

Wisdom Is Our Home

Presentation to Mercy Network on Aging
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Introduction

Assumptions: I'm in a room full of experts who know more about aging than I ever will; it's very clear that I will not try to speak or be definitive about anything that you have far more knowledge about.

Assumptions: I do bring an expertise about the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and this moment in time so perhaps I can make some reflections that connect to the ministry you love and the concerns that you hold.

Assumption: You may not describe yourself as a minister when people ask you what you are; but I view you as a minister—one who offers service and in particular the service of healing and hospitality; you are in the business of bringing people to wholeness. Before I start my presentation I want to express gratitude for that significant role on behalf of all Sisters of Mercy for our own Mercy sisters, family members and other persons you tend on a daily basis and to bring you greetings from your new Institute Leadership Team.

I want to explore one question with you today: What time is it? And the answer is very simple: it is the time for wisdom. I will explore this question from five perspectives: 1) our culture; 2) our heritage and tradition as Christians; 3) our personal relationships and experience; 4) our Institute; and 5) our Mercy centers of aging.

Although I cannot go into great analysis and description I want to offer that 1) our culture (our socio-economic, political and global life) needs wisdom today and some even describe our present moment as the age of wisdom; 2) our tradition as Christians offers rich resources for us to be people of wisdom; 3) our encounters, our relationships, our very experience in the present moment are the doorways, the thresholds to wisdom; 4) our Institute, through a rich, collaborative and prayerful process asked our God of mercy, mystery and wisdom to lead us in crafting an Institute statement that will guide us and that happened in the creation of the Chapter Declaration; and, 5) our Mercy centers of aging are abundantly blessed with wise persons and can be in this moment of time the places known throughout our Institute and in our world as Mercy centers for wisdom.

So, let's begin...

Part One: Culture

How does the culture in this country view aging today? What are key cultural themes or shifts occurring today related to aging and wisdom?

First, let's look at aging. Social scientists, economists and other scholars affirm that global aging is a major cultural factor in the United States and throughout our world. For most of history, the elderly composed only a tiny fraction of the population. Globally, the elderly comprise now about 15 percent of the population. By 2050 that percentage will shift to 25. In many countries, populations will cease to grow and many countries will enter into a population decline. By 2040, Mexico will be as "old" as the United States and South Korea will be challenging Germany, Italy and Japan as the oldest countries on earth.

In a significant report on demographics, we learn:

The world is entering a demographic transformation of unprecedented dimensions. Global aging is not a transitory wave like the baby boom that many affluent countries experienced in the 1950s or the baby bust that they experienced in the 1930s. It is, instead, a fundamental demographic shift with no parallel in the history of humanity. Aging experts Alan Pifer and Lydia Bronte observe, "When this revolution has run its course, the impact will have been as powerful as that of any of the great economic and social movements of the past." (*Graying of the Great Powers* – Jackson, Howe)

Retirement benefits and the availability of healthcare obviously are two major concerns as this shift occurs. How to use and enhance our current resources in a careful and just manner to assure some viability for the future is a mammoth challenge. Factual information indicates that by 2017 the U.S. social security system will be taking in less than it needs to pay out and by 2041 the allocations that are set aside for the future will be depleted. Wise persons—politicians, economists, sociologists—are sorely needed.

What further impact does this demographic shift have on culture? Societies likely will become more conservative in outlook and risk-avoidant economically. How our society views "work" has changed and will continue to do so. As longevity of age increases, people see work as an important activity to remain vital as they age and as a way to contribute meaningfully to society. Historians tell us that the baby boomers do not look kindly on the nature of retirement. Additionally some baby boomers look to later years to find their most fulfilling careers—after they've raised families and attained some financial security. Baby boomers are becoming a vibrant resource for volunteerism for short- and long-term projects in this country and throughout the world.

Humorist and cartoonist James Thurber, writing in the early 20th century, quipped, "I am sixty-five and I guess that puts me in with the geriatrics. But if there were fifteen months in every year, I'd only be forty-eight. That's the trouble with us: We number everything." In today's culture, we are looking at a very different numbers game where the current 80 year old might

likely be doing the activities of a previous 60 year old; the 65 year old actually demonstrating behaviors and attitudes of a previous 45 year old. The times are changing. Our exaggerated stereotypes of aging describe our elders as useless, frail types who mutter and stumble along. But these stereotypes are gratefully dying and, as they do, what new images do we wish to create and embrace?

