

The Ecclesial Experience of the Sisters of Mercy as Reflected in the Constitutions
by Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you today. I must say, when I said “yes” to this assignment, I had no way to know how much it would stretch and challenge me. May what I have prepared do the same for you!

For this first talk, I am dependent on the distinction Sandra Schneiders draws between ecclesial and ecclesiastical.¹ Ecclesial, she maintains, refers to the whole church, the Mystical Body. Ecclesiastical refers to the visible structures of the church that present themselves to us in a particular way through the hierarchy.

You have asked me to consider three things: (1) the relationship with the Church reflected in the successive RSM constitutions; (2) how we fit into the Church as we know it today and what the challenges are; (3) what a new rule might look like. In this first talk, I want to develop a framework by means of which I can interpret what the RSM constitutions convey about the Church. In tomorrow’s presentation, I will take up the challenges of today and the question of a new or revised *Constitutions*.

Three Types of Christianity

When I was in graduate school—lo those many years ago—I read an analysis of types of Christianity that has helped me to understand Mercy life. I have given you an outline so that you can follow along and have the notes to reflect on later. As you see, the material is taken from a work by Ernst Troeltsch published in 1911.

The three types of Christianity are the Church type, the sect type and the mystical type of Christianity. These are ideal types, meaning that no concrete body will realize all of them perfectly, but the patterns are helpful for understanding differences.

The church type, in sociological terms, aims at establishing a universal institution, a worldwide organizational reality. This institution is understood to be endowed with absolute authoritative truth and possessed of sacramental powers over grace and redemption. The church, then, “takes up into its own life the secular institutions, groups and values which have arisen out of the relative Natural Law.” The whole of secular life is considered a natural stage in human life, which prepares the way for the higher supernatural stage. What is “natural” becomes “graced” by being blessed by the church. The church has the power to grant or withhold the “grace” that renders something blessed, as for example rosaries, boats and marriages.

Because it takes up into itself natural or secular institutions, the church can perpetuate itself through the family. That is, members of the church have children, baptize them into the church and raise them up in the Christian faith, thus providing the new generation that keeps the institution thriving into the future. The church can also, when necessary, invoke the powers of the state to force belief and/or practices on the masses.

The church type of Christianity aims at the salvation of the masses. It seeks to save by dissemination of the absolute truth that the church is believed to hold and by the

civilizing powers of the sacraments. Christian perfection is not an ideal for all. Rather, select groups (e.g. monks, nuns) live out this ideal. As a type of Christianity, the church is hierarchically ordered and governed. By now you will have recognized Roman Catholic Christianity, Byzantine and Greek Orthodox Christianity and Lutheran Christianity as representative of this type.

The sect, on the other hand, is a religious community that “has evolved its social ideal purely from the Gospel and from the Law of Christ.” Christian character and holiness, according to this type of Christianity, should be proved by the unity reigning within the group and by the practical behavior of the individual members, not by objective institutional guarantees. Therefore, either it does not recognize the institutions, groups, and values that exist outside of Christianity at all, or in a quietly tolerant spirit of detachment from the world it avoids them. Sometimes, under the influence of an ‘enthusiastic’ eschatology, it attacks these institutions and replaces them by a purely Christian order of society.ⁱⁱ

The sect does not baptize babies, but seeks to win followers to the way of Christ by the example of the life lived. Only adult believers may be baptized and incorporated officially into the sect. Once incorporated, the ideal of perfection is for all. The deliberate allegiance and personal work of the individual members must constantly renew Christian life. That life is non-hierarchical and governed by communal forms. Often the members call each other “brother” and “sister.” Not only the Amish and the Mennonites, but Southern Baptists fall into this category.

In contrast to the first two types, mystical Christianity is a highly individualistic version. It considers neither institution nor community necessary, but holds that Christian life is essentially interior, invisible and personal. For that reason, it leaves behind no permanent form, no identifiable groups and thus no body of worship, doctrine or history. Mind you, not all mystics are to be found in the mystical type of Christianity. In fact, we know little about any mystics who do arise in this form, because they do not leave behind the institutional records on which such knowledge depends. Nevertheless, Christians who claim no need for institution or community—saying instead that their relationship with God or with Christ is purely interior—fall into this sociological type. Perhaps you know individuals whose Christianity reflects these patterns.

