

Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements

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The challenge “to be Mercy in the twenty-first century” precisely as *Sisters of Mercy*, from within and in the name of a 175 year old community that bears that name, invites comparison with other contemporary options. Specifically, how is our modality of ‘being Mercy’ distinct from that of the new ecclesial movements which originated in the twentieth century? What can we learn from these other responses to the Gospel imperative to respond to the needy of our time? What distinctive contribution can we make to the trends addressed in our Summary Paragraph, precisely as Sisters of Mercy? In the pages which follow I will profile the new phenomenon in order to address these questions.

New Ecclesial Movements

To begin with, the movements are difficult to define and classify neatly. An Irish theologian, Tony Hanna, describes them as “groupings, mostly comprising lay persons, but also clerics and religious, who are striving for an intense religious life in the community and a renewal of the faith in the Church.”¹ In a letter to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in May, 1998, Pope John Paul II defined a movement as “a concrete ecclesial entity, in which primarily lay people participate, with an itinerary of faith and Christian testimony that founds its own pedagogical method on a charism given to the person of the founder in determined circumstances and modes.”² Given the generality of these definitions, it’s not surprising that they assume many forms. Some of the better known are Communion and Liberation, the Neo-Catechumental Way, Regnum Christi, Focolare, the Community of Sant’ Egidio, and the Charismatic Renewal. To illustrate the power and reach of some of the movements, I will briefly describe three of them, drawing as much as possible on their own sources.

¹ *New Ecclesial Movements* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2006), p. 3.

² Pope John Paul II, “Movements in the Church,” *Laitiy Today* (1999), 18. Cited in Hanna, p. 5.

The Fraternity of Communion and Liberation³

The movement took its present name in 1969, growing out of a student movement founded by Fr. Luigi Giussani in Milan, Italy in 1954. It continued to grow until, in 1982, it was recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity as a “juridical entity for the universal Church” and declared to be an Association of Pontifical Right.⁴ In recognition of its thirtieth anniversary in 1984 John Paul II received 10,000 CL adherents in an audience, giving them this mandate: “Go into all the world to bring the truth, beauty, and peace that are encountered in Christ the Redeemer. This is the task that I leave with you today.” In a letter to Giussani in 2002, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of its juridical recognition, John Paul II described CL as “[aiming] at helping people rediscover the Tradition and history of the Church, in order to express this in ways capable of speaking to and engaging the men of our time.”

CL defines itself as a movement because it does not take the form of an organization or structure with formal membership, nor as a special insistence on some particular aspect or practice of the life of the faith, but as a call to live the Christian faith in the present social, political, cultural, and educational environment. There are no membership cards but only the free association of persons in groups called fraternities. The basic instrument for the formation of adherents is a weekly catechesis, called the “School of Community.” Despite this seeming informality, the movement claims more than 44,000 men and women in seventy countries who have committed themselves to a program of personal asceticism, daily prayer, participation in encounters of spiritual formation including an annual retreat, and commitment to the support, financial and otherwise, of the charitable, missionary, and cultural initiatives promoted or sustained by the fraternities. It is supported by extensive publications in more than a dozen languages. There is a General Council (commonly called the “Center”) presided over by an international leader and uniting the directors in Italy and abroad for every sphere—school, university, work, culture, etc.—in which the movement operates. Each of these spheres is led by its own group of leaders.

³ For the data which follows, see the official website of Communion and Liberation, www.CLonline.org.

⁴ Canons 321-326 provide for Private Associations of the Christian Faithful, and Canons 312-320 for Public Associations. The former possess autonomy, subject to the vigilance of ecclesiastical authority. The latter are erected by competent ecclesiastical authority, whether the Holy See, a conference of bishops in its own territory, or a diocesan bishop in his own territory.

Within individual nations, regions, or cities the movement is guided by ‘diakonias,’ i.e., groups of leaders available for service to the life of the community.

