

THEOLOGY AND COMMUNITY

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My task tonight is twofold: First to develop an understanding of Christian theologies of community, with special attention to what evolved among Sisters of Mercy; Second, to consider why the practice of theology--doing theology together--is essential to the life of any faith community. This talk was originally developed for the Mercy Institute of Life Development in the United States. I will be eager to hear from you when the talk is completed, so that I can learn to what extent the contents of this lecture resonate with your experiences in Australia.

Theologies of Community

You may be surprised to hear me refer to theologies rather than theology. It is certainly true that one model of community has come to dominate the Western church and, increasingly, to dominate even the imaginations of women religious. I refer to the parochial model: parish communities under the leadership of a pastor and organized into dioceses with bishops as the sign of unity--bishops who teach, govern and sanctify the church in collegial union with the Bishop of Rome, known popularly as the Pope.

There are very important reasons why this model, with its consequent theology, came to dominate. I cannot go into them in depth, but the driving question that resulted in this understanding of ecclesia was that of unity. In times of dispute and division, people needed to know where the true church was. From Ignatius of Antioch on, the answer was given in terms of the eucharist. As John Zizioulos says

The Eucharist was understood in the first centuries as the event that brought together the dispersed people of God "in the same place" (epi to auto) not only to celebrate but also to constitute the eschatological messianic community here and now. As such it was the spiritual event par excellence, because it was the eschatological reality manifested and

foretasted in history. Baptized persons were led to this community in order to take their place in it, which involved the privilege of addressing God as Father--of acquiring the sonship that Christ has always had--and at the same time of addressing the other members of the church as "brethren" and sharing their eternal destiny.¹

I will comment later on the absolute maleness of this imagery, on the way that it excludes from consideration mothers, daughters, and sisters. The point here is to see that, according to this theology of community, the eucharist makes of a dispersed people a community whose primary purpose is to offer praise and worship to the God who saves by bringing individuals into a body, the body of Christ. Now it is crucial to understand the role of the bishop in this theology of community. According to Ignatius of Antioch, the bishop is essential for every believer's participation in this communal salvation. As Zizioulos says,

Whoever disobeys the bishop disobeys God or Christ himself, who is the true bishop of the church, because the bishop sits in the place of God or is the type of God...The crucial importance of the bishop lies in his being the head of the eucharistic community and not in an office that he holds as an isolated individual.²

The principle that developed from this theology is as follows: one eucharist, one bishop, one church. It may be difficult to see the outlines of this theology in the modern Catholic church experience, but it is still there. When it became necessary to create parishes and to assign the role of eucharistic leadership to presbyters, these presbyters always acted in the eucharist on the bishop's behalf and with his explicit permission. Zizioulos tells us

For a long time, the bishop would send a portion of his Eucharist to the parishes in order to mix it with the presbyter's Eucharist and thus make real the idea that there is only one Eucharist in each place, that of the bishop. This practice is known as fermentum. In the East what prevails even today is the practice of the antimension, a piece of cloth containing relics of saints (a sign of unity of the church in time) as well as the signature of the local bishop, which affirms that it is the bishop that makes the parish Eucharist valid, that there is only one Eucharist in each place.³

¹ John D. Zizioulas, "The Early Christian Community," in *Christian Spirituality I: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 29.

² Ibid., p. 32.

³ Ibid., p. 35.

The modern pastor, then, is the delegate of the bishop. It is no wonder, therefore, that women can be pastoral associates but not pastors. The pastor shares in the delegated authority of the bishop, who represents Christ, the head of the church. In a theology of community as thoroughly male as this one, women can only represent the body, never the head. I say that because the unity of the community is constituted by a theology of headship that depends essentially on a hierarchical ordering and is buttressed by images rife with assumptions of superiority and inferiority. The imagery of head and body assumes that the head rules the body, that reason rules emotion, that the top governs what is below it. I think it also assumes that men rule women.

As I will show, religious community life for women fits uneasily into this picture.

Earliest Christianity

Now I say that is the theology of Christian community that has come to dominate the Western church, but it is not the earliest theology. In a brilliant article, Stephen C. Barton has surveyed research on the communal dimensions of earliest Christianity and revealed theologies of community that are immensely important for our understanding of religious life. Let me give a quick review of that article.

