

Women as the Image of God: *Fire Cast on the Earth – Kindling Being Mercy in the Twenty-first Century*

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This conference, *Fire Cast on the Earth – Kindling*, is one expression of our globalization as Sisters of Mercy. Some of the preparatory papers inform and challenge our reading of the signs of these times, others offer light and direction from our history and tradition. The issue we are pursuing together is about “being Mercy in the twenty-first century.” Doris Gottemoeller focuses the question more finely when she asks: “What distinctive contribution can we make to the trends addressed in our Summary Paragraph¹, *precisely as Sisters of Mercy?*”² It is this question that I would like to address in this paper. Given the capacities for communication and travel that have existed now for decades, it could be considered surprising that as a world-wide community of religious women, we have not responded to such a question with practical intent and in a sustained manner before. However, with the strong strands of autonomy and localization so firmly entrenched within our tradition, we can rejoice that, at last, in this twenty-first century, largely facilitated by the agency of Mercy International Association, we are finding ways to look at the big picture of our world and our times together. Both the urgency of our times and a more vivid and immediate access to Catherine’s vision and charism prompt us to a deeper, responsive reception of our charism of mercy for the church and world.

It was the joyful commitment and energy of a group of attractive women recently arrived from England to join the new Institute of Sisters of Mercy, which evoked Catherine McAuley’s animated description to her friend Elizabeth -- “the fire Christ cast upon the earth is kindling very fast.”(Correspondence 170)³ Her use of this vibrant gospel image indicates that she recognized this event of their arrival to be *God’s deed*, an initiative of the provident loving God in whom she had placed her trust and her hopes for the future of the Institute of Mercy. I believe that the invitation to us in these days, -- to discover our global call as Sisters of Mercy in the twenty-first century -- provides an opportunity for us to attend to *God’s new deed* in us. The global and local pictures of the current social reality could leave us disempowered by their sheer weight and complexity.⁴ However, since it is God’s Spirit who creates events of communion, I want to recognize this event of our gathering as God’s deed which offers us, a newly emerging international body of mercy women, some deeper wisdom and insight towards collective decision and action. This time together has the potential to ‘open a new way of “being centered in God” in life and ministry in 21st century.’⁵

¹ A one page collation of the issues that those participating in this conference identified as descriptive of the world in which we minister today.

² Doris Gottemoeller, ‘Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements,’ International Mercy Research Conference, November 2007. p.1. Emphasis is mine.

³ See Mary Sullivan, ‘Catherine McAuley in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries,’ pp. 4-5; Janet Ruffing, ‘Fire Cast on the Earth: Spiritual Implications for Mercy in the 21st Century,’ pp. 1-2.

⁴ See “Summary Paragraph of Experience” (26 December 2006). Participants in Mercy International Research Conference, November 9-12, 2007.

⁵ Ruffing, ‘Spiritual Implications,’ p.7.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

I want to 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, when referring to one of the strands we identified to be within our present global reality, suggests that:

[t]his present-day hunger and ignorance – whether in the rich or poor – is not unlike the lack of religious understanding Catherine McAuley perceived in women, men, and children of her world, nor unlike the poverty of religious awareness to which she ministered through the spiritual works of mercy which were always her stated goal, in and through the corporal works...⁶

She goes on to emphasize that: “the ministry of Catherine McAuley was always directed to enhancing people’s knowledge of and faith in God”⁷ and that “highly educated people were often, in Catherine’s day as they may be today, spiritually ignorant of a mature theology of God.”⁸

Spiritual ignorance of a mature theology of God is precisely the area I wish to address because of its very practical consequences for our mission of mercy. It is to this end that Elaine Wainwright in her paper on ‘Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy’ chooses to use the nomenclature “G*d,” in order to “to interrupt our familiarity with naming the divine.” Further, she wants:

to invite 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. I believe that 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, whom such language marginalizes and renders invisible and hence of no account.⁹

In a similar vein, Janet Ruffing, following the work of Beverley Lanzetta, draws our attention to “the soul wounds that women suffer as a result of patriarchal religion.” She notes that “there are profound spiritual dimensions to gender-based discrimination and violence from which we ourselves are not immune.”¹⁰ So that while theologically, we know we are equally in the image of God and that God indwells in us as women, our church consistently denies this profound reality in practice. Consequently, “we may live with anger and rage that has no place to go. We live with the sadness of betrayal because our church experience denies our deep feminine wisdom and agency.”¹¹

Related to this, Elizabeth Davis, having set out a confronting mosaic of realities in contemporary society, identifies a series of “troubling questions”. One of these is: “How can women be leaders in this age when gender equity and empowerment of

⁶ Sullivan, ‘McAuley in 19th & 21st Centuries,’ p. 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁹ Elaine Wainwright, ‘Mercy Embodied/Embodied Mercy as Justice, Wisdom and Holiness,’ footnote 6.

