

**Mercy Life for the Next Century**  
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**Introduction**

As you keep in mind the definitions given in the previous presentation, I want now to argue the following points:

1. What we need for the next century is a theology of Mercy life; that is, we need a coherent set of practices, understandings and beliefs that help us make sense, for ourselves as well as for others, of the life we are living.
2. This will entail a rethinking of the vows of religion.
3. The criteria for rethinking these vows should be the specific Mercy charisms of union and charity and the service of the poor, sick, and ignorant.
4. If we do the work necessary for this undertaking, we will see a dramatic increase of vocations.

It is providential, I think, that the recent Institute Chapters have called us to a more regular and intense theological reflection. Much of the *anomie* we are experiencing is due to a loss of meaning, a vacuum at the heart of our common life. Another term for *anomie* is loss of spirituality. By it I mean that lack of energy of which Rolheiser writes in the quote I gave you with the questions for reflection. Let me review here what he says:

...spirituality is about what we do with our spirits, our souls. And can we see too ... that a healthy spirit or a healthy soul must do dual jobs: It has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living. Thus, the opposite of a spiritual person is not a person who rejects the idea of God and lives as a pagan. The opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, is to have lost all zest for living—lying on a couch, watching football or sit-coms, taking beer intravenously! Its other task, and a very vital one it is, is to keep us glued

together, integrated, so that we do not fall apart and die. Under this aspect, the opposite of a spiritual person would be someone who has lost his or her identity, namely, the person who at a certain point does not know who he or she is anymore. A healthy soul keeps us both energized and glued together.<sup>1</sup>

Rolheiser is writing about the individual soul and individual spirituality. But I believe that communities can also have a spirit and thus a spirituality. This is what I am deeply concerned about. In the course of working for two years with four regional communities on topics of incorporation, I became painfully convinced that whatever spirituality we once had binding us together as Sisters of Mercy has all but disappeared. This means, in effect, that we no longer inhabit the same life-world.

Many of us are desperately trying to make up for the loss by turning to spiritual practices of other religious traditions, by trying out varieties of meditation techniques, by joining self-help groups, by seeking in feminist forms of paganism the fire and energy that once fueled our lives. Please be clear: I am not criticizing these efforts. On the contrary, I understand them very well. I am only saying they will not take the place of what we feel has been lost. They will not create a contemporary spirituality for a community of women vowed to God in the service of the poor, sick and ignorant.

Only a concerted effort on the part of representative segments of the community and then review and critique by the whole community give any hope of forging for the new century a spirituality of Mercy life. And I do mean Mercy life, not death. The very fact that so many among us are resigned to the demise of our way of life is an indication of the disintegration already affecting us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing, The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. (Doubleday, 1999) pp. 11-12.

The challenge is that we must pray and think and talk *everything* through. Well, almost everything. I have an intuition that there is even now a consensus that the works of mercy as embodied in the vow of service are at the heart of our life-form. But the wrestling I have had to do to produce these talks (and all of this is original for you—I have not even thought this all out before) has led me to a startling realization. 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 do not know what the ideal of the vows will look like if passed 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. But I do know that the one way to insure stagnation is to fail to try.

In preparation for these presentations I had a long talk with someone new to the Mercy community. She said something I won't soon forget. She said, "professed sisters act as if they've handed us the future and said, 'make of it what you will'—and that disturbs me." As well it should disturb us all.

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 reiterate that what I think matters little. It is community consensus that will count. Only a communal process can result in our rediscovering religious life for women in a new century.

## **Public vows**

Does this line in our **Constitutions** 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. How many ministries and institutions are we involved with where we are forbidden to talk about God or matters religious or spiritual? What does the proliferation of these ministries and institutions mean to the identity of the individual sister and to the community?

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.

## **Chastity**

As I said earlier, in a day when every woman was obliged to marry and bear numbers of children, the possibility of a life with other women interested in an intense relationship with God and the service of God's people was attractive to many. It should be said as well that in a world where immortality was purchased at the price of those many children, a commitment to remain childless was seen as either utter madness or, as in the case of the early church, as a form of martyrdom. So it was that celibacy came to be considered a "white martyrdom," accomplished without the shedding of blood, but nonetheless witnessing to the power of God to overcome death and its terrors.