To follow what contemporary scholars are saying, we must share their assumption that the writings of the New Testament are literary works, crafted by editing to direct the good news to particular communities who have come to believe in Jesus the Christ. Therefore, the way the good news is presented gives a window into the theology of that community.

Matthew

Let us begin with Matthew. He is faced with two challenges: (1) to distinguish his community from developments in Pharisaic Judaism and (2) internal community maintenance. For Matthew, the community is distinguished by its source of authority--namely Jesus, and those appointed by him, especially Peter; by its alternative and more rigorous interpretation of the law; and by the extension of its mission to Gentiles. **Authority, interpretation of law, mission.** These are the keys to Matthew's theology of community for those outside.

But this is not enough to hold a community together. There must also be internal disciplines, a kind of "community rule" that maintains the community by stating the ideals. Matthew gives prominence to a "scholarly" model of discipleship: the stress is placed on learning, obeying, and handing on the tradition and, in doing so, preserving important elements of continuity with the past and adding to them: "every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (MT. 13:52)⁴.

There is always potential for conflict within a community; to handle them, Matthew sets forth the ideal of a non-hierarchical relationship, whose dominant ethos is one of forgiveness and pastoral care for the one who "goes astray." There is strong emphasis in Matthew on the love commandment, on the importance of "bearing fruit" and on attaining child-like humility. As disincentives to behavior, there are threats of judgment against those in the community who are hypocrites, whose love has grown cold, who show no regard for "the little ones."

⁴ All biblical references are from the New American Bible with Revised New Testament, 1986.

Matthew's community rule, then, involves continual study and development, but without elevating some into a position of authority ("As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.); mutual forgiveness and pastoral care (18:15: If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother); bearing good fruits for the community while retaining a child-like humility. What destroys community is hypocrisy, love gone cold, causing one of the "little ones" who believe in Jesus to sin (MT 18.6) or despising "one of these little ones" (18:10).

Mark

When we turn to Mark, a different picture emerges. Mark is writing for a community under persecution. He must develop a theology of community that will enable the committed to hold on despite the fact that their way of life is met with hostility and violence from the larger society.

Many scholars suggest, however, that this hostility and violence may well have been in some measure brought about by the "novel, counter-cultural aspect of Mark's understanding of social relations."⁵ Mark's community gives prominence to women as models of bold faith and sacrificial service; rejects the laws of purity; questions whether the wealthy can enter the kingdom of God; requires a radical subordination of family and occupational ties for the sake of mission; and subverts the prevailing understanding of power relations (Mk 10:13--And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When

⁵ Stephen C. Barton, "The Communal Dimension of Earliest Christianity: A Critical Survey of the Field," *Journal of Theological Studies*, V43 Part 2 (October, 1992), 409.

Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.")

Perhaps the most revolutionary thing about Mark has been uncovered by Elizabeth Malbon: she shows that Mark's narrative displaces the location of the holy away from Jerusalem and the temple to being on the road or in the house or on the sea with Jesus.⁶

The theology of Mark's community, then, is that it is a community called to live and act in such a way as to call into question the dominant values of their time. Despite opposition and even persecution, they will acknowledge the faith and service of women; refuse to be bound by antiquated laws about what is pure and impure; live in great distrust of material possessions and certainly not seek to amass wealth; leave family and career for the sake of this mission; keep their eyes on the little ones, not on those in positions of ecclesial or civil or corporate power; and learn to find God on the road or in the house or on the sea, believing that no religious power can confine God to a single place.

Luke

With Luke, we enter another world. Recent scholarship has focused attention on the practice of table-fellowship in this community, not only with Gentiles, but with others considered to be sinners and therefore unclean. As Marshall Sahlins says, "Food dealings are a delicate barometer, a ritual statement as it were, of social relations, and food is thus employed instrumentally as a starting, a sustaining, or a destroying mechanism of sociability"⁷ Others argue that meals in Luke (and especially the meal practice and table-talk of Jesus) function as a

⁶ Ibid., p. 410.

challenge to the boundaries of the Jewish restrictions regarding food and the sharing of meals. In Luke, the table forms the new group and institutes new criteria of acceptability; it reorders the social hierarchy.

It is commonly accepted that Luke's community was creating a theology of community in face of the delay of the Parousia. This raised serious questions about getting involved in history, in society, in responsibilities to the future. The way Luke sees this community getting involved is by working from the bottom up, from the margins in. For that reason, the "poor" becomes short-hand in Luke for all the marginalized: tax collectors and sinners, women, a Samaritan leper, Gentiles, and, of course, the actual poor ones. Moreover, Luke applies Jesus' views on the subject ("When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind...") to the relationships between the rich and the poor **within** the Christian community.

