

**Heart Matters**  
Diane M. Caplin, Ph.D.

**HEART MATTERS - INTRODUCTION**

The title I have chosen for today's talk is deliberately ambiguous. I intend it to mean two things: First, the concerns of the heart (**heart matters**) and second, that what goes on in the heart has consequences (**heart matters**). This morning, we begin with **heart matters**.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Anyone with the good sense to read Carol Flingers' new book, *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst* will recognize that I have borrowed liberally from that superb work in the preparation of these remarks. The text is a 1998 publication of Harper Collins and I work I wholeheartedly recommend.

**HEART MATTERS - PART I**

*Our work is to do God's work in our own souls. . . . Our service must be free.* Does anyone know who said those words? It was Mother Demetrias, about 70 years ago - at a New Year's Day conference for the sisters. Given what I know about average lifespan in your community, maybe some of you were there to hear those words spoken. No matter. Your founder actually said them and their truth is as vital for us to hear today as it was at the beginning of this last century in the millennium.

Sure, it must have been a lot easier for Mary Frances Cunningham. For example, she knew God was a man. All she had to do was convince one priest of the need to do the work she felt called to do so that he could convince one bishop and all the requisite permissions would be given for little Mary of St. Martin's to follow God's will for her. At that time, you see there was no patriarchy. No global warming either. No Internet. There were lots of children, though, desperate to hear the word of God. Mary Frances Cunningham and her companions would find a way to discern God's will for them - to

“do God’s work in their own souls” and to offer their lives freely in His service. Your presence here today is living witness of how successful Mother Demetrias’ efforts were.

But, let’s face it, things have changed. The process of discerning God’s will for us at the end of this same century is much more difficult, right? For one thing, it’s a lot noisier now. It’s not just that there are more cars, telephones everywhere and TV game shows blaring in hospital waiting rooms. There is also a kind of psychic noise in the souls of women of the heart as we move toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Something is wrong - we know it in our bones. What is God’s will for us today? Is there a hope in the world that any woman can be free enough to listen and hear the voice of the spirit the way our saintly ancestors did?

The answer is not easy because the very things that the bones and psyches of women are heralding, seem to be at odds with the conditions necessary for a healthy spiritual life. Our consciousness-raising groups tell us to find and use our voices - yet we yearn for silence. Feminine models of saintly contemplation were enclosed - in the anchorage, convent cells, “rooms of their own,” but the women’s movement insists that we liberate ourselves from the walls built to contain us. A rich spiritual life requires letting go of the ego at the very time that the feminists challenge us to develop a sense of self. Finally, attending to the spirit means diverting attention from the body but women around the world are realizing that our bodies are divine creations whose goodness needs to be celebrated.

We might be tempted to give up right now since “a spiritual hunger and a feminist thirst”\* seem to have irreconcilable differences. But I do not believe that these deeply feminine desires are really at odds with each other. I believe that both of these

desires are God-given and that we all need to attend carefully to what God is saying to us in this time. And women especially need to do this freely, as women, not as the human beings men have defined us to be. *“Our work is to do God’s work in our own souls. Our service must be free.”*

Now for the bold part. The most important thing that women of the heart for the 21<sup>st</sup> century can do is to discern and model what truly frees women to be who we are created to be and to name those realities in our lives that are obstacles to women’s freedom. Our service cannot be free if we do not know God’s work in **our** souls. But we can’t know our souls if we continue to live out a definition of womanhood that has been designed for the convenience and comfort of men. There are dire consequences for doing anything less. Women will continue to suffer, yes, but so will boys and men. The earth will continue to suffer, like the poorest and most exploited of the poor. Communications will further alienate us from the communal and sharing beings that we are. And vocations to a life that protects prayer and selfless service will dwindle to unsustainable levels. There are serious implications for women who are evangelizers and there is much that you can do right now to effect the future. We will address some of these implications in Part II. For now, I will name what I believe to be some of the obstacles to women’s freedom for a life of service in the spirit.