So, how does our society view wisdom? Today experts tell us that we are moving into the fifth age of civilization...that of wisdom. The five civilizations that have marked the human journey are:

Hunter-Gatherer – bow and arrow

Agricultural – farm equipment

Industrial – factory

Information/Knowledge – human person

Wisdom – compass

Professionals who study organizational life claim that the compass symbolizes the power to choose, to set a direction. At this moment in history, the shift is moving from information-centered to the knowledge age which requires great investment in our own education and training. One expert states, "The challenge of transitioning into this new age of wisdom will occur through those who take the time to acquire new data and new skills ... new frameworks and perspectives ... they will develop resources that will anticipate and accommodate great transitions into the age of wisdom when information and knowledge are impregnated with purpose and principles. (295)

Impregnated with purpose and principles...this is a critical pathway to wisdom.

John Allen, Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* and author of *The Future Church*, describes 10 trends he believes will transform the Church by the 22nd century. From a Catholic perspective, he reflects on the significant demographic shifts that are occurring as one of his 10 trends. His discussion begins with the radical declining fertility rates world-wide. He concurs with other experts that declining fertility, coupled with the aging of the baby boom generation results in the elderly being the fastest growing segment of the population globally. What is of most interest to us, I believe, are his reflections on how this will impact the Catholic Church and our ministries.

He asserts that given the reality of the social security and healthcare challenges in this country, the need for more charitable assistance will increase dramatically. Beyond financial assistance, parishes and Catholic networks could resource the forming of intergenerational support groups to assist our communities. A particular challenge of our church and society is to provide adequately for the needs of the growing aging population without squeezing the young for

resources and support that becomes unrealistic. Additionally, he states that “elder equity” is perhaps the dominant domestic policy issue of the future and Catholic leaders must demonstrate values-based and pragmatic leadership in policy formation and in practice to assure that resources are distributed fairly across lines of race, class, gender and age. As in all social and economic societal challenges, “the impact will disproportionately fall upon women, the poor and those who are non-white.” Allen concludes with a reflection on future ministry citing that “what youth ministry was to the John Paul years, elder ministry will be to the twenty-first century.”

Like his professional peers, Allen notes that our church will continue to become more conservative. He urges us to consider how we will address issues related to death and dying that take into account a Catholic understanding of death and life after death. Allen states that church groups with a strong commitment to a pro-life message will need to embrace euthanasia as the dominant pro-life issue of the future. (*The Future Church*; p. 160-164)

Reflection and conversation: *What resonates with me? How do I describe: What time is it now?*

Part Two: Our tradition as Christians

The Christian tradition that many of us claim and that is foundational in our Mercy centers of aging has a rich history of ideas and suggestions about wisdom. I want to look at that tradition to set a context.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us how the female image of God is well integrated in our Christian story. She uses the simple “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” Advent hymn to remind us how this view of God comes forth:

*O Come thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orders all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.*

Numerous scholars of the Old Testament affirm a feminine image of God who is called Sophia in Greek, and is characterized as mighty, instructing and oftentimes creative. Johnson will say that this Sophia is the robust God of the Israelites “in active, redeeming engagement with the world.” The book of Proverbs begins with the person of Wisdom moving through the market place as a street preacher, a prophet, claiming: “whoever finds me finds life” (8:35). This is clearly the promise of God. As the section in Proverbs continues, we see Wisdom present at creation, playing delightfully as the world comes to be. We read that she walks the paths of justice and is quite hospitable: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of my wine ... lay aside immaturity and live ... walk in the way of insight.”

When we look at the book of Wisdom in the Old Testament, Wisdom is said to be the “mother and fashioner of all things.” Her creative presence is redeeming, protecting the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. We read in the book of Wisdom: “Wisdom guided them along a marvelous way, and became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night. She brought them over the Red Sea and led them through deep waters.” Theologians conclude that the most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Old Testament is that of Wisdom. Johnson summarizes: “She is a beneficent, right-ordering power in whom God delights and by whom God creates; her constant effort is to lure human beings to life.” (*She Who Is*; p. 88) The work of wisdom: to lure human beings to life!

When we turn to the book of Sirach, we hear again the story of this wonderful feminine presence:

Come to Wisdom with all your soul,
and keep her ways with all your might.
Search out and seek, and she will become known to you,
and when you get hold of her, do not let her go.
For at last you will find the rest she gives,
and she will be changed into joy for you. (Sirach 6:26-28)

What do we learn about Wisdom in this selection? In this passage, we are invited to see that Wisdom is worth the effort ... come with all your soul; keep her ways with all your might. The passage suggests that we enter into relationship with Wisdom: seek her, do not let her go, she’ll give you rest and her very Wisdom will be changed into joy for you. I find that a wonderful description ... I have the image of a person on a journey, a life pursuit, for wisdom and in finding her, we find joy as well. What might Wisdom and joy have in common? Have the wise persons you’ve known been persons of joy?