In a throwaway line that has fascinated me for years, Troeltsch says that the religious orders are the sects of the Roman Catholic Church. Whether that is still true today we will need to discuss. But when Troeltsch was writing—and even when many of us entered religious life—there was much truth to this observation.

Take a look for a moment at the outline. We never said that everyone should be a Sister of Mercy, only those who have a vocation, who have been called. Our ideal derives from the Gospel and Law of Christ. We do not have Mercy sacraments or a special group designated to grant and deny access to the power available in Mercy life. We attract new members and display the holiness of life by the unity of the group and the practical behavior of individual members. Though some may be elected to leadership for a time, communal forms of governing take priority. Even when we used the term “mother,” it was not for life. Mother could return to being sister.

One way to appreciate the Catholic Church prior to Vatican II is to see that it could contain within itself the impetus to sectarian Christianity. (I know that the very term has pejorative connotations to Catholic ears, but I am asking you to try to

understand it as a way of organizing one's Christian life.) Religious orders provided a context for those who wanted to live the Gospel ideal in an uncompromising fashion, in a community of brothers or sisters. Within a hierarchically ordered and universal church one could have a very different experience of Christianity—one that brought a person much closer to the ideal of the early church. As Jo Ann McNamara and others have shown, such groups could exist in the church with or without official approbation. Official recognition by the church was a blessing and a bane. With it went both institutional controls exercised by ecclesiastical authorities and financial/moral support from church members who wanted assurance of the group's legitimacy.

Catherine's Original Rule

We know that Mother McAuley's group of Ladies existed for some time before she sought official approbation from the Church. It has become fashionable in some circles to speak of her being "forced" to found a religious institute. I think that such a way of talking undermines Mother McAuley's own moral agency. She was faced with a choice and she took her time to think it out. I find it clear from the record that she weighed the pros and cons and decided in the best interest of the group for which she was increasingly responsible.

Despite all she had to endure to become a Sister at an advanced age; despite the arduous task of getting a rule approved—a reading of Catherine's original rule with the question that you have put to me in mind is quite revealing. One is hardly aware of the church (in the sense developed above). The original rule is suffused with admonitions to an internal unity based on love for one another and an external service to the poor and to distressed women of good character based on love for the Christ the sisters would meet in them. In her magisterial study of the tradition of Mercy, Mary Sullivan points out that Mother McAuley was careful to avoid unnecessary clerical or ecclesiastical supervision that could intrude upon the direct responsibility of the members of the Institute. She also notes that Catherine placed the vows and other intra-institutional matters in a supportive rather than a primary position.ⁱⁱⁱ In Catherine's ordering of the chapters of the rule, priority is given to the schools, the visitation of the sick, the admission of distressed women, the perfection of ordinary actions and employment of time, and union and charity.

In addition, Catherine's rule contains special prayers, lists of feasts, devotional practices and ways of preparing for ministry that are peculiar to the Sisters of Mercy. Only where the life of the community touches the larger church, obviously in matters concerning the sacraments and the chain of authority, does there appear mention of priests and bishops. The original document is surprisingly non-parochial. That is, the religious life of the community is lived within the circle of committed members and extended to those under their care. To my mind, what emerges is a very Johannine picture: a group of women bound to each other not so much by legal association nor even by religious vows, but by the union of heart and mind that makes them one body. That union is directly connected to their devotional and apostolic life.

1955 Union Constitutions

While the 1955 *Constitutions* still opens with the Object of the Institute, the changes in the actual text are breathtaking. Let me read from the original and then from the 1955 version:

(original)

The Sisters admitted into this religious congregation besides the principal and general end of all religious orders, such as attending particularly to their own perfection, must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, that is, a most serious application to the Instruction of poor Girls, Visitation of the Sick, and protection of distressed women of good character.

In undertaking the arduous, but very meritorious duty of instructing the poor, the Sisters whom God has graciously pleased to call to this state of perfection, shall animate their zeal and fervor by the example of their Divine Master Jesus Christ, who testified on all occasions a tender love for the poor and declared that He would consider as done to Himself whatever should be done unto them.^{iv}

(1955)

1. The Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy has for its general object the perfection of its members by means of the observance of the three simple vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, and of these *Constitutions*. It has for its special object the service of the Poor, Sick, and Ignorant.