There is an ethos in our culture that we are successfully spreading to every nation in the world. The so-called first world has somehow managed to make an international virtue out of corporate greed and an unquenchable thirst for economic growth. Feeding this acquisitive appetite is fundamentally at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many

of you know better than I do the ravaging results on the lives and spirits of the poorest of the poor.

There are two victims of corporate greed, however, that are mysteriously hidden from us. One is the girl child, the other mother nature.

First the girl child. I will use a North American girl child as my prototype since she is most familiar to me. You will have to decide how she compares to the girl you were or to those you teach. She is happy. She is athletic. She is smart in school. She sings, laughs, dances, plays. Then she turns 10 or enters the fifth grade or 11 in the sixth grade or at some time in her happy journey of life she gets quiet. Not only does her body start to change but people start to respond to her differently. Her father withdraws. Her mother and teachers tell her “HUSSHHHH.” And her participation in school begins to fall off. She is sure she is ugly. She seems sad all the time. What is happening?

Not everyone ignores her, however. Around the same time, the boys her own age seem to take an interest in her. Not the kind of interest they used to have on the playground or in the science lab. Now the interest is different. Now it seems unseemly. They stare, glare, snicker. She is self-conscious but at least someone is paying attention.

Perhaps this is enough for you to get, or remember the picture. Some of the finest research available to us is now studying this phenomenon. The American Association of University Women has documented how the treatment by teachers and counselors effects the once-bright girl child and sends her subtle messages about her worth in the intellectual arena. Carol Gilligan and her team of Harvard researchers have brilliantly documented their studies of “voice” of young girls and what happens to the natural goodness of a girl’s special voice when it resonates back to her from no one. But we

believe that child to have be a unique and special creation of God. Do we also believe that the sad silence that falls over this child is part of God's plan? Will this child be able to do God's work in her own soul even when her God-given spirit seems to be extinguished?

The answer I think, is no. Of course not. But what is going on here? Part of the answer is surely economic. From the time she is conscious enough to watch TV Madison Avenue is after this child. She is sold fattening food empty of nutritional value until she gets plump and is then sold a lifetime of fashion magazines that tell her what she should look like and then sold diet aids and exercise plans to achieve that look. Then there are the cosmetics and the clothes. Our economic system looks at our little girl, a precious feminine incarnation of the divine, and sees - a marketing opportunity. If the game is played right, the child will be exploitable for 80 years or more.

Boys and men will suffer this kind of exploitation too you say. And you are right. But probably the worst economic thing that happens to our girls happens precisely because they are girls on the way to womanhood. There is an entire growth industry that is flourishing around so-called birth control and infertility. First, the medical and pharmaceutical industries have found ways to alter the natural cycles of women to cause infertility that approximates the male way of being; then, when the successful career woman of 35-40 decides she would like to start a family, the same industry invades her again in a mad effort to restore the fertility that was unnaturally altered during the woman's most fertile time of life.

Why is this happening? Reliable studies prove conclusively that it would be much safer and much less expensive to control reproduction by altering male fertility. At

least one reason is that it is much more financially lucrative to require a woman to take a pill every day for thirty years than it is to inject a man occasionally to regulate his sperm production. Worst of all, I think is that pressure to begin chemically altering the hormones of developing young girls is on so that they will be sexually available to men as soon as they reach maturity. As long as I live, I will never forget a conversation I had years ago with a woman who told me that her 16 year old daughter had been asked out on her first date - for a movie. Her mother told her she could go if she first agreed to go on the pill. This is a dramatic example but one that illustrates what many people think of that child's worth. Her sex defines her. She is an object for an insatiable market economy and an object to answer the sexual drives of men. With the risk of pregnancy unnaturally altered, the only reason not to have sex is that she does not want to. Not a reason that counts for any woman in any culture I am familiar with. At the very time when the meaning of her creation as woman should be contemplated in protective silence, the maturing young girl is assaulted in these ways. Is it any wonder that even she will grow to call this liberation, instead of naming it the enslavement that it really is?