What theologians and scripture scholars have studied for years cannot be summarized here nor is that my intent. I am just trying to remind us of our rich Biblical tradition on Wisdom, the feminine personification of God who is life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing and just.

For a moment let us turn to the New Testament and consider Jesus ... the Wisdom Jesus. St. Paul describes Jesus in the letter to the Corinthians as the “wisdom of God.” Cynthia Bourgeault, spiritual writer, speaks of Jesus as faithful to the Old Testament characterization of Wisdom and introducing a new dimension for our consideration: Jesus declares his oneness with God and with those same descriptors we heard a few moments ago: life giving, creative and playful, engaging, instructing and just. And the radical claim of Jesus is that his oneness with God is ours as well. This is the profound, wisdom-gift of Jesus: his proclaiming that the kingdom of God is within you. Now those of us who grew up listening to all the Gospel stories

know well the kingdom of God image. But Bourgeault issues us a warning that too often we've heard the stories so well that we miss the simple message that we are not to learn about Jesus and the wisdom he taught but rather we are, as St. Paul, says "to put on the mind of Jesus Christ." And this mind ... this wisdom view of Jesus is that the kingdom of God is now... active ... in our lived reality. And we must embrace the consciousness of Jesus, the wisdom of Jesus, to live in the presence and life stream of God.

What's another way of saying all this? Jesus' message was all about oneness. The kingdom of God, the home of God, the very life of God is within you. We hear over and over the stories and parables of Jesus that speak of this oneness: *love one another as you love yourself ... live on in my love ... as the Father and I are one, so are you one with me ... I am the vine, you are the branches.* What does this vision of oneness hold for us? That all life is sacred, holy, blessed ... that there is no separation between the human and the divine.

Bourgeault notes that this new consciousness "is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns the world into a different place ... where no separations exist between the human and the divine and between the human and any other human." The call of Jesus to "come and see" is an invitation to come and see all of creation, all of life, all of our sisters and brothers as one. This, in a dangerously simple few statements, is the wisdom of Jesus ... a wisdom that is foundational to our life as Christian ... a wisdom that we are to live into and to live out of.

So, why am I spending this time doing a very skimpy review of a lot of Scripture and simplifying the meaning of Jesus in a few statements? Simply, I want to suggest that our tradition gives us a vivid picture of wisdom that were we to pay attention to our experience, we would find ourselves literally being overwhelmed with how Wisdom surrounds us each and every minute of our day. Wisdom is needed in such large measure today given the challenges in our world and in our church. And the wisdom needed is that described throughout our Jewish and Christian tradition: A wisdom personified as God's very presence that is named *life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing, and just.*

Part Three: Our experience and relationships

So, how would you describe wisdom in your own words? When is the last time you heard yourself or someone else say, "she/he is a very wise person." What wisdom lives in you and what wisdom do you meet every day?

The invitation to live a commitment to Jesus is to find within ourselves and within each person we meet the very presence of God: life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing and just. These characteristics of life, which are really characteristics of fullness of God, come in human form and it is to us, as experts in our own experience, to pay attention. Now paying attention is a discipline.

Annie Dillard, storyteller and writer, says, “At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, to the world. Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.” Claiming the present moment is a choice. How often do we find ourselves drifting to the unfinished tasks that we didn’t get to before we had to get to the airport to make our way to this conference? How often do I/you say to ourselves “I really need to give that some thought” and then move right on to the next task, the next activity. How often do we really listen, pay attention, stand still, stop?

Over the past weeks I have tried to pay attention to my own quest for wisdom and where I find wisdom. In my own role as part of the Institute Leadership Team, as a member and a woman in the Catholic church, as a person who is stymied by our total inability as a political system here in the United States to make any headway in crafting a path toward the common good, I seek wisdom constantly. I’ve thought about our Christian tradition and the description of wisdom as, the feminine personification of God as life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing and just. And all of this has led me to think about a few particular people who have shown up in my life as significant influences, loving persons and sources of wisdom. And as I introduce them to you, I’d invite you to think about the “wise persons” who have shown up in your life as teachers, friends, colleagues, family members.

Sister Terese Tracy. I had heard about Terese and knew her from a distance for a number of years when I was growing up in the Mercy community. Terese had a reputation for being fiercely just, passionate for those who are poor, visionary, and a very hard worker. When I was first elected to the leadership team for the Omaha region of the Sisters of Mercy, I found myself sharing leadership with Terese. And, it was a bit intimidating!

