, Missouri, with an all African American population. The fire house, which had been unused for several years, was used for the clinic. The clinic was open on every Wednesday from 12 noon to 4:00 PM. Physicians from St. John’s volunteered to assist at the clinic. A local pharmacy would fill the prescriptions, deliver the medications to the patients and sent the bill to St. John’s Mercy Hospital. By 1972, because of the large number of patients, the clinic was open five days a week. By 1983, the clinic moved to a larger building. In 2005, the Meacham Park Clinic was incorporated into the JFK clinic located within St. John’s Mercy Medical Center—still serving the uninsured.11

Sister Carol Ann Callahan, R.S.M. is a full time minister at St. Augustine Wellaton Center in North St. Louis. There are three part-time Sisters of Mercy and ten Mercy associates assisting the staff. The population of Wellston is all African Americans, who live in extreme poverty.

Crime is a very serious problem with gangs, drugs, domestic violence, burglary, and robbery. Education is of great concern. The school district has not been accredited in years and is now under the supervision of the State. Health care is another concern. There is a high population of seniors and people on disability with severe mental and physical problems. They have no access to quality health care, no insurance and no money for medication.

The center provides a food pantry and thrift store. It provides assistance with utility bills, medicine, rent, funerals and other needs. Social services and job referrals are also provided.12

Heeding the advice of our foundress, Catherine McAuley, “the poor need help today not tomorrow” and “when the root is made healthy, the green plant grows,” the Sisters of Mercy try to help the poor today, but also strive to empower them to help themselves in the future.

**Notes**

2. Sisters of Mercy archives, St. Louis, (located at 2039 North Geyer Rd., St. Louis, MO 63131-3399); interview with Sister Jolitta Konecny, R.S.M.
3. Catherine’s House archives, Little Rock, Arkansas (Located at Mount St. Mary Convent, Little Rock, Arkansas).
4. Mound Bayou archives, Mound Bayou, MS, (Located at St. Gabriel Mercy Center, P. O. Box 824, Mound Bayou, MS 38762); Interview with Sister Donald Mary Lynch, R.S.M.
5. Mercy Housing and Development archives, Biloxi, MS (Located at Project WITH, 2109 Atkinson Rd., Biloxi, MS).
6. Interview with Sister Mary Ann Poeschl, R.S.M., Canton, MS.
7. Interview with Sister Jane Briseno, R.S.M., New Orleans, LA.
8. Interview with Sister Stephanie Miller, R.S.M., New Orleans, LA.
9. Interview with Sister Mary Trinity Jackson, R.S.M., St. Louis, MO.
10. Interview with Sister Janice Meiners, R.S.M., St. Louis, MO.
11. Sisters of Mercy archives, St. Louis, MO.
12. Interview with Sister Carol Ann Callahan, R.S.M., St. Louis, MO.
Mercy ministry to Indians in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma, by the St. Louis regional community, began in 1851 and continues today. The total region encompassed eight states: Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Illinois. In the early days of the ministry, most states in this region were frontier areas. Sisters of Mercy received requests to minister in these areas by a priest or local bishop both before statehood and in the early stages of statehood. The Sisters of Mercy came to serve the dire needs of frontier people, which involved teaching basic survival skills as well as meeting spiritual needs.

The treatment by the U.S. government of American Indians is not a proud one. Native Americans were oppressed by European explorers, starting with discovery of the Americas in 1492. Later, after the establishment of the United States, negative approaches included banishing them to reservations, moving them to worthless land or even exterminating them through isolation and starvation. After the Civil War, the prevailing norm was to deprive Indians of liberty, property, and culture. Efforts were made to force them to adapt to the Protestant work ethic and become good citizens. Methods used to accomplish these goals involved moving young Indians far away from the tribe, train them in government-sponsored schools, and educate them in the “white way” of life so they could blend into society.

An example of unjust policy was the contract school started under President Grant’s administration. The government contracted with groups, mostly religious groups already working with the Indians, to pay a specific amount per Indian in the boarding schools. Congress constantly fluctuated in the amounts paid, stopped and started payments, and began to discriminate against Catholic schools as well as sectarian ones.

The event called the Trail of Tears in 1838 was an attempt to relocate ninety thousand Indians east of the Mississippi River to the Indian territory west of the Mississippi. Many relocations followed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These relocations took place in what are today the states of Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Mississippi.

Sisters of Mercy in Arkansas
In 1851, eleven Sisters of Mercy from Naas, Ireland, arrived in New Orleans. They took a trip up the Mississippi River to Little Rock, a poor town of about two thousand people. Here they opened St. Mary School where they experienced bigotry from Protestants and Know-Nothings. Eventually, they met with success in the school.

In 1852, Bishop Byrne purchased six hundred acres in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The land had previously been General Zachary Taylor’s property. The house was in ruins, but four log cabins and well were operative. In 1853, the Sisters came up to Fort Smith via the Arkansas River, 300 miles from Little Rock, a four day trip at that time.

Fort Smith was Indian Territory, right across the river from Oklahoma Indian Territory. The Sisters slept on the floor in one log cabin and immediately began school for girls and small boys in the
other cabins. They built a three-story building for boarders on the slab of Taylor’s quarters. Three Choctaw princesses and three Cherokee attended the school along with many other Indian women. The river was low for fourteen months, so no supplies could arrive by river. The Sisters subsisted on farm produce and game.