Our second victim is mother nature. Just as the greedy corporate culture looks at a girl and sees a market, so it is with rivers, trees, the birds of the skies, the fish in the sea. With sinful eyes, all of God's body, every cell of the creation is the raw material of economic growth. This nature shares with women and has for centuries of human history. The feminine has been associated with nature and both have been used by male powers who had no experiential basis for understanding either. Men are less identified with nature at least in part because they have no experience of being woman - whose

cyclic and nurturing body share much with the created order. The term mother nature is as apt as mother earth. It is she, after all, that can co-create and sustain God's world.

Nature has been abused by human beings not because of God's plan but because we have misunderstood the gift and our responsibility to have dominion over all of the created order. Some people want to get away from the language of dominion but the word which literally means supreme authority, ought to be understood as being to it as God would be to it. The relationship of human beings to nature at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is surely not one of the divine creator to the created one. We don't love the creation the way God does. What has gone wrong?

Part of the problem, at least, is that nature has heretofore been understood to be something that needed to be controlled. Nature had to be tamed and contained. It was needed it for food, shelter, clothing, recreation. The treasures of the earth have been seen not as created beings with integrity and goodness of their own but with the arrogance of people who see everything in relation to how it can serve them. In a word, nature has been objectified.

Objectifying nature has nearly resulted in its obliteration. Sometimes it is only human carelessness or thoughtlessness that has caused the devastation. Other times the blatant evil is easier to name. To my horror, I saw the evidence one afternoon on a bumper sticker, "Pave the Bay." If the object is to control, then nature in all its complexities will be simplified. Loving nature is not an option because love is mysterious, complex, emotional. It is easier to simplify in order to control. Then there is no negotiating for the other's needs. In control, one can dominate in the worst sense of the word.

What is needed of course, is a change of gaze. Human beings need to see nature not as an object to fulfill our own needs and desires but as itself a subject deserving of our unselfish attention, respect and love. Theologian Sallie McFague, in her new book of feminist ecology says it best: Christians are called to love nature just as we are called to love of God and neighbor. We ought to love nature as ourselves. And given the abuse that nature has taken in this millennium, we ought to view nature as among the poorest of the poor: “In other words, the radical, inclusive love of others, especially the most oppressed others, which is at the heart of Christian faith, demands two things of Christians. It demands that we support the preservation of wilderness areas so that nature, the new poor, can grow and flourish. It also demands that we work for pockets of wildness in our cities, so that ordinary people, especially poor people, can experience nature directly.” (p. 125).

Notice that Christians are not called to protect nature so that we can enjoy it as spectacle or that it be there for future generations of humans to enjoy. We are called to preserve it for its own sake, for its own flourishing on its own terms. The lesson is a vital one for all Christian caretakers to heed.

The market forces that exploit nature are no less harmful than those which exploit women using God’s creation as a means to some greedy end instead of treasuring and respecting both for what they represent in themselves. Let’s take some time together now, at your tables to reflect on your own experiences as a girl and woman in your environment. How does your experience compare with what I have offered here this morning? How do you think the record of treatment of women and of the natural order compare? Is there

anything to learn from this for our spiritual lives? “Our work is to do God’s work in our own souls”. What will make our service free?

## **HEART MATTERS - PART II**

Heart **Matters**. What you believe about womanhood, nature, technology and spirituality will necessarily effect the way you live out your call as Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart. It will literally effect everything you do and who you think you are. When and how you communicate this special identity will effect your ability to be attractive to other women who hear a call like yours. Listen to a more complete version of the phrases of Mother Demetrias that we have been working with this morning.