Because Terese was a giant in our community and because I was young and beginning a very new ministry, I would stumble a bit around her. What I found in Terese was such a welcoming heart, so attentive to life and relationships, and so focused in what she believed to be true and necessary. Terese also was so comfortable in who she was ... so at home in her own skin. She was a “force” but her wisdom qualities softened her and she became a great teacher ... as our tradition claims, she was instructing and just.

Helen Mahoney. Helen is my aunt and because my mother died when I was very young, Helen became a very significant person in my life. But apart from the very personal role that Helen had for me, she was a wise woman in her own right. I remember her telling stories about her husband having to go to war right when they had begun a family and so she quickly realized that she needed to get a job and buy a house and keep things going. She was a liberated woman long before “feminist liberation” language ever emerged. Her wisdom was of a practical nature; she cherished life and she did all that she could to protect and enhance life.

One of Helen’s greatest sadnesses and challenges was her loss of hearing. She so loved visiting with people and was so interested in everything around her that this was a terrible hardship. And she was creative. She found ways to communicate even with her hearing loss and she

remained extremely aware and knowledgeable about the news of the day—locally and globally, politically, socially and religiously. She was a rare teacher of wisdom for me.

Mary Daniel Turner. Mary Daniel was a Sister of Notre Dame and grew up in Washington DC. I first met Mary Daniel when she was a presenter to our Omaha community on living the vows. She was at first glance a woman of wisdom and having time with her and growing in friendship with her was a journey into deeper wisdom.

For a number of significant years, Mary Daniel accompanied our leadership team as a “spiritual guide.” I don’t think the title ever resonated with her because she was always leading us back to ourselves: trust your own experience; be the interpreter and author of your own life; listen deeply to your own story and be taught by your own questions, your own wonderings, your own mistakes. Mary Daniel often visited and talked about power and women’s use and avoidance of power. She constantly invited me/us into a hospitality of seeing our power as influence and opportunity and using our power for the common good.

Mary Daniel in her very person introduced me to Sophia, the wisdom of God ... the one who is life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing and just.

You’ve met many wise persons. I chose three women, all of whom have died, but my experience in wisdom personified happens every day. I have a wonderful stance that I learned from Thomas Merton about 40 years ago and to which I return often: Every moment and every event of every person’s life plants something in her soul; and if I were looking for God (the wisdom God) then every moment and every event and every person would speak to me of that God. That perspective is foundational in my life. The wisdom of God is not a holy journey apart from our lives; the wisdom of God surrounds us and lives deeply within us, individually and communally.

I invite you now to pause and think about those wise persons who have accompanied you on your life journey. Then after a short time of reflection, I will invite you to share with one or two others, your person of wisdom.

Part Four: Chapter Declaration ... words of wisdom

I believe organizations and institutions create statements, documents, mottos, vision and mission statements that capture our best thinking and give direction to our common life. Look at the Gospels; think about the Declaration of Independence; think of a favorite quote or motto that you find yourself returning to in a time of stress or confusion. As Sisters of Mercy, we have been on a journey during this past year or more to ask our God of mercy, of mystery and of wisdom to lead us to life-giving words that will direct our actions and values as an Institute for the next six years.

Using the gospel story of the woman at the well as a central point for reflection, Sisters of Mercy, Mercy associates and companions, and other Mercy persons reflected on coming to the well of God's mercy and drawing down deeply for wisdom and direction. This process asked for us to engage one another in a contemplative style of prayer and conversation. At our Chapter gathering this past June, we articulated a new statement called our "Chapter Declaration" which we believe captures our hopes, values and challenges as we move into the future. Just as Sisters of Mercy have had other wonderful statements that have provided guidance and inspiration, this Chapter Declaration is for me our current words of wisdom to one another and to our world.

I want to share the whole document with you and lift up a few phrases that I hope will invite your own reflection and energy as leaders of Mercy ministries. First we developed a context in which we affirm our "interdependence with one another." Certainly we are speaking of a oneness with all peoples and all of creation ... and we are speaking of a oneness with all Mercy persons who not only share our values and mission but inspire us daily with their own commitment –people like yourselves.

We named what distresses us and said bluntly that we are "scandalized by the increase in poverty ... how people are denied every day of basic human rights ... by the degradation of Earth ... and the increased violence and racism." These are not realities that are "out there" in someone else's part of the world; this is our reality and I suspect you could speak to the issue of poverty in how you work for just wages; you could speak to the racism that too often our sisters and residents display toward your staff and workers; that you can see with us how the basic human rights of shelter and food are denied to an ever growing number of elderly persons in this country. And, we acknowledged our complicity ... we are part of the wrongdoing attitudes and behaviors that are less than life-giving and just.