¹⁰ Ruffing, ‘Spiritual Implications,’ p.17.

¹¹ Ibid., p.19.

women are still distant dreams?”¹² Any analysis of world poverty almost invariably identifies health, literacy and education of women as intrinsic to its remedy. Over a hundred and seventy-five years ago, our founder, Catherine recognized with clarity that the agency of women was fundamental for the poor to be freed to live a life of dignity and joy. Since then the full force of the mission of Sisters of Mercy, spread to the corners of the earth, has been directed to that end. Yet it is still true that gender equity and empowerment of women, and therefore the leadership of women, are only distant dreams even while globally, new and urgent determinations are made in our time “to make poverty history.”

Women and the Theology of God

I want to argue that a mature theology of the God revealed by Jesus in 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.”¹³ In the past few decades women have had access to a theological and biblical education in ways previously not possible. One consequence is that the women, the “other” half of the human race, are for the first time interpreting sacred texts and contributing in significant ways to current theological and ethical discourse. 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.¹⁴ Theologian Anne Carr has rightly described this phenomenon as a *transforming grace* as it offers us the capacity for the conversion and transformation that can occur when spiritual ignorance makes way for a more mature theology of God.

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. To explore this, I will focus briefly on an area of theology that is familiar to me. As a Sister of Mercy, I have been privileged over years to have been able to study systematic theology with a particular focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. I was prompted to pursue such studies because my pastoral involvements had led me to recognize the practical effects of the beliefs we hold. I recognized in particular that the symbol of God as Trinity, which is at the very heart of our spiritual and theological tradition, has had little if any practical import in people’s lives. For so many, it is still largely a dormant symbol, its power to communicate the dynamism of the liberating God Jesus proclaimed by his life and deeds, mostly muted. In recent decades, however, many theologians have contributed to a widespread revival of this central symbol of our faith. The work of women in this enterprise, as in every arena of theological work, has been and will continue to be crucial.

¹² Elizabeth M. Davis, ‘Social Analysis: A Canadian Perspective, How Can we Dare Wisdom and Mercy in the Mosaic of Our Realities?’ p.12. For two different perspectives on the issue of the leadership of women see also Senolita T. Vakata, ‘Social Analysis: Pacific islands Perspective, Gender Development in Oceania Region’ and Sophie McGrath. ‘Response to Social Analysis papers from an Australian Perspective.’

¹³ Wainwright, ‘Mercy Embodied’, footnote 6.

¹⁴ 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.

Many would be familiar, for example, with the work of North American theologian and Sister of St Joseph, Elizabeth Johnson. Johnson addresses the issue of why the doctrine of the Trinity became irrelevant to Christian life. Her focus on the practical impact of the symbol of God uncovers how this central symbol of God as Trinity has functioned for millennia “to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women” and how in turn, this “undermines women’s human dignity as equally created in the image of God.”¹⁵ She shows how patriarchal religious culture has both confined women to an inferior place and limited speech about God to male images. The seriousness of this situation is emphasized early in her primary publication on the Trinity, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 1992, when she repeats in mantric fashion, “The symbol of God functions.”¹⁶ She uses this sentence like a red flashing light to alert the reader that “what is at stake is the truth about God, inseparable from the situations of human beings, and the identity and mission of the faith community itself.”¹⁷ In the context of this discussion, we could add to this by owning that the symbol of God can contribute negatively to the phenomenon of world poverty.

Johnson articulates here 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 worshipped by an individual person or by societies, shapes behavior. And it is for this reason that a consideration of the naming of God takes on a particular urgency. Johnson’s method evaluates the effects of sexism within society and theological discourse and addresses the debilitating patriarchal effects of the names, imagery and structure of the Trinity, on the Christian community and on women’s lives in particular. She draws attention to a fact that has been steadfastly ignored by theologians for centuries: that exclusively male imagery for God has been used in an uncritically literal way, leading to a form of idolatry. This in spite of key theological principles for language about God commonly accepted at the heart of the tradition.¹⁸ Further, she shows that while affirming and promoting the equality of the divine persons and their mutual interrelation, the classic doctrine subverts this by maintaining the rigid hierarchical ordering as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Johnson’s constructive feminist theology of the Trinity along with those of many others¹⁹ address the challenge posed by the limits of the trinitarian theology we have inherited and this growing body of work can be accessible to us. While it is not possible within the scope of this paper to draw on the richness of this scholarship, I

¹⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, *SHE WHO IS: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York; Crossroad, 1992) p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁸ Johnson refers to the testimony in scripture and later tradition re the incomprehensibility of God, to the centrality of the teaching on analogy within the Roman Catholic tradition, to the need for many names of God, to the apophatic tradition within Christianity. See *ibid.*, pp. 104-120 .