During the Civil War, the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, was fought very near Fort Smith. Confederate records show that three mounted regiments of Cherokees fought with the Confederates. Surely some were fathers and brothers of the Indian students in the Sisters’ school. The Battle of Fort Smith, which the Union won, left many wounded from both sides for the Sisters to nurse. Later, criminals from the Indian Territory were tried and executed at Fort Smith. The site of the hanging gallows can still be seen there.

Indian girls continued to attend this boarding school well into the twentieth century.

**Sisters of Mercy in Oklahoma**

In 1874, the Catholic Indian Mission Bureau was started as an advocacy organization. It began an annual collection for Indian and Colored Missions in 1884.

In 1889, Katherine Drexel entered the novitiate of Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh in order to found her community for Blacks and Indians, a need made urgent as the 1889 Land Rush opened previously unassigned lands in Indian Territory and the Sooners, settlers who wanted to stake their claims first, flooded the territory. The need for more schools was evident.

In 1884, five Sisters of Mercy had traveled from Lacon, Illinois, to Sacred Heart Indian Territory, later to become part of the state of Oklahoma, at the request of the Benedictine abbot, Fr. Isidore Robot, first prefect apostolic of the Prefecture of Indian Territory.

The Sisters arrived at the nearest outpost by train at Atoka. The Indians met and led them by covered wagon for days, through thick forests infested with snakes and wild animals. They had to cross the treacherous Canadian River. They settled in Sacred Heart, an area named by the Benedictines. Their school was named St. Mary, and opened to serve the Pottawatomie, Chickasaw, and Seminole Indians.

Few whites except government officials, including those at the military post, railroad workers, lumbermen, miners, and outlaws were in the territory. The governor of the Chickasaw nation put his daughter in the school. Other white families followed. The history of Oklahoma Mercy schools has always been a combination of Indian and white.

One elderly Sister of Mercy recently recounted her experience of having served at St. Mary in the 1930s. She taught elementary school by day and supervised dormitories in the boarding school at night. She explained that about a hundred Seminole girls and one Pottawatomie girl were in one building and about sixty white boarders were in another building. This was not really segregation; it was the Mercy way to have paying students subsidize nonpaying students. Katherine Drexel, for example, paid $14.00 a year for each Indian student in the school.

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In 1891, St. Joseph School and orphanage were the first institutions in Oklahoma City. The Sisters walked three miles and crossed the Canadian River each day to supervise the building of Mt. St. Mary School, the premier school of the territory.

In 1897, Congress withdrew all government funds from the contract schools. Katherine Drexel and church funding sustained the Catholic Indian missions. In 1898 the Sisters of Mercy erected a boarding and day school at Ardmore, Oklahoma,
The St. Agnes School was opened with many Chickasaws and Choctaws in attendance, one hundred and twenty students the first year, in both the day school and boarding school. In later years, discovery of asphalt and oil brought an influx of settlers. Along with them came anti-Catholic sentiment. Hostility toward the Sisters was great. Only a Jewish merchant made terms for their trade in his store.

In later years, discovery of asphalt and oil brought an influx of settlers. Along with them came anti-Catholic sentiment. Hostility toward the Sisters was great. Only a Jewish merchant made terms for their trade in his store. Gradually, however, prejudice was broken down.

The day school was more popular with the Indians than the boarding school. In 1903, because of governmental relocation, many Choctaws came from Mississippi to enroll in the school because they knew the Mississippi Sisters.

Oklahoma didn't become a state until 1907, with Oklahoma City becoming its capitol in 1910. Today, the tribe conducts a casino, as do other tribes in Oklahoma.

In the 1950s, St. Mary School was a four-story structure for both boarders and day students. In the 1970s, there were fifty-five Indian tribes living in Oklahoma. The student body of St. Mary School had twenty-six tribes represented. Sister Theresa Schmidlkofer, a descendant of a Pottawatomie princess, was a teacher at the school in those years. She encouraged her class to explore their Indian ancestry. After they consulted with their parents, nearly two-thirds of the students claimed Indian blood. Many of the Oklahoma Sisters of Mercy proudly claim Indian blood.

Sisters of Mercy in the Dakotas

In 1883, Sisters of Mercy of the Omaha regional community went to the Dakota Territory, including Indian Island, Belecourt, Turtle Mountain, and Devil's Lake. The schools, staffed by Mercy Sisters in the Dakotas, suffered terribly when the U.S. government reneged on their promises of a certain sum of money per student, as well as not paying money owed to the tribe for land. Many of the Indians suffered from hunger. The winters were harsh and the buffalo scarce since the last herd was killed off in 1885. Bishop James O'Connor brought Katherine Drexel, a laywoman at the time, to survey the situation. She sent supplies and a stove.
Two contract schools were administered in the Dakota Indian Territory. Throughout the U.S., the Catholic Church sponsored the most schools for Indians; but, nevertheless, Catholics suffered prejudice. As an example of anti-Catholic sentiment, one evaluator of a Dakota school berated an Irish Sister instructor for her brogue.