As cultural attitudes toward childbearing, toward sexual activity, and toward the relationship between them have dramatically changed, the meaning of a vow to renounce sex and its pleasures becomes problematic. First, it is no longer necessary to forego sexual activity in order to avoid the burdens of childbearing. Celibacy does not require virginity, in other words. Second, the secular world has come to treat sex as of no particular importance or moment while the world of Catholic Christianity struggles to free itself of the inherited attitude that sex is inherently defiling. Third, as I have already tried to suggest, sexual activity for women is a far more extensive category than it is for men. Women can experience pleasures that are sexual without any participation in strictly genital activities. I'm not sure of this, but I think one might say that for a woman to give up sexual pleasure entirely, she would have to give up being a woman. If that is the case, then you see why chastity so defined is extremely problematic.

For the vow of chastity to have meaning in the next century, we must find ways to connect it to that union and charity which was Mother McAuley's legacy to the Institute. As our **Constitutions** make very clear, chastity is about love.

To accomplish this, 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 really think that the discussion of chastity or celibate love needs to be carried on without any of the labels currently in use—straight, gay, heterosexual, lesbian. We need to 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.

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. If the aim of chastity is to create a loving community of women whose very existence as a body is in response to a call from God, neglect or refusal to participate in and care for that community constitutes a failure of chastity.

The new members come looking for this loving body. They want us to spend time with them, pray with them, tell them stories, impart to 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.” A new understanding of the vow of chastity, however we name it, will reveal how misguided that response is.

### **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>2</sup> 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 to the surrender of “the independent use and disposal of material goods.”<sup>3</sup> Lovely as the idea is, however, I am not sure what 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

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Pohier, *God in Fragments*. (Crossroads, 1986), p. 32.

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 twenty-first 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 live out the vow of poverty in a dramatic and salvific way as we face the reality of poor and rich regional communities and contemplate the bold act of sharing funds and other resources across regional community lines. I think we need an intense theological

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<sup>3</sup> *Constitutions* (1992), paragraph 24.

reflection on the dimensions of this opportunity. As Patricia Wittberg has written in her challenging book, *Pathways to Creating Religious Communities*, what we need is a *corporate* lived virtuoso spirituality that will speak to the problems of our time.

Whatever we call it—poverty, 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. Is 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 too many of 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 of the vow of poverty in

the future. But, again, we must learn to be much more concrete in our presentation of ideals and in our practice.

## **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. At the same time, this wariness has resulted in a kind of amnesia about having made this vow. I get his impression from reading some of the responses by sisters to the cases of Jeannine Gramick and the Sister of St. Joseph who went with the splinter group in Rochester. I am not siding with the authorities, only saying no one under vows should be surprised when those vows are invoked in controversial situations.

Perhaps the only way to rediscover the power of these realities is to reflect them through the prism of the double lens I have been using: union and charity and the service of the poor, sick and ignorant.

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.

I find the current longing for “a corporate voice” and for “corporate action” to be an indicator of an increasing awareness that something is awry in our practice of obedience and/or in our exercise of authority. Perhaps 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 we are doing this because we have lost our nerve where mandating and commanding is concerned.

The reports I heard about the most recent Institute Chapter make me think that an examination of our belief, understanding and practice of obedience will be critical to our survival as a body.

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.

Some among you suggested that changing the names of these vows might make them more intelligible. That is why at the end of each of the vows, I’ve said something like “whatever we call them, so and so remains....” I’d say the same about obedience. If we can’t recover the truth of the Latin root, that this vow is about listening, heeding, attending—then perhaps a name change will help. But first we

must come to some agreement about what is entailed when one listens indeed—in deed.

I cannot thank you enough for pushing me to think through all of this before the dancing cursor of a computer screen. It has been more exhilarating than I might have imagined. These presentations have certainly not said all that can be or needs to be said. But I hope that they provide us all food for thought and for conversation as the days dwindle down to the New Year and the new millennium.

Thank you.

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Prepared at the invitation of the Sisters of Mercy,  
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