In addition to the fraternities there are special sub-groups or off-shoots:

- Memores Domini is an association of lay persons in CL who have made a choice to dedicate themselves to a life of virginity, living in houses of women or men and following a rule of group living and personal asceticism.
- The Fraternity of St. Joseph is made up of those who wish to dedicate their lives definitively to Christ in virginity, while remaining in their current life situations.
- The Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo is a clerical missionary group recognized since 1989 as its own Society of Apostolic Life. Members live in communities on five continents.
- The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Assumption is a pontifical institute which separated from the Little Sisters of the Assumption in 1993. Its principal ministry is aimed at the family, through helping in the home, caring for the sick, for children in difficulty and for the elderly. It currently has about one hundred members.

The Neo-Catechumenal Way⁵

This movement was founded in the slums of Madrid, Spain, in 1964 by Kiko Arguello, an artist and musician, and Carmen Hernandez, a graduate in chemistry. Moved by the plight of the poor and dispossessed, they began a program of evangelization of adults which took the form of a post-baptismal catechesis, hence the name. At the invitation of bishops and pastors to establish the program in their parishes, it spread rapidly. By 1990 the movement was established on five continents, and Pope John Paul II, in a letter to the Vice President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, recognized it as “an itinerary of Catholic formation valid for our society and modern times.” In 1997, in the course of an audience given to the initiators and the itinerant catechists of the Neo-Catechumenal Way, the pope encouraged them to carry on the work of crafting their statutes. The statutes were subsequently approved by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on June 28, 2002.

⁵ For the information which follows, see www.camminoneocatecumenale.it

Facilitating the spread of the NC Way are special diocesan seminaries, called Redemptoris Mater seminaries, which possess their own statutes and a rule of life approved by the respective bishops who have erected them. In 2000 there were about 1500 seminarians enrolled in forty-six of them: twenty in Europe, fourteen in the Americas, six in Asia, one in the Middle East, three in Africa, and two in Australia. By that time 731 priests trained in the NC Way had been ordained. At the same time it was reported that about 4000 young girls from Neo-Catechumenal Communities had entered religious life, especially in enclosed orders. These priestly and religious vocations were nurtured in the 16,700 local Neo-Catechumenal Communities inserted into 5000 parishes within 880 dioceses.

According to the Decree of Approval, the NC Way “places itself at the service of diocesan bishops and parish priests as a means of rediscovering the sacrament of Baptism and of a permanent education in the faith, offered to those faithful who wish to revive in their life the richness of Christian initiation, by following this itinerary of catechesis and conversation. The Neo-Catechumenal Way is furthermore an instrument for the Christian initiation of adults preparing to receive Baptism.” In practice, new members, called ‘catechumens,’ undergo a seven-year long formation program. Although they continue to live at home, they are organized into communities of fifteen to thirty individuals who meet at least twice a week for catechesis and to celebrate the Eucharist. Day-long meetings are held monthly, as well as occasional social gatherings and regular ‘scrutinies’ and liturgies to mark the transition to a new stage of formation. Eventually some members become ‘itinerants’ and move on in order to establish communities elsewhere.⁶

Regnum Christi (and the Legion of Christ)⁷

Like the NC Way, Regnum Christi is also closely associated with a clerical movement. It was founded in Mexico City in 1959 by Marcial Maciel, eighteen years after he began the Legion of Christ in Mexico City as a twenty year-old seminarian. After his ordination, Marciel had taken his followers to Spain and then to Rome for further studies. By 1948 Pope Pius XII had granted the Legion a Nihil Obstat and the Bishop of Cuernavaca raised it to the status of a diocesan congregation. In 1965 Pope

⁶ Description of the formation program is found in the New Catholic Encyclopedia article titled “The Neocatechumenal Way” at www.christusrex.org.

⁷ The information in this section is largely drawn from www.regnumchristi.org.

Paul VI recognized the Legion as a clerical congregation of pontifical right. It operates educational institutions and centers for the formation of the laity.

Meanwhile, the movement known as Regnum Christi continued to grow. It describes itself as “an international Catholic movement of apostolate at the service of the Church.” Its participants number in the tens of thousands in some two dozen countries. Some fifteen thousand members participated in the 60th anniversary celebration of the foundation of the Legion of Christ in Rome in 2001. It chooses not to be identified with a particular project (education, missions, youth work, works of Christian charity, etc.), but rather it “endeavors to prepare a specific type of person who will be able to respond to the needs of the Church and the world. Its specific contribution is to place at the service of the Church men and women committed to Christ, enthused with his message, and capable of establishing far-reaching apostolic projects.” To live this spirituality members rely on a personal commitment to daily prayer, regular spiritual direction, and the frequent reception of the sacraments. They also benefit from working with other members, coming together in teams that meet weekly to reflect on the Gospel, apply it to their concrete circumstances, and review the progress of this apostolic activities. Priests from the Legionaries of Christ usually provide spiritual and apostolic direction for the members.

