

## **Ecclesial Challenges for the Sisters of Mercy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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

### **Horror Vacui**

As I read the history of our Institute, the earliest sisters had a clear mission and a distinct enough way of life that, when women came to them, they had something for them to do and things to teach them. I fear that our 1992 *Constitutions* is a bit misleading in the way it casts Mother McAuley's reason for founding the community. Perhaps in the most general way, she wanted her women, as religious, to partake in the mission of the church in the world. But it is clear that, up close, the church was not engaged in the mission to protect women, to visit the sick, to educate the poor. She saw something that wasn't being done for those who were close to her heart, and she found a way to get it done. In other words, I think Mother McAuley saw herself responsible for a dimension of the Body of Christ that she knew and loved well.

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

mission of Mercy. The story of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia is a wonderful example of what I am talking about.<sup>1</sup> When Ursula Frayne (27) arrived in Western Australia with two other professed sisters, three novices and a postulant (after a voyage of 113 days and 25,000 kilometers) she found that no place had been prepared for them. Not only that, but in place of the hoards of children the bishop said were waiting for instruction, a single student presented herself the day they opened school. Ursula and her sister tramped through the bush and went to every home in the settlement. At the end of three months, they had fifty students. From that beginning, they went on to open orphanages, hospitals, and boarding schools. They found a way to include aboriginal children in their educational mission. They visited the prisons and established a house of mercy for girls of good character to find refuge and learn skills that would lead to employment. Of course they did all this within the Catholic Church in Australia. But all accounts indicate that they presented a different “face” of the church. As did the sisters who nursed in the Crimea, the War Between the States, the yellow fever epidemics and the sisters who taught slaves to read when it was against the law in the southern United States to do so.

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

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

At the same time, the new *Constitutions* has done away with as much of the hierarchical ranking as was possible, given Canon Law. It is clear from the tone of the text that this group wants to be a community of sisters and that the exercise of authority within is a service, not a life-long office or honor.

It is stunning to pull these elements out in the year 2000. Now we find the Sisters of Mercy running the gamut. Some of us have taken up parochial and diocesan positions, engaging directly in the ecclesiastical mission under the authority of pastor or bishop. Others of us want to see members of our Institute ordained, thus introducing into the heart of the community a distinction that would make some members clergy and carry with it the power to confer or withhold the sacraments. (See Schneiders' new book, *Finding the Treasure*, for some very strong opinions on this question of ordaining members of women's religious orders.) At the same time, there is discussion about accepting into membership persons who are married, persons who do not want to make a life commitment, persons who are not female, persons who are not Catholic. Inasmuch as this represents the urge to gain universal scope, the ideal type at work is the church-type.

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

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

My analysis leads me to hypothesize the following. Institutionally we are veering toward the church-type and some sisters have bought into that, finding a satisfactory religious life as part of the parish. Many disaffected with the church are trying to sustain their spirits with a mystical type of Christianity and even with a generic "spirituality" that borrows from many other religious traditions. Others are trying to change the Church and/or society through protest actions undertaken by other groups, groups that have preserved more of the sectarian character of radical Christianity. I have in mind here not only the growing dedication to closing the School of the Americas, which has created

such bonds that some sisters will forego community events to attend protest rallies. There are also the ecological communities and the whole justice network—not to mention the support groups proliferating within the community that, in effect, are trying to influence in some way the larger RSM body: the feminist network, the under 45, the Sisters of Mercy of Color, the Lesbian network. Institutionally, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has become so much of a church that we need “sectarian” groups within to function the way religious orders once functioned within the larger body of the church.

Yet it seems, from a reading of the Institute Chapter, that those responsible for deciding directions for the Institute are not satisfied with this picture. The call for a “corporate voice” is, to me, a call to be together on some things. Underlying the language of “corporate voice” appears to be a desire to work some issues all the way through our processes so that they become, not the position of this or that group of sisters of Mercy, but a stand taken by the Institute as a whole.

### **Identity and Mission**

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

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

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

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

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

### **Union and Charity**

Do we any longer believe in the salvific power of union and charity? That is, do we believe that women united in heart and mind can determine together how to serve God with or without institutional guarantees? This is not an idle question. I have worked exclusively with women of faith for the last eight years and I know the demons that inhabit us. One of the worst is captured in the passage I cited yesterday from Audre Lorde: that we cannot have an unsanctioned thought, that we suspect what is most creative in ourselves. I think we have insights into very important church and societal issues—insights that stem from our experience—that we could, as a body, offer to the

world. But we would have to believe in our own processes of discernment enough to suffer for those insights.

Another of the demons is a kind of inclusivity that makes it impossible to respect boundaries. Union and charity is difficult if not impossible to achieve when one is never sure who is in the community.

### **The Service of the Poor, Sick and Ignorant**

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

### **Public vows**

The 1992 *Constitutions* declares that “we profess by public vows....”<sup>iii</sup> Does this line mean only that we pronounce our vows in public and then live them out in private? In other words, do public vows entail a public dimension to our life, a dimension that can be experienced by others, especially those in need? I find this question to be especially acute when it comes to the works of mercy. If, to minister as a Sister of Mercy, we must be able to perform the spiritual as well as the corporal works of mercy, then we need to think very seriously about our current practices. As I’ve noted, we are involved in

ministries and institutions where we are forbidden to talk about God or matters religious or spiritual. What does this portend for identity of the individual sister and of the community as a body?