¹⁹ See for example, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Patricia A. Fox, *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier The Liturgical Press, 2001).

want to provide one example from British born Sarah Coakley, presently teaching at Harvard, who elaborates an insight relevant to this present discussion on a mature theology of God. Coakley's trinitarian theology values the apophatic tradition as she examines the capacity of patristic sources to hold the contradictions and ambiguities of language necessary for appreciating both the mystery of God and self. She focuses on the work of Gregory of Nyssa demonstrating that the process of human transformation is the Trinity's very point of intersection with our lives. She suggests that such transformation requires "profound, even alarming shifts in our gender perceptions, shifts which have bearing as much on our thinking about God as about our understanding of ourselves."²⁰ She refers to Gregory's late work, the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* where he "charts in the highly imagistic and eroticized language, the ascent of the soul into the intimacy of the Trinity." Coakley observes that the message that Gregory wishes to convey is that if the soul is to advance to ultimate intimacy with the trinitarian God,

gender stereotypes must be reversed, undermined, and transcended; and that the language of sexuality and gender, far from being an optional aside or mere rhetorical flourish in the process, is somehow necessary and intrinsic to the epistemological deepening that Gregory seeks to describe."²¹

Through such patristic evidence, Coakley attempts, to illuminate an "alternative" approach to the Trinity which gives experiential priority to the Spirit and to prayer. In so doing she uncovers what she believes are the false divisions between "theology" and "spirituality."²²

The careful and creative biblical and theological work involved to redress the major gender imbalance that has been in place for two thousand years is progressing, albeit slowly. It seems to me important that Sisters of Mercy are, and will continue to be, involved in this task, and that this happens through the lens of different cultures and perspectives. This endeavour comes under the rubric of *spiritual works of mercy* and as such has the potential to make a major contribution towards restoring the full humanity of women.

A related dimension of this work is the change that needs to happen at the more primal level of human consciousness. And this is perhaps the most telling and the most difficult arena of transformation because the symbols that reside at the centre of a person's identity and meaning need to be approached with reverence and care. This place is sacred ground. For some, the move to consider the *Holy One* at the centre of their life as *God-She* or even *God-Three* can be so disturbing that it is simply covered over and put aside. For others, even when exposed to excellent theological sources and teaching, and even when intellectual assent is able to be given, the actual move to *receive* a fuller, orthodox, albeit often discordant, understanding of God is finally aborted. When the reception of the incomprehensible God does not have the opportunity to move to the place of the affect, to the place where God is discovered as

²⁰ Sarah Coakley, "Persons' in the 'Social' doctrine of the Trinity: a Critique of Current Analytic Discussion,' in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall SJ, Gerald O'Collins SJ., (eds.) *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1999), p. 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²² Sarah Coakley, "Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity", in Sarah Coakley & David A. Pailin (eds.), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1993), p. 47.

Love beyond All Telling, as Compassion Poured Out, theological truth can revert quickly to the previous default position – to the safe place of one’s childhood or adolescence. The intellectual entry point closes over. It is all too threatening and *God-He* resumes his throne. This is one of the reasons why the spiritual works of mercy, or the ministry of spirituality is so important.

The Ministry of Spirituality

As long ago as 1975 Margaret Farley writing about mutuality in a Trinitarian model and addressing the issue of gender in the naming of God, argued that: “What is important is that there be room... for women to know themselves as images of God, as able to be representatives of God as well as lovers of God.”²³ Even longer ago, 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. Nor has this truth of women as *imago Dei* been translated into practice within the church.

I was profoundly moved recently when I attended a performance of the opera “Dead Man Walking” based on the experience and book of Josephite Sister Helen Prejean. Toward the finale, close to the point of the prisoner going to his place of execution, Helen finally enabled Joseph de Rocher (a fictional name) to own the evil effects of his murderous crime. She tells him he did a terrible thing and he is despair of forgiveness. The music from orchestra and voice soars as the climax of this work approaches:

Joseph But could anyone forgive me?
Sister Helen God is here, Joe, God is here right now.
Joseph I did such a bad thing sister, Maybe my dyin’ will give them folks some relief.
Sister Helen Joseph, when they do this thing to you...
Joseph Sister Helen, I’m gonna die!
Sister Helen I want you to look at me, Joe. I want the last thing you see in this world to be the face of love. *Look at me Joe. I will be the face of Christ for you. I will be the face of love for you.*²⁴

The crescendo of music and dramatic action draws the viewer into the redemptive power of the moment portrayed and announces powerfully to anyone willing to hear: *a woman’s face reveals the face of God!* Besides it being a relief to witness a woman religious portrayed with such authenticity, this opera based on an actual event acknowledges that a woman can indeed reveal Christ’s face, God’s face. More broadly, it is also a potent example of the ministry of spirituality at work.