In 1887, a priest organized an Indian sisterhood in North Dakota at Standing Rock. Rome denied it full ecclesiastical recognition. In 1891, the sisterhood was moved to Fort Berthold, North Dakota, where the Sioux Indian Sisters were auxiliaries in teaching and nursing. Several of these Sisters won commendations as volunteer nurses in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.

In 1948, former Omaha provincial Sister Killian Baptist from Louisiana went to Devil's Lake North Dakota Mercy Mission to assist with the Indian hospital. However, the Sisters working in the hospital were not allowed to wear their habits by order of the government.

**Sisters of Mercy in Mississippi**

In 1883, Bishop Francis Janssens, bishop of Mississippi, was distressed by the sad plight of the Choctaws in Neshoba County. He went to Holland and encouraged a priest, Fr. B. M. Bekkers, to come to establish Holy Rosary Mission in Tucker, Mississippi. Father Bekkers came to a most bigoted area of the state to a forgotten, poverty-stricken people, but as the bishop said, a good people. These Choctaws were sharecroppers to poor farmers. In 1847, despite their own poverty, they collected money for the potato famine victims of Ireland.

Bekkers worked hard and lovingly among the people and won their confidence and love. He built a small church and school. In 1885, he petitioned for three Sisters of Mercy from the Vicksburg foundation. Tucker in Neshoba County, Mississippi, where he had started the mission, was less than a hundred miles from Meridian, where the Sisters also had a foundation.

Bekkers returned to Holland and secured donations. He bought a huge tract of land for his mission which he eventually divided into lots of fifteen acres so the Indian families could settle near the church and school. He also built a simple convent. When the Sisters arrived, they were greeted warmly. A very sick child was brought to them for healing. With fear and trepidation, they washed the child, rubbed it down, dosed it with medicine, and with ardent prayers brought it back to health. This greatly enhanced the acceptance the Sisters received.

The Sisters walked great distances to visit the humble dwellings of the Indians. They noted that lack of cleanliness and poor sanitation were factors in the spread of disease. One of the Sisters who kept a diary reported that they made numerous trips of three to six miles to visit. One time, on their return, they were covered with ticks. Tragedy beset the small community, when Sister Marianna French, only twenty-eight years old, died of consumption after the first year.

The Sisters opened a school. The first year, there were many baptisms, and sixteen families had settled on the tracts near the church. During cotton picking, the children worked and were not free to attend school. Father Bekkers took this time to go to Holland for fundraising. He left the Sisters responsible to perform baptisms and to bury the dead.

The Indians lived off garden produce, fish, and wild game, including turkey, deer, and squirrel. The men adorned themselves with squirrel tails when they attended Sunday Mass. When the bishop came for Confirmation, they performed their dances for him, and he reciprocated with a side of beef for the tribe.

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A small settlement of Irish Catholics lived nearby. Many vocations to the Sisters of Mercy came from their daughters, many of whom attended the boarding school of the Sisters in Meridan. These Catholic families, Sisters and Indians, always had a close bond.

The mission never received any government funding; but, in 1903, the government issued another edict for the relocation of the Choctaws to Oklahoma Indian Territory. Father Bekkers had secured two Carmelite priests who were working with him to teach the Indians dairy skills in milking, and making cheese and butter. They thus made it possible for the Indians to take on their own businesses. These Carmelites accompanied the Choctaws to the Indian Territory.

After eighteen years of ministry, the Sisters of Mercy were separated from the Choctaws whom they had loved and served. They were then recalled to Vicksburg.

Many years later, during World War I, Choctaw language was used as a secret code, as was Navaho during World War II.

Conclusion

In their decades of ministry to Native Americans, the Sisters of Mercy experienced conflict, injustice and changing policies of the federal government. Standing contracts were breached, and funding was cut off from their schools. They carried out their ministry despite many financial hardships. They suffered prejudice, endured a clash of cultures, shared poverty with displaced tribes, and lived and died serving them. A eulogy honoring one Sister who had worked twenty-two years with the Native Americans said, “She brought spiritual love, dignity, neatness, precision, and enthusiasm.” The Sisters reached out to serve as best they could under trying circumstances. Few of their names or deeds are recorded in any mainstream histories. Very little credit has ever been given to these Sisters. Rarely are their names mentioned in archives or historical documents. However, two Oklahoma Sisters of Mercy were inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. Sister Francis Troy was inducted in 1935, and Sister Aloysius Lonergan in 1936, both of them golden jubilarians at the time.

Notes

1 The archives of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Louis Region houses the archives of the Arkansas, Mississippi and Oklahoma foundations. They are presently at 2039 N. Geyer Road, St. Louis, Missouri, 63131. I am grateful to Sister Jeremy Buckman, archivist.

2 Information in this paper is also drawn from interviews with several Mercies of the St. Louis region who have Indian ancestry and are knowledgeable about issues that touch Native Americans: Sister Jolitta Koneney (Cherokee); Sister De Forres Laughlin (Cherokee); Sister Theresa Shmidkofer (Pottawatomie); Sister Arthur Ellis (Lakota). Information in this section is drawn from Sister Mercedes Morris, R.S.M., “Sisters of Mercy in Oklahoma: 1884–1944,” masters thesis, Catholic University of America (1945). Advisor: John Tracy Ellis.


4 Interview with Sister Clotilda Toelle, R.S.M. She remembered that Mother Katherine Drexel paid a certain amount per student. Letters from the St. Louis archives verified the amounts that were paid.

