

Women as the Image of God: Implications for Mercy Mission

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[Note: the references in brackets are found in detail in my paper entitled “Women as the Image of God: Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindling”: Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century.” This paper begins with Reading from Exodus 3:1-15 and power point with 10 slides of fire plus images of the “cries of the people” from presentations of the previous day.]

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.”’ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

From my reading of the papers for this conference I had the sense that our gathering in these days had the potential to open a new way for us as Sisters of Mercy of “being centered in God” in life and ministry in the 21st century. The global and local images of the current social reality that we heard yesterday could leave us disempowered by the pain and helplessness that they evoke. However, since it is God’s Spirit who creates events of communion, I want to claim this event of our gathering as *God’s deed* which offers us, a newly emerging global body of mercy women, some deeper wisdom and insight towards collective decision and action.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

In this brief presentation I will focus on an issue that has been raised in several papers and which I believe is intrinsic to our being mercy in the 21st century, and therefore to our common corporate mission as Sisters of Mercy. Mary Sullivan approaches it when she reminds us that: “the ministry of Catherine McAuley was always directed to enhancing people’s knowledge of and faith in God” and that “highly educated people were often, in Catherine’s day as they may be today, spiritually ignorant of a mature theology of God” (Sullivan, 12, 15).

I want to focus on spiritual ignorance of a mature theology of God because of its very practical consequence for our mission of mercy. It is to this end that Elaine Wainwright has invited us:

as women of mercy to be/come deeply aware of the power and pervasiveness of dominant male images in our consciousness, woven into our spirituality and theology and given expression in our language and symbol systems [because] unless we shift patterns of thought and language, we will not be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those, especially women and children (Wainwright, footnote 6).

In a similar vein, Janet Ruffing has drawn our attention to “the soul wounds that women suffer as a result of patriarchal religion” (Ruffing, 19). I want to argue that a mature theology of the God revealed by Jesus and the Spirit – one that does “shift patterns of thought and language” is crucial if we are “to be able to change structures and systems of power on behalf of all those [afflicted by poverty], especially women and children” (Wainwright, footnote 6).

Women’s work in theology, and in a particular way within feminist theologies, has challenged us to receive the ‘more’ of God, to a deeper, richer knowing of God.¹ It helps us receive God’s naming of Godself – ***I AM WHO I AM***. My concern is about how the fruits of decades of women’s work in biblical and theological research can be made accessible and be ‘received’ by the people of God in ways that enable conversion and transformation.

I referred in my paper to the constructive theology of Trinity of Elizabeth Johnson. In the opening chapter of her work Johnson uses the sentence, “the symbol of God functions” (Johnson, 4-6) like a red flashing light. She seeks to alert the reader that “what is at stake is the truth about God” which she rightly claims is “inseparable from the situations of human beings, and the identity and mission of the faith community itself” (Johnson, 6). I want to give equal stress to this warning sentence today. I want to convince each of you of the power of the symbol of God in our lives and that it has serious practical consequences. In the context of this process of theological reflection, we need to know that the symbol of God impacts on the phenomenon of world poverty.

This touches on something that Catherine McAuley knew very well – that there is an intrinsic link between the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. How we speak about God, matters because “what is at stake is the truth about God, *inseparable from* the situations of human beings.” The symbol of God truly does function. The God or gods worshiped by an individual person or by societies, shapes behavior. I believe that the careful and creative biblical and theological work involved in redressing the major gender imbalance that has been in place for two thousand years, comes under

¹ See for example, Wainwright, “Mercy Embodied” for profound new insights into Jesus as the Wisdom and Compassion of God, and Ruffing, “Spiritual Implications,” for her enriching work on the Holy Spirit.

the rubric of *spiritual works of mercy*. This rich resource was not available to Catherine and our founding sisters. It is available to us and I am suggesting that it has the potential to make a major contribution towards restoring the full humanity of women.

The Ministry of Spirituality

Catherine McAuley established the first *House of Mercy* in Dublin to provide a space where women could be treated with full human dignity, as persons made in God's image. Today that call from women world-wide is still ours. Moreover, since those first days in Baggot Street, the faces of literally thousands of Sisters of Mercy have been revealing the female face of God to those to whom they minister. As have the faces of multitudes of women everywhere. This fact, however, has, for the most part, not seemed to contribute to a reception of the truth that woman is made in the image of God and that our naming of the incomprehensible God needs to include female images along with multiple other images. Nor has this truth of women as *imago Dei* been translated into practice within the church.

I am proposing that the work of facilitating the recognition that the truth about God – ***I AM WHO I AM*** – is *inseparable from* the truth about women being made in the image of God and that this needs to become a significant dimension of the ministry of a Mercy spirituality. I believe that this recognition is intrinsic to the spiritual works of mercy and an important arena for the ministry of Sisters of Mercy.

Other significant strands of an emerging Mercy spirituality inevitably arise and are deepened as we listen to each other describe the situations of our corporal works of mercy. Hence the importance to the work within this conference of the papers of our sisters from Kenya, Guyana, Jamaica, Tonga and from the 'places' of ministry like that of Human Trafficking that are now distressingly global.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I draw from the insights that Doris Gottemoeller offers from her analysis of the elements that have contributed to the present flourishing of new ecclesial ministries within the church. Gottemoeller puts forward "three learnings from the new movements which address challenges inherent in today's world and which are applicable to the Sisters of Mercy . . . The first learning she lists is *the necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality which unifies a group* (Gottemoeller, 9). She notes that "the example of the movements tells us that a deeply appropriated common spirituality has the power to unite members and attract others" (Gottemoeller, 10).