Luke's theology of community is that Christians are in the process of creating a new kind of community by sharing meals and table-talk with those who have previously been left out or positively excluded because of inaccurate understandings or hostile attitudes. Sinners, those whose economic situation forces them to take unpopular work, those with disfiguring disease or illnesses that can't be faced, the opposite sex--they become acceptable by being included at the table. There one gets to know them face to face and has a chance to talk with them about what is most important. There one may well be instructed and given insights into God that will come in no other way. Only this table fellowship with sinners, with the poor, allows Christians to take

⁷ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, (New York, 1972), 215, quoted in Barton, "The Communal Dimension",

up the challenges of history, of power, of establishing lasting institutions, etc., without losing their souls. Whatever you do, you take with you the ones with whom you break bread.

John

When it comes to the community of the beloved disciple, things change once again. Many scholars, following the ground-breaking work of Raymond Brown, see John's community as radically estranged--not only from the wider society and from the society of the synagogue, but even from the society of other Christian groups. An "us and them" ethos seems to dominate.

The picture of Jesus that emerges matches the experience of the community: he is a stranger, one who came to his own only to be rejected by them; he is not understood and he cannot trust himself to others, for he knows what is in their hearts. But for those who believe, he is the way, the truth and the life--even as the community is in his stead. Barton points out

... almost every major symbol of belonging as a Jew to the people of God--Torah, temple, festival calendar, sabbath observance, the land, the scriptures and the patriarchs--is displaced in a quite counter-cultural way by the Jesus of John.⁸

This counter-cultural aspect also has a political dimension bearing directly upon attitudes toward Roman authority, as David Rensberger has shown.

Such a self-understanding on the part of the community leads to escalating conflict. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel knows this will come, and says to his disciples: "I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (Jn 16:1-2). The Jesus

410-411.

of the Fourth Gospel knows also when it comes and he gives comfort and consolation in his own person--as shown in the marvelous story of the man born blind (Jn 9). After his going, comfort, consolation and guidance will be provided by the One he will send, "another Paraclete." This guidance will be directly available to each one of the faithful, as long as each stays in communion with Jesus and with those he calls "his own."

For John's gospel, the major dangers to the life of the community are disunity and apostasy. Thus the Farewell Discourses place such emphasis on union and charity in the community and on the need to dwell in the words of Jesus so that one not be led astray. What Jesus needs are witnesses to the truth, even as he has been; in the Fourth Gospel, women are accorded prominence as such witnesses, outspoken in defending the truth of what has been revealed to them.

One of the many ironies of John's gospel is that it is only the unity of community that makes possible daring individual witness to the truth in the face of isolation and estrangement.

Other early theologies of community

Time does not permit a complete review of the early theologies of community. Suffice it to say that there is the charismatic theology of Paul, in which the local believing community is the new creation "in Christ" and the locus for shared experience of the eschatological Spirit; the theology of First Peter, with its notion of incorporation into an alternative family, the "household of God" (I Pet. 2:5; 4:17): "...and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"; and

⁸ Barton, "The Communal Dimension," p. 413.

finally the Pastoral Epistles, sometimes called the Catholic Epistles, where we see emerging the hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of community that has come to dominate the Western Catholic Church.

Mercy Theologies of Community

Like the larger church of which we are a part, the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy, too, has theologies of community. Let me begin with the earliest: that of Catherine McAuley herself.

(If some of the phrases seem different or strange in this next section on the early rule, it is because I am using Catherine's language, not the words that replaced her choices.⁹)

According to the one chapter of the rule that Catherine, under the guidance of Dr. Murray, thought sufficient for guiding the community, the Sisters of Mercy are a community striving for a mutual love "so perfect as to resemble in some manner the love and union which subsists between [Jesus] and his heavenly Father." By their observance of the precept, "love one another as I have love you," the rule states, the sisters will prove themselves to be really Christ's disciples. Theirs is an Institute founded and grounded on charity. The chapter on Union and Charity specifies that this should be their favorite virtue; that the sisters should study to maintain and cherish it among themselves so as to live together as if they had but one heart and one soul in God. The union she desired to obtain among her sisters with each other should be such as to emulate the love and union which reigns among the blessed in heaven.