5 The Indian Sentinel was published by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions from 1902 to 1962. Information about the bureau, a precursor to the Catholic Extension Society, is available online in the Catholic Encyclopedia.

6 Information from interviews with Sister Clotilda Toelle who taught at Sacred Heart St. Mary’s Indian School in 1931, and later at St. Agnes Indian School at Ardmore.


9 See Diary of Father B. J. Bekkers, archives of the Diocese of Jackson, formerly Natchez-Jackson, Mississippi. It treats the work of the Sisters of Mercy with Choctaws in Holy Rosary Mission at Tucker, Mississippi.

10 See Diary of Sister Marcelline Street, unpublished, in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. Louis, Missouri. It concerns the work of the Sisters with Choctaws in Holy Rosary Mission at Tucker, Mississippi.
Is the Community Catholic Enough?
Accepting Vocations from Women of Color

Maria Luisa Vera, R.S.M.

What I am going to share with you today is one slice in the life of the Sisters of Mercy with regard to women of color in our midst. Much of what I will say I have written in an article that appeared in The MAST Journal in 2004. The particular issue was part 2 on “Religious Life and Constitutions” in anticipation of the Fourth Institute Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in 2005. The historical background is rather sketchy as you will soon see. Attempts to respond to the issue have been generous and sincere on the part of many of our Sisters. We have taken some action steps and have chosen to stay in the struggle.

Historical Sketch

There is little documentation that I have been able to find about the Sisters of Mercy and their policies about minority vocations or acceptance into the order of women of color. The year was 1946 when a priest working in a black parish in New York City posed this question to the Sisters of Mercy: “Is the order Catholic enough to accept colored vocations?” The letter is briefly referenced by Regina Wentz, R.S.M. in Our Beloved Union.¹ There is no doubt in my mind that this question or others similar to this were with the Sisters of Mercy long before 1946. What were the admission policies with regard to black or “colored women” or women of color? Does no policy mean no admission? Our Beloved Union contains only three pages that treat “Admissions of Minorities into the Union.” There is one letter from the first mother general to the mother provincial in St. Louis in 1929 that references a young woman from Mobile, Alabama who had been accepted into the community. The mother general decided the young woman 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 I know the young woman did not stay in the community.

In 1938, the question surfaced again from the principal of St. Catherine Academy in British Honduras (Belize) in the following way: “What is the policy about native girls being accepted into the novitiate.”³ The minutes of the General Council record, “The question was kept in abeyance for the time being.”⁴ By now, you are probably wondering if there was ever a formal response to the priest from New York. Here it goes (in 1946): “I seenothing for you to do but to tell Father O’Brien that we do not accept colored applicants.”⁵

The question kept appearing in one place or another; in 1951, from Chicago and, later, from Cincinnati. The letters go back and forth, and we have to come to the conclusion that admission of women of color to the Sisters of Mercy was inconsistent or arbitrary, because there seems to be no policy either for it or against it. There is a 1953 letter from the mother general to the provincials and novice directors stating, “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.” It is difficult to get a clear picture of how carefully or seriously the issue of admitting women of color into the community was considered. There are some real gaps in the documentation. There is, however, evidence that the women of color would not be considered for domestic work. There is also evidence that women who were to be admitted 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

We now fast-forward past sixty years of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union (1929-1989) and into the new reality of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (1991). We transferred our vows into the new entity. We accepted our new Constitutions and in Our
The founding document, we said, “We, women of Mercy, have discovered a new relationship among us, and we pray that the bonds we formalize today will endure, will enliven us, and will serve our church and touch our world.”

Women of color are accepted into the community of the Sisters of Mercy today. My experience tells me that it is not a question in countries beyond the United States of America that make up our Institute, but I cannot say the same for us in the U.S.A. The question does not appear to be so much the qualities of the applicant, but the readiness of the receiving community where women of color will learn to be Sisters of Mercy.

Will the question of color ever cease being a question for us, the Sisters of Mercy? So what made it possible for women like me (third generation Mexican-American) to be admitted to the Sisters of Mercy? Was it women of faith and courage who were willing to be the first to help the community grow in consciousness and self-awareness? Was it the 1958 case of Brown vs. Board of Education? Was it the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and all that came with it? I have put out the challenge to our Mercy community before and I do it again today: We need to do the work required to help us better understand this part of our history in order to keep moving toward a future where we can truly “act in solidarity with one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.”

Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color

Let me describe the concrete efforts of a group of Sisters of Mercy in the United States. A group between twenty and thirty of us, who call ourselves members of the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color, living in the United States have been gathering annually for eleven years. I will briefly tell you who gathers; for what purpose and why Alliance?

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.”

It took the group the first three years of annual gatherings to come to what may appear to some as very simple decisions. At the end of these three years, some of our Sisters made the decision not to con-
tinue on the journey. It is important that you know the one basic assumption we all agreed on before we set out to define "who," "what," and "why." We all agreed that no one has the right to define anyone else.

There has been a small core group that has never failed to attend the gatherings in all of the eleven years. Some are able to attend depending on dates, places, and finances. The group is self-organized and self-funded with the exception of some small grants from a couple of the regional communities. We have a planning committee, which serves for three years, and the rest of us give input as to possible sites, presenters, and facilitators. We try to meet in April or very early May and rotate the gathering sites from a couple of the regional communities.