*Where material interests are concerned, we rely on work and enterprise. Where spiritual interests are at play, [however] we are tempted to forgo them. This certainly is not according to God’s design. To neglect our spiritual life is a sin against the Author of nature, and the Author of grace will not make up for this neglect with miracles. The gospel of human effort is as necessary for holiness of life as the gospel of grace. If we desire holiness, we must work for it, making use of every means that crosses our path. Accept the opportunities that come - they are god’s messages, and His way of helping us to grow holy. He will not force us to receive them. He has given us free will, and our service must be free.*

Mother Demetrias at a New Year’s Day conference to the sisters as quoted by John Murrett in *The Mary of Saint Martin’s*, p. 164)

“The gospel of human effort is as necessary for holiness of life as is the gospel of grace. . . . Our service must be free.” Given this morning’s discussion, I think we would all

agree that these words ring true today. Most understand the rewards of hard “work and enterprise” on the material front. The gospel of capitalism. But what about the rewards of the spiritual quest? In your special, womanly mission to bring forth the kingdom, you have taught that God’s promise for eternal rewards will be fulfilled. Perhaps, then, you will allow me to paraphrase Mother Demetrias in 1998 in these three simple claims: Women’s effort, freely given, is necessary to acknowledge and nurture God’s infinite grace. Women’s effort, a special gift, must be offered to understand our relation to the cosmos. Women’s effort, an ingenious design, is essential for the future of humanity and the rest of God’s holy creation. Heart Matters.

Heart matters because the world and God’s people are hungry for a witness to a holy life that counters all of the unholy messages that bombard us every day. What can you do? You are not a member of the federal reserve board, the New York Stock exchange, the United States congress. You have no power to slow the world down, quiet things, simplify life, so you think. Wrong. Psalm 46 promises something quite different: BE STILL, THEN, AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD. If you as a body of women can commit to being still, to listening for the voice of God in your lives, and for teaching young girls and other women to listen in kind, you will change the world. Your constitutions reflect the value revealed in the psalm: “Our communities strive to provide an atmosphere of reflective silence in order that everyone in the community has the opportunity to experience the presence of God through prayer.” MSHS Constitution, p. 40. If that is so, teach other women how to do that. LISTEN to them and their concerns. Help them understand that the uneasiness they are feeling in their bones is not the result of a hormonal imbalance that needs to be chemically regulated, it is the voice of God

crying out to be heard. If women religious can't teach us how to do these things, who can?

I can't resist telling you a little story here. One early evening at the Provincial House in Mount Washington, I was rushing to get a paper out via Federal Express and still had to fill out my forms when the driver, JAVAHA , got there. I shuffled her into the chapel and asked her to wait a few minutes while I finished. When I got back to her, she said to me, "What is this, a Church, or something? It's so quiet here in this place." "Well, I say, it used to be a convent but now it's a theological center for women. It's a pretty thick building and nobody's home, I guess it can seem quiet at this time of day." "No," she says to me, " I mean, here, in this place it is truly quiet - it's like I can hear my insides."

In the early history of women's religious life, convents gave young women and girls a counter-cultural option to the enslavement that many knew marriage and motherhood to be. And the prohibition against the ordination of women freed women from something else too - it freed them from the male-defined world of the clergy and the administrative details of running the parish and the military-like chain of command that defines the hierarchical church. Women who bonded together freely, to listen to God's will for them and to respond in unselfish service to do God's work, learned how to be human in a woman's body and how to be community in a body of women. They learned this in a world that was the most oppressively male world known in human history; they learned it during the Roman Empire for God's sake. For centuries, women committed to the promises of God were able to attract some of the most intelligent and gifted women the world has ever known. To these women, to women like you, all of Christendom must

be grateful for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, for building the hospitals for those that no one knew were sick, for teaching the kids hanging around after mass, knocking on the doors of the lonely suspicious. Could the word of God ever reached those of us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had women never learned to build communities that witnessed to the feminine principle in creation? I doubt it.