The extent to which these movements have penetrated the United States is not clear. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops publishes the *Directory of Lay Movements, Organizations, and Professional Associations 2007-2009*, but none of the foregoing are listed. However, their websites do reference United States locales. Anecdotally there are stories of bishops who have welcomed them into their dioceses and at least one who has banned the NC Way.

Observations and Reflections on the Movements

Each movement owes its origin to a charismatic founder whose personal spirituality and passion for mission attracted followers. In addition to the founders already identified, we could cite Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement, Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Community of Sant’ Egidio, and Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Furthermore, the more successful movements have grown rapidly, spreading from country to country around the world, attracting the allegiance of hundreds of thousands of participants, whether or not they have specific membership rolls.

This rapid diffusion is not a consequence of minimalist requirements for participation. On the contrary, the movements call for uncommon generosity, the gift of time and talent and even money beyond what is expected of the average Catholic. Their requirements include explicit and demanding formation programs and rigorous ongoing spiritual and apostolic practices. Frequent meetings, spiritual guidance from senior members, and personal accountability to movement leaders are all typical.

At their best the movements represent a flowering of the gifts of the laity, congruent with the insights of Vatican II. At the same time, they also involve clergy and religious. As noted above, CL includes various types of lay fraternities as well as a priestly fraternity and a religious congregation of women. The NC Way runs seminaries around the world, preparing priests who will propagate the Way. Regnum Christi is associated with the Legionaries of Christ. On September 4, 2007, the NC Way held a youth rally in Loreto, Italy, attended by about 100,000 young people and presided over by Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. When the leaders made a ‘vocation call,’ some 2,000 men and 1,200 women stood up to show their readiness to become priests or consecrated religious.⁸

At present the movements occupy a kind of legislative vacuum in the church. The Pontifical Council for the Laity has general oversight, as noted above, but the generality of the relevant canons provides opportunity both for creative experimentation and for aberrant or heterodox development. The latter observation leads to some critical reflections which have been leveled at the movements.

The first criticism is that the movements can become divisive and cult-like. The NC Way is particularly open to this criticism, since its practice is to provide a separate celebration of the Eucharist for its members within each parish (including a separate celebration of the Easter Vigil). These celebrations are held on Saturday evening, often at a place other than the normal place of worship, and are frequently not listed in the parish bulletin as available to all parishioners. While the celebration generally follows the *Novus Ordo Missae*, certain parts have been deleted or placed in a different location.⁹ This exclusivity and allegations of heterodoxy have prompted some bishops to ban the NC Way in their dioceses. The most extensive inquiry was undertaken by Bishop Mervyn Alexander, in Clifton, England, in 1996. The panel charged with reviewing the NC Way concluded that it had damaged the spiritual unity

⁸ www.zenit.org.

⁹ See Hanna, pp. 60-62, for a more detailed description.

of the three parishes where it was established, and it was subsequently banned. On December 1, 2005 the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments sent a letter to the leaders of the NC Way admonishing them to follow the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist. Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the message in an audience with them on January 1, 2007. Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul-Minneapolis banned the Legionaries of Christ from his diocese. He further instructed parish heads that *Regnum Christi* is to be “kept completely separate from all activities of the parishes and the archdiocese,” not using parish or archdiocesan property for any meeting or program. His objection was that “pastors sense that a parallel church is being encouraged, one that separates persons from the local parish and archdiocese and creates competing structures.” The diocese of Columbus, OH, has a similar policy.¹⁰

Doctrinal positions of some of the movements have also come under criticism. CL is sometimes described as fundamentalist in its theological focus, idealizing the Middle Ages as a time of unity between faith and life, without appreciation for the contributions of the Enlightenment and modern culture. It aroused considerable controversy in the 1980s with its allegations of a huge conspiracy among Communists, Protestants, secular humanists, progressive political parties, liberal Jesuits, and Catholics committed to ecumenical dialogue for ‘selling out’ true Christianity.¹¹ Other issues have arisen with both the CL and the NC Way over their relationship to dioceses, including that of priests to their bishops.