In conclusion, allow me to read to you a segment from Eric Law's, The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community, which has been extremely helpful to the members of the Alliance in our prayer and reflection:

In order for an intercultural encounter to be truly "Pentecostal," the church must first value monochromatic gatherings. For people of color, a multicultural gathering serves as 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, 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 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.

The challenge does not end there. Law further poses "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," said the writer of Ecclesiastes (3:1). 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 other based on the social, political, and economic context of the situation.

What is the next step for the Alliance of Sisters of Mercy of Color living in the United States of America? What is the next step for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas? What is the next step for women religious of the twenty-first century? We know deeply within us that we have not arrived, but can we at least agree to be on the journey? Are our communities Catholic enough?

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.
Reflection on Immaculée Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell*

*Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.*

The *MAST Journal* 17.1 dealt with violence: murder, abuse, natural disasters misperceived as God's wrath, Iraq, and just war theory. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the horrors of violence but, as Christians committed to living gospel values, it would be wrong of us to insulate ourselves against the injustice, the violence and the pain of our times. We are called to suffer with those who experience violence, to pray for the victims and to pray for those who do the violence.

Back in the 1970s after my thirty-day retreat, when I was being trained to do spiritual direction and to direct individual retreats in the Jesuit tradition, it was suggested that we ask retreatants who might lack a poignant sense of social justice to pray with *Time* magazine. Our mentors, retreat directors with much experience in that ministry, noted that some people who considered themselves faithful followers of Jesus would avoid harsh reality in the evening news or the daily newspaper. Jesus did not call his followers to ignore reality but to go out among the people, to enter into their suffering, to ache with compassion: com passio.

Those of us whose name is Mercy follow Catherine McAuley, a woman who designed the original habit so that the Sisters of Mercy, soon called “the walking nuns,” could move freely among the poor. We who are Mercy are called ever more deeply to be with others in their suffering, each personal Calvary, each one’s passion and dying.

In an informal group of Sisters gathered by Sister Marilyn Gottemoeller to share about an article the Institute Leadership Conference was going to discuss, I heard Sister Bernadette Little (Jamaica) refer to a book Sister Loraine Peter had given her; a book I had not yet read: *Left to Tell* by Immaculée Ilibagiza. This survivor of the genocide in Rwanda presents the truth from her perspective. The tale is all the more powerful because it is not a documentary account. This is a very personal story.

Looking at the picture of the beautiful woman on the cover, feeling the wholeness in her gaze, one would never suspect she had survived in subhuman conditions for more than three months during the killing of most of her tribe in Rwanda. I had previously read about that genocide but reading the firsthand account of Immaculée was like walking with a victim I came to know personally.

I remember visiting a Holocaust museum near Detroit with my high school students where I saw a tiny article from the *Detroit Free Press* which reported about gas chambers and systematic extermination of Jews well before Pearl Harbor and American involvement in World War II. Did anyone read the article? Did Americans just ignore that genocide? Why did Americans who so often involve ourselves in other parts of the world, just look the other way in Germany as well as in Rwanda? Why

When I was being trained to do spiritual direction and to direct individual retreats in the Jesuit tradition, it was suggested that we ask retreatants who might lack a poignant sense of social justice to pray with *Time* magazine. Our mentors, noted that some people who considered themselves faithful followers of Jesus would avoid harsh reality in the evening news or the daily newspaper.
Immaculée knew clearly that the call for revenge even from deep inside herself was the voice of evil. She knew that only God could deliver her from that impulse. She held to the truth that those who did the horrible violence to her own family members, her friends, and her people, were still God’s children.

did ordinary Americans not know about the genocide in Rwanda until it was almost over? Why did we and United Nations look away? Are there similar situations today which we ignore?

That same issue of The MAST Journal 17.1 presents theology of nonviolence based on Catherine McAuley and Thomas Merton. Immaculée chose nonviolence as her response to horrific violence. “We have to stop killing and learn to forgive” (p.178). She realized that to seek revenge was to allow those who attacked her and her tribe to continue to control them. The only way to break the cycle of mounting violence was to refuse a violent response even though, “My heart hungered for revenge, and I raged inside myself” (p.196). During her unbelievable time, crowded into a small bathroom amid six, then eight, women, Immaculée had gone through her personal dark night of the senses and dark night of the soul. She had come to know the voice of evil and distinguish it from the voice of God. She knew clearly that the call for revenge even from deep inside herself was the voice of evil. She knew that only God could deliver her from that impulse. She held to the truth that those who did the horrible violence to her own family members, her friends, and her people, were still God’s children. Immaculée prayed that God would help her forgive as God forgives.

As I read Immaculée’s internal struggle against revenge, I was transported back to standing with Sister Mary Aloyse Gerhardstein and some of our Sisters from Soweto in Regina Mundi Church in South Africa where the Truth and Reconciliation hearings were held. Following the lead of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela, in an attempt to break another cycle of hatred and violence, this church where I could see bullet holes in the walls was the place where each person spoke personal truth about the horrors endured during apartheid. All listened. No one was executed. No one was punished. No one was forced to apologize. All listened... and healing began. We can choose a nonviolent response even to raging violence as Jesus did on the cross praying that God would forgive those who crucified him.