Nevertheless, now, many of the most intelligent Christian women of a certain age, fight to be ordained. Some even insist that they ought to be ordained and married. Fewer and fewer seek out the prayerful enclosures that nurtured and developed women's spirituality for centuries. Now, an Ignatian retreat is the Cadillac of spiritual experiences. Vocational interest to a life of prayer and service in communities of reformed women religious is at an all-time low.

There are no doubt many reasons for this drop in vocations the complexities of which we do not have time to get into today. Surely one reason, though, is the perception that women religious are subordinate to men; that they exist to serve a hierarchical institution that oppresses and demeans women. In one sense, the observation is completely false. If anywhere women could be women, without being under the headship of a man, it was in the convent. There they could make the rules, set the priorities; identify the needs of God's people and commit to serve those needs. In another sense, though, I believe that the perception has some validity to it. What young women often see in women religious these days is a willingness to forgo what the spirit is calling them to do in exchange for a professional identity that gives them a public profile in the community.

So let's say that "sister" is the pastoral associate and may see a need to gather the fifth grade girls to listen to them, to offer them a protected environment in which to voice their deepest yearnings, fears, longings. She may want to give them an experience of the enclosure that frees them to say and be who they really are and to have their precious voices resonate back to them from a wise woman who once had that voice herself. Or she may want to help them to pray in a language that touches them, in a way that reverences the reality that they are precious creatures in the image and likeness of God. "Father" the final authority in the parish context gets nervous. They may use inclusive language. This may be feminist subversion. The bishop may hear about it. You see, when women gather in an environment that excludes men, there can only be two reasons for it: 1) they must be victims, battered in need of some support, 2) they must be plotting to undermine the social fabric of our beloved institutions of church and society. So, let's say, hypothetically, "Father" says no. Not in his parish. The girls will go to CCD like everyone else. Read: with the boys.

Lest you think I have come up with a fanciful example, let me assure you that I speak from experience. In the past six years of founding and operating the Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women, I have noted two reactions from those who learned about the center: 1) that we are a shelter for battered women or 2) that we are radical feminists who hate men and want to destroy every trace of western civilization. I, with my Ph.D. in philosophy and twenty years experience in higher education have had to explain to any number of people in my own family that no, I am not running a rehab center for drug addicts. Women coming together is dangerous stuff. If we are not victims, why are we doing it? Then, once they get it, and discover that we are studying

the scripture or moral theology together, the next question is often whispered, “Does the cardinal know about this? What does he think?”

The short answer is, of course, the cardinal has been on our mailing list since we got to town. He is our local Church leader and we have official standing in his diocese. The longer answer, however, is that I cannot afford to be concerned what the cardinal thinks. The cardinal has his own call, his own duties, his own sacred responsibility to keep this church together. I have mine. God has sent to Mount Saint Agnes hundreds of women, faithful women who are hanging on to membership in our Church by their fingernails. Women who are desperate to know what they can pass on to the next generation with integrity. Feminist. Catholic. Catholic feminists. There are not enough hours in the day for my eyes to be on the cardinal. St. Thomas has a great line, “Ubi Amor, Ibi oculos.” Where love, there eyes. Where are your eyes? If they are on what father thinks, then it won’t make a damn bit of difference that you are a woman in that parish. And if you assemble little girls to listen and your eyes are really on “father” those children will know it in their bones. God’s voice in their souls, hearing no resonance, will fall silent.

Believe it or not, I am trying to make a connection here to the challenge of communicating in this fast-paced world. What we love, where our eyes are, will be revealed to others whether we know it or not. The computers you are so courageously learning to use are neither good nor bad in themselves. They are tools. They are tools like the fountain pens and the manual typewriters in days gone by. Like the busses that used to take you to the neighborhoods for your mission work. It is what we do with those tools that will carry the message. You have already communicated something valuable by

taking the time to learn how to use them. You are telling young people that you will face your fear and go to where they are if that is what it takes to bring the word of God to them. In an earlier day, maybe you faced some fear to knock on a few doors. Some of them were opened to you. A community founded to teach religion to those denied access to the classes must understand that the mission territory looks a little different today. But if all goes well, the service will be from the same woman who has always tried to do God's work in her own soul. Freely.