Note that there is here an eschatological note, a foretaste of heavenly bliss. But it is found, according to this chapter, not in the eucharistic community under the headship of the

bishop or even of the pastor; rather, it is found in the mutual love of sister for sister that "emulates the love and union which reigns among the blessed in heaven." Similarly, offenses against charity are not to be repaired first--or perhaps at all--by going to confession; rather the sisters are to repair offenses by quickly asking pardon if one is the offender and as quickly granting it if one is the offended one--and without contention or reserve.

Realistic about community life, Catherine expects that there will be defects, **weakness** and imperfections; she encourages her sisters to assist one another by bearing with patience each other's defects. The only reason for speaking of faults would be "for the charitable purpose of their amendment" and then only after consulting God in prayer and their spiritual director. Faults should only be spoken of otherwise to the Superior.

This community is not founded on flesh and blood, nor on what she calls "any human motive"; it is a community founded on God alone. This rules out particular friendships, attachments and affections and means they "shall scrupulously avoid all private parties and connections, as the source of discord and divisions, and as hostile to purity of heart, to charity and to the spirit of religion."

It is notable that Catherine altered the chapter on Union and Charity received from the Presentation Sisters by omitting the article which said that the Superior would be called Mother not only while in office but ever after. I take this to mean that being Superior is a service to the community, not an "ordination" to a rank that lasts a life-time.

In addition to the chapter on Union and Charity, which was said to have marked the young community in a special way, Catherine added to the Presentation rule two chapters: Of the

⁹ For information on the early rule I am indebted to Mary C. Sullivan, RSM, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition*

Visitation of the Sick and Of The Admission of Distressed Women. Here one finds the ministries--the duties, as Catherine called them--that, along with the instruction of poor Girls, gave a particular character to the early community of Mercy. In each of these cases, the overarching aim of the community's work is what we would today call evangelization. The sick are visited, distressed women taken in, poor girls educated so that the reign of God will be extended to them. And this reign is not simply a "spiritual" one: the sisters are instructed to "promote the cleanliness, ease and comfort of the Patient" as well as to admonish and instruct; distressed women are to be prepared for and placed in situations where they develop the character necessary to earn a living; women carefully instructed will bring "peace and good order" of religious women to whatever station they are destined to fill.

This theology of community was lived out in such a way that Catherine could and did send postulants and novices on new foundations, confident that they would learn to be Sisters of Mercy by living the life of the local community with vowed Sisters.

Mary Sullivan says this about Catherine McAuley:

When Caroline Murphy died while Catherine was at George's Hill, and then Anne O'Grady, Elizabeth Harley, and her own niece Mary Teresa died in the first two years, she hoped death would not destroy the young community. When foundations went to Tullamore, Carlow, and Cork with too little money to live on, and to Charleville with no prospect of postulants, and to Birr with no assured income, she hoped God would provide for them. When she appointed young women as the superiors of the new foundations--Mary Ann Doyle was 25, Frances Warde was 27, Clare Moore was 23, Juliana Hardman was 28--she deferred to their authority and trusted that God would direct them. When the ministry of each new foundation turned out to be different from that of the last, and different from the one on Baggot Street, she trusted in the mercifulness of these women and in God's unfailing guidance. At the very end Catherine expressed only one hope for

the Sisters of Mercy: that they would live in union and charity, and rely on God's merciful help. If they did this, all the rest would follow.¹⁰

Again, it is impossible to do justice to what Mary Sullivan has uncovered in her magisterial work, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*; but she has demonstrated convincingly, I think, that Catherine's approach to community life and to the mission of that community was deeply feminine and anything but hierarchical. The unity of the community did not reside for her in obedience to a single person who represented God; the unity of the community resulted from the mutual love, sister for sister, that transformed them into a living body with "one heart and one soul." It is that love, that respect, that affection that she wanted bestowed upon the poor ones, the sick, those deprived of education, the marginalized, the forgotten.

We know that much of what Catherine put in place regarding her community was imposed by Church law regarding religious. But Mary Sullivan also shows us how Catherine's voice was substantially altered and finally buried in the very Constitutions that she created by judicious editing of a previous rule. Her manuscript was first edited by Dr. Murray, then translated into Italian **and then translated into English from the Italian translation!**

But anyone who has read her letters knows what her voice sounds like: it is affectionate, practical, full of good sense and good humor; her voice resounds with confidence that her sisters are capable of mature living and mature judgments, that they do not need a laundry list of rules covering the minutiae of life; and even in her darkest days, her voice speaks of a God whose providence will bring her and them through and into a bright future.