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

### **The Traditional Vows of Religion**

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

**Chastity:** Though constitutions have always spoken in euphemisms about this vow, the clear interpretation has been that by this vow the sister foregoes sexual activity and sexual pleasure. In former ages, this understanding of chastity was

connected to a perception of sexual pleasure as defiled and defiling. Chastity, as the 1955 *Constitutions* implies, makes one like the angels.<sup>iv</sup>

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

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

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

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

Of one thing I am convinced. If we are not known for loving one another, nothing we do for the poor, sick and ignorant will draw women of fire and energy to our midst.

That is why I believe that the tendency to overwork, so prevalent among us, is in truth a violation of chastity as it is currently understood from our *Constitutions*. If the aim of chastity is to create a loving community of women that exists as a body in response to a call from God, neglect or refusal to participate in and care for that community constitutes a failure of chastity.

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

**Poverty:** I agree with Jacques Pohier when he contends that “the possession of goods and the use of money has such a different significance [in our day] that to deprive oneself of possessions or money must inevitably have a totally different significance also.”<sup>v</sup> (p. 32). We seem to have intuited this when we changed the emphasis in poverty from renunciation of any acts of possession and use of goods except by permission of a superior (former *Constitutions*) to the surrender of “the independent use and disposal of material goods.”<sup>vi</sup> Lovely as the idea is, however, I am not sure what we think it means nor how it works out in practice. Are we continuing to consider “independent” to mean “without permission”? Given the level of affluence among us, I fear that we are. That is, I fear that many of us think that as

long as the community allows us to have what we ask for, there is no obligation to think further.

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

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

And this idea of “my own” does not apply only to the individual sister. We can also be guilty of thinking of material possession as “our own,” as belonging to a

particular regional community and thus off limits to any other. I believe that the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has a golden opportunity to testify to our union and charity in a dramatic and salvific way as we face the reality of poor and rich regional communities. And as we contemplate the bold act of sharing funds and other resources across regional community lines, we need an intense theological reflection on the dimensions of this opportunity. Patricia Wittberg has written in her challenging book, *Pathways to Creating Religious Communities*,<sup>vii</sup> that the world needs a *corporate* lived virtuoso spirituality that will speak to the problems of our time. Whatever we call it—simplicity, interdependent use of goods—the vow we have known as poverty must have a corporate dimension and meaning if we are going to embody into the next century the Christian way of holding goods in common.

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

Surely, the initiative at the recent Institute Chapter to have us cut the percentage of resources consumed was inspired by some sense that our levels of consumption are

affecting our mission. I applaud that impetus, but think we have to get much more concrete before we will realize, as a body, how the growing individualism and consumerism among us is inhibiting our living out of the vow of service.

Similarly, the growing concern for ecology and the call to change our attitudes toward the cosmos will affect our understanding and practice regarding material goods

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

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

There can be no union among persons unless they are willing to join their individual decision making power to that of others in some fashion. There can be no union unless the members of the group are ready to obey the decisions made according to whatever processes are adopted. Whether groups decide to delegate the decision making to an individual (such as was the case when we had a whole system of superiors) or engage in the most elaborate forms of discernment involving every single member, (as was the case in the recent Pathways process) there can be no united

action unless individuals in the group commit themselves to the outcome of the decision before knowing how it will turn out.

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

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

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

### **Ecclesial challenge**

We are very well aware of the ecclesiastical challenges. In fact, I think we have been consumed by them for quite some time. But I believe that our greatest ecclesial challenge is to turn our eyes away from “them” for awhile, whoever “they” might be. We need to decide together who and what we think we are or want to be in the great

broken Body of Christ—which is not nor can every be coextensive with ecclesiastical structures. And we need to do that without starting with definitions imposed by someone outside the community.

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

I cannot state strongly enough, however, that we have to develop processes that allow us to confront the real differences among us and to resolve the essential ones. I have argued throughout these talks that one difference regards the “type” of Christianity on which we organize and understand our lives. In this framework, other differences will take on new aspects. I am eager now to hear from you what you think these real differences are and how we might resolve them.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Walsh, *A Woman of Mercy, the Story of Ursula Frayne (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt Publishing, 1997)*.

<sup>ii</sup> Rembert Weakland, OSB, “Religious Life in the U.S.—Understanding the Moment,” in *Living in the Meantime, Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, edited by Paul J. Philibert, O. P. (New York: Paulist, 1994), p. 210.

<sup>iii</sup> *Constitutions* (Silver Spring, MD: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1992) # 2.

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<sup>iv</sup> *Constitutions of the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States of America* (Bethesda, MD: Sisters of Mercy General Motherhouse, 1955), pp. 39-40.

<sup>v</sup> Jacques Pohier, *God in Fragments* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), p. 32.

<sup>vi</sup> *Constitutions* (1992) #24.

<sup>vii</sup> Patricia Wittberg, *Pathways to Re-Creating Religious Communities* (New York: Paulist, 1996).