The characteristic works by which the members of the Institute promote the salvation of their neighbor are:

- (a) The education of the young.
 - (b) The visitation of the sick in homes and the care of the sick in hospitals.
 - (c) The care of girls, of women, of the aged, of orphans.
2. The spirit of the Institute is Mercy toward those who are afflicted with ignorance, suffering, and other like miseries. This requires such a combination of the spirit of Mary and of Martha that the one does not hinder but helps the other.
3. In undertaking their arduous but meritorious duties, the Sisters whom God has been pleased to call to this state of perfection should animate their zeal and fervor by the example of their Divine Master, Jesus Christ, who testified on all occasions a tender love for children and for the poor and the suffering, and who declared that He would consider as done to Himself whatever should be done to them.^v

Note how the means to perfection have been narrowed down to observance of the vows and of the *Constitutions*, which appear in the very first paragraph. And the service of neighbor is now cast as a way of “promoting [their] salvation.” The scope of the characteristic works has been enlarged. Mary and Martha have found their way into a description of the spirit of Mercy. Children and the suffering have joined the poor as ones for whom Jesus Christ testified a tender love.

The characteristic works, as expanded, are covered together in the next chapter (whereas Catherine’s rule had devoted a chapter to each). And from then on we enter the

world of the organized, hierarchical church—now replicated within the Institute. Paragraph 24 of chapter 3 gives the precedence according to rank. We find Mother General, Mother Vicar General, Mother Provincial (in her own province), Secretary General, Procurator General, Mother Assistant Provincial (in her own province), Local Superior (in her own house), Secretary Provincial, Procurator Provincial (in their own province), Local Councilors (in their own house), Mistress of Novices, Assistant Mistress of Novices (in the novitiate house only). It should be noted that the Visitatrix General, during the time of her visitation, precedes even the Provincial and Local Superiors—and this during the whole time of her visitation. Finally, “the religious shall take their rank according to seniority.” Need I say that the chapter on Union and Charity, which comes as chapter 11, sits quite uneasily with this hierarchical, rank conscious vision of religious life? Moreover, the works of the Institute seem far less important than the observances of a religious life described in generic terms and codified by Canon Law and the law of the congregation. There is no chapter on the special fourth vow—though to be fair I should note that there was not one in the original rule either.

Let me make two further observations. First, these *Constitutions* may well reflect ecclesiastical control. I don’t know enough about the circumstances in which they were written to judge that. But they surely reflect a congregation that has assimilated itself to the structures and values of what I have called the church type of Christianity. Hierarchy, law, order, uniformity are enshrined in these Constitutions along with an enormous attention to external forms. There are chapters on the habit, on the specific duties of the Sister Sacristan and Sister Portress and successive chapters on governance and the duties of those elected to office.

Second, if you were to ask how the Sisters of Mercy “fit in with” the larger Church at this time, I would say, extremely well. For the ecclesiastical superiors could look at us and see something very familiar. I know that there were other currents working underground and in the provinces, so to speak. There was too much common sense and sense of fun in most Mercy convents for all this to be taken completely seriously. But it looks to me, from studying these Constitutions, that the radical or sectarian character of Catherine’s foundation has been seriously compromised.

Catherine founded a form of life that allowed women to serve those who were being overlooked by Church and society, sustained by the love, care, dedication and sacrifice of like-minded women. The 1955 *Constitutions* puts front and center a “state of perfection” completely in line with what the Church thought women should undertake. The inner life of this congregation reflects forms of governance and operation similar to the Church’s own. I fear that, if there is any “sectarian” witness to Mercy life under these Constitutions, it is to a state of life called religious rather than to the Gospel and the Law of Christ. The very text begins and ends with a reference to itself. I have quoted the first paragraph, where observance of the *Constitutions* is given as a means to perfection. The last chapter of the 1955 version is on the obligations of the *Constitutions*, where we learn that they are to be read out loud to the Sisters in such a way that they are covered in their entirety “at least twice a year.”^{vi} It is important to say, however, that embedded in this framework one still finds special prayers, devotions, feast days and other evidence of a tradition of piety and affection. You also find special ways that the sisters are to prepare themselves for the works of mercy. The “feel” of this community as reflected in the text is of a tension between an original Johannine inspiration and a creeping Matthean

interpretation. Though I know the reality to be different, if I were to judge solely on a reading of the text, I'd have to say that what holds this congregation together is the law.