What needs to be freed today? From what do women religious need to be freed? I believe that a serious obstacle to holy freedom for women religious is a misunderstanding of the relationship between feminism and spirituality. Too often, it is assumed that spirituality and feminism are mutually exclusive pursuits. To be sure, secular feminists have good reason to distrust matters of the spirit. It is no exaggeration to say that institutionalized religions have been brutal to women. Often dominated by men, these patriarchal institutions have succeeded in severing the connections that women hold dear: the connection to our own feelings; the connections with other women; the connection to our God. The sacred has been used against us. It has perpetrated myths about the inferiority of women and about our value in the created order. It is also true that those committed to a life in the spirit often hold feminism in great disdain. With its emphases on assertiveness training, self-worth, development of voice, and political action, feminist priorities seem to undermine the quiet, self-emptying efforts of the spiritual quest.

But feminism and spirituality are not mutually exclusive, they are mutually necessary. Women religious, of all people, need to know and believe this in your hearts.

In the heydays of patriarchy and all its ravages, it was nuns and sisters who offered women a liberating alternative to the roles forced upon women. It was within the safety of the convent walls that women had the blessed time to get in touch with their own feelings, to develop deeply feminine friendships with each other and to relate to their God in a way uncontaminated by the abuses of institutionalized Christianity. It was out of the anchorage, the cloister and the monasteries that we have inherited some of the most profound spiritual fruits of our tradition. Women need protected spaces, safe places in which we can listen to the voice of God in our own souls freely, and to sort out what that divine gift means to our lives now. Ironically, perhaps, women religious are still the best girls for the job.

I am not suggesting that the Mission Helpers wall off the compound and invite in all the girls and women who want to renounce the world and get away from it all. I am suggesting that you establish protected spaces, reserved exclusively for girls and women, in which we can relate to one another from the hearts that god has given especially to us, without the eyes of the other upon us-eyes that have so often stifled our voices and made something unseemly out of the divine creation that we are. I am suggesting that we listen to girls and women for what they are saying are the deepest concerns of their hearts. I am suggesting that you teach many how to pray and listen for the voice of God in our souls. This will not be easy. There is no handbook. And it is very dangerous stuff. It is much more dangerous than secular feminism alone can ever be. It is a feminism attentive to a divine call. Women religious have always recognized the right of women to choose, have always celebrated the acts of courageous, decisive women, have always fostered feminine community. So it is with feminists today. I assure you, this is very dangerous stuff.

I want to close by sharing with you a philosophical fragment from the Upanishads, written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ:

*The Self desires only what is real, thinks nothing but what is true. Here people do what they are told, becoming dependent on their country, or their piece of land, or the desires of another, so their desires are not fulfilled and their works come to nothing, both in this world and the next. Those who depart from this world without knowing who they are or what they truly desire have no freedom here or hereafter. But those who leave here knowing who they are and what they truly desire have freedom everywhere, both in this world and in the next.*

But what if we never learn what we truly desire and who we really are? What if we are that self who desires only what is real but never looks for it, like treasure buried just beneath the surface under the ground we walk on? If the Indian sages are right, this means we will never have freedom in this life or the next. Mother Demetrias will turn in her grave because she knew: *“Our work is to do God’s work in our own souls. Our service must be free.”* Feminism and spirituality are not at odds. They are as Carol Flinders says, “two rivers flowing swiftly toward the same sea.” (p. 338). This is why spiritual women must become feminists and why feminists must become spiritual women. Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, help lead the way.

Thank you.

Diane M. Caplin, Ph.D.  
Associate Director  
Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart  
Community Days June 5, 1998  
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