¹⁰ Mary C. Sullivan, RSM, "The Spirit's Fire and Catherine's Passion.," *The Journal of the Mercy Association in*

The Current Rule

Now let us turn to our own Constitutions:

By life in community
and by sharing faith and mission
sisters come to know each other as sisters
and to form bonds of union and charity.
Reverence for the unique gift of each member--
the young and the old,
the well and the infirm--
helps sisters to live together
in affection and mutual respect.
When breaches of charity occur,
they are to encourage each other
to speak the truth in love
and to bring prayer and patience
to the restoration of harmony.
Community strengthens the sisters for mission
when they listen openly to one another,
seek the common good
and promote mutual trust.
A sign of their union and charity
is their personal and corporate willingness
to share their lives and resources
with the poor and the afflicted. ¹¹

It is at this point, I think, that we must ask some hard questions of ourselves. What does "life in community" mean? What model comes to mind as we listen to these words?

For some, I believe it is the parochial model. That is, individuals who live a life relatively untouched by other church members during the week, but who come together under the leadership of someone who has prepared the worship or other material that will constitute the community in the designated place and at the designated time. In between, membership in the community has little affect on day to day life. This is not to say that individuals who live out their Christianity (or their membership in the RSM community) this way do not pray, or do good

Scripture and Theology, V5 (Spring, 1995), 12.

works, or lead good lives; it is to say that they do not do this according to communally determined patterns based on an understanding of what their lives mean that can be called theological. Absent this, it is difficult to take seriously the Christian claim to be a light to the nations: *Lumen Gentium*, as the Vatican II document of the same name teaches. Absent this, it is easy to understand why contemporary communities of women are rarely attracting new members. Add to it, the rising consciousness of women that we have been written out of history, silenced in the churches, prevented from assuming responsibilities commensurate to our skills and experience in the world of diocese and parish--and you have a curious situation where women religious, once the only hope for Catholic women who were not content with what Patricia Wittberg calls "a common denominator" kind of religious existence, now try to live out their lives as individual members of a parish community.

You will say, of course, that this is due in large measure to the shortage of priests. But I say that it is due as well to our own failure to do theology together.

For all her conventional piety, Catherine McAuley knew that Christ was to be met, not only in church, but in the homes of the sick poor--and she taught her sisters to prepare to meet him there. She knew that the power to forgive, the capacity for pastoral care, resides in the Christian community and she taught her sisters to forgive and care for each other as a prerequisite for their duties in the schools, hospitals and shelters; for her, it was simply a form of loving. Catherine believed the sisters had the capacity to love one another as Christ loves, for--as she says--"this was His last Dying Injunction, which as a most valuable legacy, He bequeathed to all

¹¹ Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions* (Silver Spring: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1992), p. 8-9, par 18-19.

His followers..." For her, this was the Lumen Gentium : a community united in love, living out love of God and love of neighbor. And that does not depend on the presence of a priest.

I see by your worksheet that you are prepared to face some of these hard questions this week-end. When you do, please let it be from a wider perspective than the merely practical. Before one asks about how and when to gather the sisters, one must ask "What do we believe about ourselves?" "What is the meaning of being a Sister of Mercy?" Perhaps it would help to measure our current understandings against the witness of the New Testament. What are our ideals? To what behaviors do we utter our woes? Can we find them, as we did in Matthew, in our community rule? How do we handle conflict? Do we experience opposition from the society that surrounds us? Who doesn't like us? Why? With whom do we eat? What constitutes our table talk? What are the dangers to our community? Can you name them? Do they differ from regional community to regional community? Is the quality of our life together such that we are forming witnesses to the truth, despite the alienation and isolation such witness brings on?

Once such questions are faced--and this constitutes doing theology--you can proceed to ask how the meetings you set up are connected to your answers, how they connect with the lines of the Constitutions about "sharing faith and mission," "coming to know each other as sisters...to form bonds of union and charity."

The title of your conference is apt: it is a great journey, this continual seeking to understand what we say we believe, this constant striving for congruence between what we say and the way we live. And on this road, or even at sea as we may sometimes be, we will meet Christ. We will know that we have by the breaking of the bread.

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