Immaculée did not demonize the Hutus who searched out to destroy her people, the Tutsis. She did not stoop to the level of those who made an entire people the enemy. “The killers are good people, but right now evil has a hold on their hearts” (p.144). Immaculée knew it was part of the reason God had spared her that she fulfill her life’s work to help others to forgive. At a refugee camp with two little brothers ages three and four, she knew even they could be caught up into violence: “I saw the circle of hatred and mistrust forming in those innocent eyes and I knew God was showing me another reason He’d spared me... to steer them from embracing the hatred that had robbed them of their parents and of a family’s love” (p.165).

Followers of Jesus know that there is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday. Catherine McAuley warned us there is no crown without the cross. Somehow suffering carves out in us greater depths, which joy can permeate. St. Thérèse of Lisieux spoke of God filling us to capacity whether we be a small thimble or a cup. When she instructed that the Sisters should have a good cup of tea when she was gone, I imagine Catherine McAuley meant that we should be hollowed out by embracing suffering through compassion so we are able to hold much of God’s forgiveness and joy.

Sources
I\'ve stood on the edge. On Sunday at 1:59 PM, I found myself on the edge of the North Island, at Cape Palliser Lighthouse. It\'s about a three-hour drive from here, over the Rimutakas and around the Wairarapa coast—at the southernmost point of the North Island. The view from the base of the lighthouse—252 steps up—is spectacular. The coast is rugged and exposed, open to the full force of the Antarctic southerlies. On Sunday, the weather at the edge was brilliantly fine, hot and cloudless—welcome conditions for the seals playing on and around the rocks.

Living in this country shapes us as "edge people." Nowhere is very far from the coast. The place where we stand literally and figuratively shapes the way we see the world. And, as religious, we are called to be on the edge, called to have an edge perspective.

Liturgically, now, we\'re on the edge: the edge of Christmas and the edge of Lent. We call it Ordinary Time. On Boxing Day, however, it seemed as if we had been swept directly into Good Friday and the shadow of the cross drowned the image of the Christ child. Surely God wept. And the "Ordinary" became the extraordinary.

There is a risk to being on the edge. We can easily lose sight of the center. That is why today\'s gospel is so appropriate for this conference. Jesus called his disciples first to be with him (and presumably to be with one another). Only then did he send them out to preach and cast out demons. Mark highlights for us what we claim as the two defining characteristics of religious life today: its contemplative dimension and its prophetic dimension—in other words, its "passion for Christ," and its "passion for humanity." Its center and its edge.

We are here as living embodiments of that passion—all 350 of us—prayers, educators, poets, artists, prophets, writers, singers, theologians, spiritual directors, preachers, dancers, administrators, musicians, social workers, advocates, activists, chaplains, pastoral assistants, sacramental leaders, counselors, nurses. Our passion for Christ, our relationship with him, sustains us in these ministries. We were called and we are continually called to be with Jesus as the first disciples were called and we are sent as apostles to preach and to cast out demons.

But will it matter to anyone that all this "passion for Christ" and all this "passion for humanity" is gathered here these three days? What difference will our conference make? Will it be business as usual on Monday? Or will our lives have changed so much that our relatives will come to get us as Jesus\' relatives did, thinking he had gone "over the edge"? Mark puts that particular story directly after today\'s passage, which may make us ponder.

And what is the message we are sent to proclaim? What is the message after Boxing Day? The task of the prophets of old was to criticize and energize. We see the writer of the letter to the Hebrews...
Julian: To Shine with Hope
drawing on the prophet Jeremiah to energize, to
give hope. Perhaps that is our task today.
The challenge for the writer was to reinterpret
the gospel of Jesus for a new historical moment, to
motivate and give hope to Jewish Christians experi­
cencing loss, alienation, and despair. After con­
cluding his description of Christ’s priesthood, the writer
turns to Jeremiah, a man called from the center to
be on the edge. He puts before his community Jer­
imiah’s passionate reminder of God’s love, God’s for­
giveness, God’s fidelity, and reinterprets it for his
time. Today we may question the writer’s particular
spin on the covenant, but what is important for us is
his reason for it—to give hope and meaning to a
community in despair and despondency.

The edge is a dangerous place.
Thousands of people have died
on the edge—some who chose
the edge because of its beauty
and some whose economic
reality forced them to live there.
We have seen such massive
destruction at the edge that we
cannot yet comprehend it. How
do we preach a word of
resurrection hope in the midst of
such darkness?

The edge is a dangerous place. Thousands of people have died on the edge—some who chose the edge because of its beauty and some whose economic reality forced them to live there. We have seen such massive destruction at the edge that we cannot yet comprehend it. How do we preach a word of resurrection hope in the midst of such darkness? How do we preach "THE Story"? What message would the disciples in today’s gospel have preached?

We know the end of the story, we know that they experienced the Risen Christ precisely when their hopes were shattered, when they allowed the stranger to walk beside them and offer a new perspective on all that had happened. Over and over again the Gospels provide us with evidence that hope begins to unfold and shine when the “I” becomes “We,” when we share our pain, when our friends lift us down through the roof, when some­one we thought was the gardener calls our name, when sharing our resources satisfies our hunger, when a friend washes our feet, when we experience forgiveness, when a stranger dresses our wounds, when we are invited down from our tree, when we find someone who has been lost to us, when we put our nets down one more time, when we hear words of peace uttered in moments of terror. It is precisely when the darkness seems greatest and situations seem most hopeless that God always makes a way. And that is what God has been doing on a massive scale these past three weeks.