Current Constitutions

The *Constitutions* of 1992, written as they are twenty-five years and more after Vatican II, interpret Mercy life through the theology of the Council and at the same time reflect the hyperconsciousness of church law. Thus the opening paragraph states that Catherine McAuley “founded the institute of the Sisters of Mercy to involve women as religious in the mission of the church in the world.”^{vii} In addition to active service the community engages, through its special ministry of “prayer and patient suffering” in an intercession for the whole church.^{viii} Moreover, in carrying out the mission of mercy, the “pastoral priorities of the universal and local church” are taken into prayerful consideration.^{ix} Participation in the liturgical life of the church shapes the union with Christ signified in baptism and by religious vows.^x Mercy prayer now includes celebration of “significant events . . . in the church” and is conducted “in the spirit of prayer of the church.”^{xi} It is incumbent on each sister “to serve in a ministry compatible with our mission in the church.”^{xii} Chapters and sisters in positions of governance “exercise authority in the Institute according to the universal law of the church. . . .”^{xiii} In a very important, and if I remember correctly, contested passage the *Constitutions* state:

Through the approval of the *Constitutions* the church recognizes us as a pontifical institute and confers authority to organize and govern ourselves. We acknowledge ecclesiastical authority and assume responsibility to collaborate with its representatives in promoting the life and the mission of the church. As religious, we recognize the legitimate authority of the Pope.^{xiv}

To continue, among the responsibilities of the Institute chapter is the responsibility “to clarify our role in the church.”^{xv} The Institute president governs “in accordance with church law”^{xvi} and represents the Institute to the church.^{xvii} When the *Constitutions* considers the actions of a president that require consent of the council and the actions of a regional president, the text sees fit to reiterate that all is done in accordance with the law of the church.^{xviii} “According to the norms of universal law” appears again when permission for a sister to live “elsewhere” (meaning other than in an approved house) and the question of the right to acquire, retain, administer and alienate temporal goods arises.^{xix}

I might note also that in *Our Founding Document*, the text that accompanies the *Constitutions*, we find these statements:

1. . . . we believe that the presence of the church is made visible in this world through our service to the poor, sick and ignorant.
2. . . . we pray that the bonds we formalize today . . . will serve our church and touch our world.^{xx}

It appears that these *Constitutions* reflect a desire for the Sisters of Mercy to be perceived as partaking in the mission of the church, united with the church in its prayer, fed by the church’s liturgical life, collaborating with church representatives in promoting the life and the mission of the church. It is notable that many of the things that were distinctive to the mercy tradition in the earlier constitutions—special devotions, prayers, feast days to be observed, ways of preparing for ministry—have disappeared from this text. It is also notable that recognition of legitimate church authority, whether it be the

universal law of the church or the authority of the Pope, is expressly stated, something that occurred in neither of the previous constitutions under study here.

If paragraph 4 is the description of the mercy mission, it now has an almost universal scope: “we serve God’s people through education, health care and other ministries that further social, political, economic and spiritual well-being.” The vow of service, which now has place in the *Constitutions*, commits the sisters to the exercise of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy revealed through the life of Jesus.^{xxi}

Despite repeated references to the church in these *Constitutions*, I miss here the sense that the Sisters of Mercy are the church, incarnate in women whose ways are communal, not hierarchical--whose priorities rest with persons, not with institutional structures. I find this theologically troubling.

Equally troubling is the loss of the special devotions and prayers recommended by Mother McAuley. If one studies them, one sees that each highlights the humanity of Christ in all its vulnerability (the Passion of Christ and the Sacred Heart) or the woman Mary in whom sisters are to find a Mother and Model.