We set forth a direction that is rooted in our Mercy tradition and values and we desire to do more ... to be more for those most affected by poverty, violence and racism. And so we directed ourselves first to live more fully the Gospel spirituality that is ours; to work toward unmasking and addressing the Critical Concerns that we have been addressing for a number of years: women, immigration, Earth, non-violence and racism. We will seek to find creative solutions to address unmet needs through how we view and use our resources ... and in all that we hope to contribute to a sustainable future for our Institute, our church and our world.

I could not be with you tonight and not tell you the story of the Chapter Declaration because it must become the foundational document of our mission in this moment of our Mercy story. I could not ask the question: What time is it now? And not emphasize our time in Mercy is to embrace the wisdom of our words and live this Declaration with integrity. The Declaration does, I believe, synthesize the wisdom of so many Sisters of Mercy as we struggled during the past one to two years to articulate a vision for ourselves. I know you will be invited into your own reflection on this Chapter Declaration in the months to come and I hope you will share

your wisdom and understanding with us as we try to live out of this vision toward a more sustainable future for ourselves, for our ministries and most importantly for our world.

Part Five: Our Mercy Centers of Aging

We have discussed how our culture views aging and needs wisdom for a common good future; we have looked to our Christian tradition as a resource in our personal and communal desires to be people of wisdom; we have opened our hearts and minds to see how our very experience and relationships are the thresholds for wisdom; and we have looked quickly at our Institute Chapter Declaration as a statement of vision that will contribute to our becoming persons of wisdom. Our final reflection, which belongs much more appropriately to you than to me, is the recognition that our centers of aging must become known throughout our Institute and our world as Mercy centers for wisdom.

I am intrigued in recent years about the discussions about the invisibility of women religious in the United States today. No longer are there large groups of us in schools or hospitals ... and that is true. Earlier this summer, about 150 young people gathered in Dublin with about 15 to 18 Sisters of Mercy for a youth pilgrimage. This event preceded World Youth Day which gathers tens of thousands of young persons every three years to celebrate their faith in Jesus Christ. What Sisters of Mercy said to me about our event in Dublin is instructive: It was a wonderful experience of learning about Catherine McAuley and becoming steeped in the mercy values. More so it was an experience of a community of Sisters of Mercy engaged in a common project. Most young people, and other adults, experience Sisters of Mercy today in ones or twos. Do we not have any consistent places where large numbers of Sisters of Mercy show up for common projects and give witness to Mercy and justice for our local communities and for our world? Yes, our centers of aging!

What would it take from your leadership to design strategies that would change the face of our centers of aging in which WISDOM becomes the hallmark of activity and that WISDOM is directed toward the sustainable future of our Institute, our church and our world? The characteristics that we have been connecting to wisdom throughout this presentation are the characteristics needed in being a center of wisdom: Life-giving, creative and playful, engaging and relational, instructing and just.

Sister Joan Chittister, spiritual writer, in her book *The Gift of Years* writes of wisdom: "The service of the elders is not a service of labor, it is a service of enlightenment, of wisdom, or discernment of spirits. Only the carriers of generations past can give us those things because wisdom is what lasts after an experience ends." Those who have lived, loved and learned from life bear the responsibility to gift our Communities and our world with wisdom. Your centers can become the vehicles, the portals, the thresholds where the story of wisdom can be shared and learned. Later in Chittister's reflection, she reflects that our elders have what the world needs most: Experience that can save the next generation.

Our next generation, bereft with violence, poverty and lack of self-esteem, must meet and engage persons of wisdom. Mercy centers of aging can be places where conversation and dialogue could bridge the tentativeness and anxiety of the current generation with the seasoned stories and learning of their elders. Our culture is in grave danger of an elitist separation where technology and information will drive decisions and values, devoid of the wisdom of those who have traveled a similar path and integrated the struggles and hardships into a meaningful story that is holistic and hopeful.

I invite you ... I implore you to think creatively and substantively about our future and how your role is key toward the sustainability that our Chapter Declaration asks of us. Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of the VISA Credit Card Association, speaks to the invitation I am offering: "We are now at a point in time when the ability to receive, utilize, store, transform and transmit data has expanded literally beyond comprehension. Understanding and wisdom are largely forgotten as we struggle under an avalanche of data and information."

You are wise leaders; you have all you need to chart a different future. It will not be easy and you have more challenges on your mind and in your heart than I could imagine. My invitation to you is to step creatively and courageously into your challenges and see if another path might open to you where wisdom can become the hallmark of Mercy Centers of Aging for our Institute, for our church and for our world.

Note: Full references available on request.