I am suggesting from all of the above that as Sisters of Mercy in the 21st century we have the capacity to articulate and draw from a rich and deep spirituality of Mercy that is born of a mature theology of God. Such a theology includes:

- a commitment to receive the utter incomprehensibility of God,
- an understanding of the profound importance of knowing women are created in the image of God, and
- the cumulated shared wisdom that service of the poor unleashes.

I believe that attending to this call is an intrinsic part of *God's new deed* in us – *Fire Cast on the Earth – Kindling*. Our challenge is to find explicit ways to own and appropriate together, as a global entity of Sisters of Mercy, such a theology/spirituality/praxis.

Let me finish as I did in my paper with some lines from a poem of Christopher Fry:

*Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us until we take
The longest stride of soul [we] ever took.
Affairs are now soul size
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.²*

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² From *A Sleep of Prisoners*, by Christopher Fry.

"FIRE CAST ON THE EARTH - KINDLING": BEING MERCY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The place
where you stand
is holy ground.



I have witnessed
the affliction of my people.

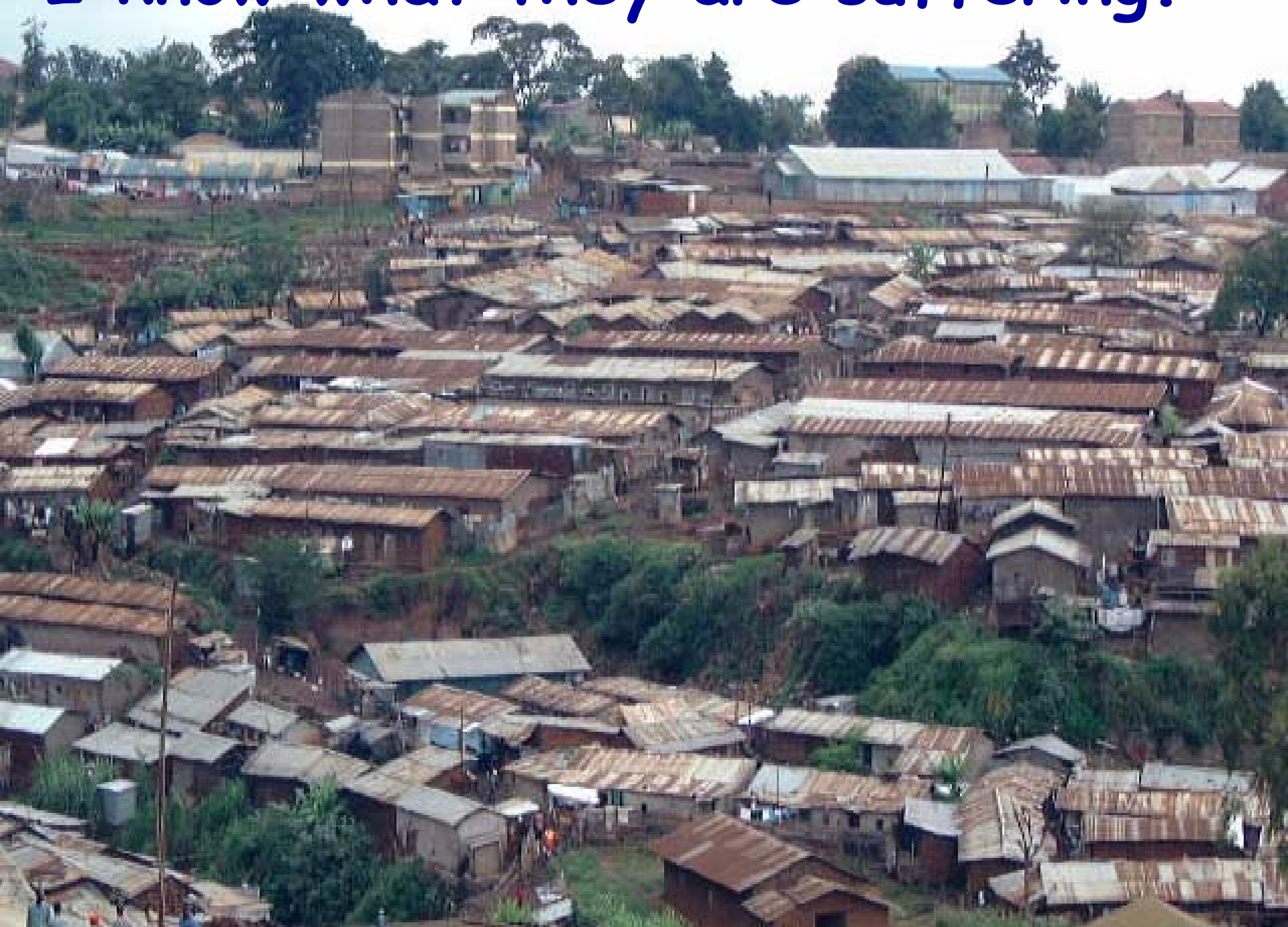




I have heard their cries.



I know what they are suffering.



Therefore, I have come
to save them.





I AM WHO I AM



THIS IS MY NAME FOREVER
THIS IS MY TITLE FOR ALL
GENERATIONS



I AM WHO I AM