Day after day, the media are full of stories of amazing survival, of communities working toget­
er, of incredible generosity and sacrifice, of an almost global solidarity. These are the signs of the presence of God. In the midst of suffering, God is never absent. And this is the truth being discov­ered and lived at the edges today. People are carry­ing out the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in ways that before Boxing Day we would never have thought possible. The gospel message is be­ing reinterpreted and preached anew by the ac­tions of so many people.

Over the past few weeks in this country, where
most people believe in God, we’ve seen and heard
many people struggle to understand where God was
on Boxing Day and where God is at the moment.
But God is where God always is—in the midst of the
suffering, in the global wave of solidarity and com­
passion, in the outpouring of government and pri­
vate aid, in the generosity of children donating their
pocket money. But it takes the eyes of faith to recog­
nize God in these actions. And, in this country, it
takes the courage of the prophets of old to name and
proclaim this presence when a postmodem sensibil­
ity is suspicious of any truth claim.

We in this land know only too well about
earthquakes and the ocean’s destructive power.
The ten earthquakes on Tuesday and the one this morning were yet another reminder of our shaky geographic reality.

Perhaps as religious, particularly in this coun­
try, our task today is to throw off our reluctance to
Perhaps our challenge is to be like lighthouses—unmistakable beacons of hope flashing from the edge. Name the presence of God where we see it, and to shine with hope instead. Perhaps our challenge is to be like lighthouses—unmistakable beacons of hope flashing from the edge. There is such energy gathered here in this place on the edge. How best shall we harness it to preach the message of Jesus, to preach "THE Story"?

In this country, we have the edge on time, the edge on the new day. We're often at the cutting edge of inventiveness and creativity. As religious, can we not have the edge on hope? Can we not preach collectively with our lives a word of hope? Can we not be like that Cape Palliser Lighthouse and flash every twenty seconds? There must be hundreds of such lighthouses all around our fifteen thousand kilometers of coast, the twelfth longest in the world. Imagine the view from above on a clear night! Here at the bottom of the world in a vast ocean, a wonderful dance of light taking place every night, the dance of "Our Story" and the dance of "THE Story"!

As the feminist writer Marge Piercy suggests:

_We must shine_

_with hope, stained glass windows that shape light into icons, glow like lanterns borne before a procession. Who can bear hope back into the world but us..._
Contributors

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Anne Hartfield, Ph.D., lives in San Marino, California. Her doctorate is in American history from Claremont Graduate University, California. Her dissertation was “Sisters of Mercy, Mothers to the Afflicted: Female Created Space in San Francisco, 1854–1898.” Her research: U.S. Women’s History, Colonial America, and U.S. religious history. M.A., American history, University of Denver and her A.B. was in American studies from the University of Notre Dame . . . She has taught at University of LaVerne in California and is presently chair of the Social Studies Department at Mayfield Senior School, Pasadena, California. She has published and presented papers on religion and race in the American Catholic Church, and on the Sisters of Mercy.

Elizabeth Julian, R.S.M., (Aotearoa, New Zealand) holds a B.A. and a B.Ed. from Massey University, an M.Ed. from Boston College and a D.Min. from Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. At Wellington Catholic Education Centre, she teaches courses in scripture, theology, and spirituality, and coordinates the Distance Learning Programme. She writes for the Wellington Archdiocesan monthly newspaper and has published articles in Review for Religious, MAST, Vashti’s Voices, Refres, and Stimulus. “Landscape as Spiritual Classic: A Reading from Paekakariki” was published in H. Bergin & S. Smith (eds.), Land and Place: He Whenua, he Wahi: Spiritualities from Aotearoa New Zealand (2004). Her address to the Catholic bishops and congregational leaders of Aotearoa New Zealand in March 2006 was entitled “Creating a Song and Dance—Kiwiimagining: The Prophetic Role of Women Religious in the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand Today.”

Jolitta Konecny, R.S.M. (St. Louis) was born in Slovak, Arkansas. She entered the Sisters of Mercy in St. Louis, Missouri. She has a B.A. in business education and an M.A. in secondary administration. She is also certified as a hospital chaplain by the National Association of Catholic Chaplains. Her ministry in secondary schools in Arkansas and Mississippi includes service as assistant principal at Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock, Arkansas. She has worked at hospitals in Arkansas and Missouri and was hospital chaplain in Arkansas and Oklahoma. In 2003, she received the Omega Award as the “Unsung Hero” presented by the Oklahoma Alliance for the Better Care of the Dying. Later, she was assistant executive director of Catherine’s House in Little Rock. She subsequently was bookkeeper in the regional treasurer’s office for the Sisters of Mercy. At present, she volunteers at Mount St. Mary Academy in Little Rock.