Though there are many strengths to these *Constitutions*, and I will have more to say about that in the next presentation, I find here a readiness to collapse the mission of mercy into the mission of the church, an eagerness to seek the approval of the church’s representatives that does not entirely stem from the political pressures coming from outside the community.

Audre Lorde has a marvelous insight into a particular weakness of women. She writes:

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

In our attempts to be rid of external forms that kept us out of touch with the world we were now to love and learn from, I think we also neglected or became ashamed of our most distinguishing features. (In some ways, I think we are like Christians at the time that the Catholic epistles were written—eager to assure the authorities of the surrounding world that we can fit in and not rock the boat.) Even under the 1955 *Constitutions*, Sisters of Mercy were instilled with a particular way of viewing the world, a way that often put us at odds with a more “institutional” or “organizational” mindset. Certainly the original rule did so. How else could those early sisters take the risks they did?

I’ll be very eager to discuss this with you further. But for now, let me summarize and close this section.

I have suggested that religious life allows for a certain sectarian impulse to coexist with the Church type of Christianity within the Catholic Church. That impulse is to live the Gospel as simply and purely as possible in a community of sisters or brothers whose lives give witness to the power of God and draw new members for the life and works. While one might not be entirely comfortable referring to Mother McAuley’s foundation as sectarian, I think it is clear from her rule that her group had a mission that was their own, a mission they were engaged in and expert at before ever seeking official approval from the church. They also had a form of life that supported their mission and

enabled them to strive for a union and charity that emulates “the love and union of the Blessed in heaven.” Catherine herself is known to have spurned privileges for the Mother Superior and other marks of hierarchy. In fact, she was not above poking a bit of good fun even at the rule she herself wrote.

By 1955, however, the marks of a hierarchical structure were clearly upon the Institute in the form known as the Union. (It would be interesting to see other constitutions and compare for these tell tale signs.) It was a church within a church, centralized, organized, and codified. I do not gainsay what such an organization can do, especially if it puts itself at the service of the world-wide mission of the universal church—as Sisters of Mercy and so many other groups of women religious did. Sisters formed an incomparable work force for the church. I’d love to hear you evaluate that experience.

Between 1955 and 1992 lies not only Vatican II, but Sister Formation, a burgeoning theology of the laity, a re-evaluation of sexuality in the Christian life, the woman’s movement, a revision of the Code of Canon Law, an unusually long and dramatic papacy, and, as Sandra Schneiders’ new book shows so well, the incursion of post-modernism—to name only a few of the myriad changes.

The current *Constitutions* show a congregation willing to be at the service of the church’s mission, but not exactly as a work force. It speaks the language of collaboration while continually assuring the “powers that be” that sisters at all levels will be obedient. This congregation seems to want to identify with the church by espousing a liturgical spirituality at the very time when dependence on priests is impractical at best and irksome at worst. The mission of Mercy has expanded from response to misery to the promotion of economic, political and spiritual well being.

This is as far as a study of the *Constitutions* can take us relative to the question of how the Sisters of Mercy “fit” in the church. It’s time now to think about the significance of what I’ve said for our future. Thank you.

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Endnotes

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1. ⁱ See Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, *Finding the Treasure, Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist, 2000).
 2. ⁱⁱ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, p. 461
 3. ⁱⁱⁱ Mary C. Sullivan, RSM, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 290.

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4. ^{iv} Sullivan, p. 295.
 5. ^v *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. 3-4.
 6. ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 124. I must say, however, that this practice gave sisters the advantage of knowing their rights and responsibilities according to the law—something I'm not sure we know as well in our current circumstances.
 7. ^{vii} *Constitutions* (Silver Spring, MD: Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1992), #1.
 8. ^{viii} *Ibid.*, #4.
 9. ^{ix} *Ibid.*, #6.
 10. ^x *Ibid.*, #11.
 11. ^{xi} *Ibid.*, #17.
 12. ^{xii} *Ibid.*, #31
 13. ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, #51.
 14. ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, #52, 53.
 15. ^{xv} *Ibid.*, #59.
 16. ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, #62.
 17. ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, #65.
 18. ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, #66,70.
 19. ^{xix} *Ibid.*, #79, 80.
 20. ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 21. ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, #29.
 22. ^{xxii} Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 102.