²³ Margaret Farley, ‘New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution,’ *Theological Studies* 36, (1975) p. 643.

²⁴ Terence McNally, Libretto of the opera *Dead Man Walking*, 2000, commissioned by the San Francisco Opera. Music Jake Heggie. Italics mine.

Bonnie Brennan traces the evolution of this ministry in Ireland from Catherine and the early foundations until the present and for the purposes of her paper she defines the ministry of spirituality thus: “in an intentional way, [the ministry of spirituality] puts the focus on learning about God; fostering the relationship with God; and finding meaning in our live experiences in accordance with this relationship.”²⁵ Following this definition, I am proposing that the work of facilitating the recognition that the truth about God is *inseparable from* the truth about women being made in the image of God needs to become one 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 -- truly *God's new deed* in us -- 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. A recent series of postings on *Mercy E-news* from sisters gathered from many countries provide powerful examples of this process at work. I refer to those who participated in the September *Mercy Global Concern* “Bridging the Gap,” workshop organized at the United Nations by Deirdre Mullen RSM. The focus of the workshop was “Promoting Human Solidarity and Care for Earth” and Sisters Claudette Cusack and Mary Daly recorded these entries respectively:

Deirdre had arranged an amazing program for us that gave us an insight into how the vision of Catherine McAuley was being lived out today in places of dire need around the globe. Day after day we were privileged to hear from our Sisters working to alleviate injustice and to change the systems that perpetuate suffering. Time after time we were made aware of the importance of communication and co-operation between those working on the ground and those working for systemic changes. Both are needed if the poor are to be cared for in the long term. [Paper Number 7]

The MGC sponsored workshop, “Bridging the Gap,” impacted me in several different ways. Hearing from Mercies around the world has deepened my appreciation for and understanding of the Mercy charism. It will affect the work that I do... [in] retreats and spiritual direction...I would like to revisit work I have done on Mercy spirituality and add or strengthen an emphasis on a contemporary understanding of mysticism and the experience of God; of the role of the experience of chaos and darkness; on the implications for spirituality of seeing God as subject rather than object; of the gift of Mercy emphasis on the relational and on systems for response; on chaos, darkness and the cross and the challenge of hope. [Paper Number 4]²⁶

This provides a glimpse of the formative effects of our ministries on our theology and spirituality. The fruits of this creative interplay between corporal and spiritual works are also evident more broadly within religious orders and lay ecclesial movements. For example, a recent radio programme in Australia on human trafficking illustrated the creative impact of a nation-wide network of women and men religious. Jennifer

²⁵ Bonnie Brennan, ‘History of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland in terms of the Ministry of Spirituality,’ p.1.

²⁶ Mercy Global Concern, Mercy E-news October 1st 2007.

Burn, a senior lecturer in law who directs the Anti-Slavery Project at the University of Technology Sydney, commented:

There are whole groups of people and networks working across Australia in dealing with anti-trafficking. The religious networks are unique and have made an incredible contribution to the anti-trafficking movement in Australia and they have, in many ways, led the development of law reform and debate in this area.

Working in anti-trafficking, anti-slavery work is incredibly difficult. It's draining, it's complicated and there have been very few positive outcomes. One of the enormous benefits that I've found from working with religious communities is that they come to the area with a different framework. They have a theology and a commitment that might have a different motivation from the one that I'm working from. One of the things that they do is to think about process... What they will do is to have some period of reflection that's built in to discussion...²⁷

This observation identifies a distinctive contribution that religious communities as a whole have to offer the “incredibly difficult” work of addressing the raw issues of our time. In pursuing the question of what our distinctive contribution as Sisters of Mercy might be, I have drawn from our tradition of the significance of the dignity of women and linked it to the transformative theological and spiritual implications of women created in God’s image. I have connected this to the spiritual works of mercy being intrinsically related to the corporal works of mercy.

²⁷ ‘A Light at the Door,’ *Encounter*, ABC Radio National, September 23, 2007.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to 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 is *the necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality which unifies a group*.²⁸ 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.”²⁹

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, of an understanding of the profound importance of knowing women are created in the image of God, and from the cumulated shared wisdom that service of the poor unleashes. I believe that this is *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. If that were to happen, the other two learnings from the new movements -- *the importance of our ecclesial identity and relationships* and *the centrality of corporate mission*, would follow.

In 2001, in an article published in the bulletin of the Union of Institutes of Superiors General, Marie Chin quoted from the poem, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, by Christopher Fry. Some lines from the same poem seem equally appropriate for us now:

*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.*³⁰

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²⁸ Gottemoeller, ‘New Ecclesial Movements’, p. 9.

²⁹ Gottemoeller, ‘New Ecclesial Movements,’ p. 10.

³⁰ See Marie Chin rsm, UISG Bulletin, Number 116, 2001, p.68.