Mary Paulinus Oakes, R.S.M. (St. Louis) has an M.A. in educational administration from St. Xavier University in Chicago, and an M.A. in religious education from Loyola University in New Orleans. She was trained as a chaplain at Our Lady of the Lake Hospital in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has served as principal of Sacred Heart High School in Biloxi and St. Francis High School in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Presently, she works as chaplain at St. Dominic Behavioral Hospital in Jackson, MS, where she conducts the twelve-step program with alcoholics and drug addicts; she also does grief work with depressed patients. She has started a halfway house for alcoholic men, and one for women in Jackson, MS.
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 presently director of ELOROS, (Education, Law and Religious Organizations) a nonprofit. She has been editor of The MAST Journal since 1998. Her most recent book is Obedience to Reality: Essays on Religious Life, WestWind Press (2006).

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M. (Cincinnati) is associate professor of theology and chair of the Theology Department at Saint Joseph’s College of Maine. She holds a doctorate in systematic theology from Fordham University, a M.A. in Spanish language and literature from the University of Cincinnati, an M.A. in religious education from the Aquinas Institute of Religious Studies, a certificate in spiritual and retreat direction from Colombiere Spirituality Center in Michigan, and a B.A., summa cum laude, from Edgecliff College. She is the author of the monograph: Humanization in the Christology of Juan Luis Segundo and has contributed articles and reviews in Review for Religious, The Bulletin of Saint Sulpice, The MAST Journal, The Merton Annual, The Merton Seasonal, and Groundings (St. Michael’s Theological College Publication, Jamaica, West Indies). Her current research includes a systematic study of Segundo’s theology and an article on Merton in relation to the Shakers’ spirituality of simplicity.

Maria Luisa Vera, R.S.M. (St. Louis) was born in Brownsville, Texas, and was educated in the public school system. She attended the Mercy Hospital School of Vocational Nursing after graduating from high school. After two years of hospital work, she joined the Sisters of Mercy in St. Louis in 1963. She received her B.S.N. from Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas and worked as a floor nurse and nursing supervisor in hospitals. In 1985, she was elected to the St. Louis Province Leadership Team. She was regional community president from 1992–1995 before being elected to the Institute Leadership Team in Silver Spring, Maryland, a position she held from 1995–2005. She has served on various boards and committees including the Catholic Health Association, the Mexican American Cultural Center, and the Religious Task Force for Central America and Mexico. She was a member of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious throughout her twenty years of elected leadership. In 2006, she became the CEO for Mercy Ministries of Laredo, the umbrella organization that encompasses Casa de Misericordia, Mercy Casita, and Mercy Primary Healthcare Services.

Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M. (Cincinnati) is a canon lawyer with a J.C.L. from St. Paul University in Ottawa. She is the director of the tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as well as promoter of justice and defender of the bond, a position held 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 The Jurist. She is an editor of Jurisprudence and has contributed to the Canon Law Society of America’s Advisory Opinions and Roman Replies, as well as Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. She is the author of Catholics, Marriage and Divorce: Real People, Real Questions (2004). She served as secretary of the Canon Law Society of America from 2004–2006.
Discussion Questions

(Doyle) Do you consider the prophetic dimension of religious life associated primarily with women’s choice of a particular lifestyle, or with the sort of ministry Sisters do in church and society?

(Hartfield) When Sisters have to deal with conflict between themselves and clergy or bishops, what is the kind of conflict where you think it’s best to cut and run, slapping the dust off their sandals? When should Sisters stand and fight? Over what subjects?

(Konecny) What is the difference of name, resonance and relationship in U.S. society when the historically oppressed group to whom Mother Austin Carroll ministered is called Black, African American, or the Negro race? If you hyphenate or not?

(Oakes) Mercy ministries to Native American tribes are not well known outside the regions where Sisters served. From a justice standpoint, do you agree or disagree with the idea of Indian tribes now supporting their tribes by running gambling casinos?

(Rosenblatt) Is there continued value, for women’s own spirituality and sense of well-being, in rejecting the Church as patriarchal, authoritarian, and oppressive? Even if this remains true, what are women’s alternative strategies for resisting and reforming this feature of ecclesial reality?

(Sunderman) What were some of the social, religious, and racial tensions that St. Paul had to face in the early church? In Mercy life, it’s one thing to feel inspired with the idea of “being reconciled.” What practical work is necessary for parties in conflict to reach an accord? Does the same strategy work for every kind of conflict within community?

(Sunderman) Was Merton’s heartfelt expression of love for “M.” in his later life an example of “first love” or a mature spiritual engagement of mind, emotions, and personality? As a woman, how would you assess him if a man shared these feelings with you?

(Vera) How does a dual-language approach to Institute communications signal a willingness to change attitudes held by the majority about women of color in Mercy? Is Spanish translation sufficient? What work does the majority need to do if they are to feel true empathy for the situation of women of color in society, Church, and Mercy itself?

(Vondenberger) The physical violence done by practicing Christians against each other in the 1994 Rwandan genocide still defies comprehension. What lessons from *Left to Tell* are applicable to inter-relational conflict that is less national in scope? Can my attitude alone soften the impulse to violence in someone else, or only in me?
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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, 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. Marilyn King, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST’s executive director. MAST will hold its 22nd annual meeting in Burlingame, California, at Mercy Center June 13–15, 2008.

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 $25 per year, payable to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST Managing Editor, Sisters of Mercy, 535 Sacramento Street, Auburn, CA 95603. Email: mhoward@mercysisters.org.

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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. Marilyn King, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST’s executive director.