Finally, some of the movements have been criticized as lacking social awareness or an appropriate commitment to inculturation of the Gospel message. Because the movements are so numerous and extensive, it would be far beyond the confines of this paper to document all of the relevant testimonies and experiences, both positive and negative. My purpose here is only to sketch out the reality with enough detail to illustrate some challenges for the church today and particularly for religious congregations such as the Sisters of Mercy.

Learnings and Challenges for the Sisters of Mercy

¹⁰ Jerry Filteau, Catholic News Service, “Minnesota archbishop bars Legionaries from his archdiocese,”

Dec. 22, 2004.

¹¹ See Hanna, pp. 39-45, for further examples.

Our Institute itself may be regarded as an expression of a movement. Through the centuries the church has been enriched by the monastic, the mendicant, and the apostolic movements. Each was a distinctive response to the Spirit's gifts to the church; each responded to the needs of the time. The foundation of the Sisters of Mercy was part of the apostolic movement—the birth of hundreds of congregations in Europe from the 16th to the 19th century and their rapid diffusion to the New World, as well as new foundations in North America which, in turn, moved out to Africa and Latin America. These movements yielded distinctive congregations which conformed to the canonical regulations of their time. Except in a few areas of Eastern Europe and Africa, the movement of apostolic religious life is in decline today.

This is not a judgment based on an appraisal of the sincerity of current members, but simply an observation that our numbers have declined precipitously since the 1960s and a reversal does not seem likely in the near term. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the number of women religious in the United States has dropped from 179,954 in 1965 to 63,699 in 2007.¹² The membership in the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas has declined by approximately a third since its founding in 1991. It is true that there are 165 “emerging communities of consecrated life and lay movements” in the United States founded since 1965.¹³ CARA justifies the grouping together of religious institutes and lay movements on the grounds that many of the groups have not yet determined the type of community they hope to become or the ultimate status they will seek within the Church. However, the editors observe that most of the new groups follow, or plan to follow, traditional models of religious life. While this may seem like a new flowering of religious life, 45% of the groups report having six or fewer members. Only 25% have more than fifteen members. And, perhaps as telling, twenty-four of the communities listed in the 1999 CARA directory had ceased to exist by 2006 and another thirty-seven were determined to be ineligible for the later listing.

I would suggest that there are three learnings from the new movements which address challenges inherent in today's world and which are applicable to the Sisters of Mercy. These are observations based on the evident power of the movements to attract and retain members as well as on the treasure of our Mercy heritage.

¹² The CARA Report, Vol 13, no. 1 (Summer 2007), p. 6.

¹³ See Mary E. Bendyna, RSM, ed., Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States 2006 (Washington, DC, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University) for the data cited here.

The first learning is *the necessity of a clear and distinctive spirituality which unifies a group*. Each of the movements profiled, and many others that could be referenced, has a characteristic approach to Gospel living, bequeathed to it by a charismatic founder and nurtured by subsequent leaders. By spirituality here we don't mean something casual or superficial. Sandra Schneiders, IHM, defines spirituality as "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives."¹⁴ "Experience" suggests that spirituality is not an abstract idea or theory, but a personal lived reality. "Conscious involvement in a project" means that it is neither an accidental experience such as witnessing a beautiful sunset or the result of a drug overdose nor a collection of practices such as saying certain prayers or going to church. It is an ongoing and coherent approach to life as a consciously pursued and ongoing enterprise. "A project of life-integration" means that it is an effort to bring all of life together in an integrated synthesis of ongoing growth and development. "Self-transcendence toward ultimate value" implies that spirituality is the choice of a direction toward a value that one perceives as positive not only in relation to oneself but in some objective sense. Now I am not suggesting that every participant in the movements we have briefly profiled achieves this integration and intensity of personal spirituality—only that a vision of the spiritual life is laid before each one with powerful clarity and urgency and that the followers collectively embrace it, thus encouraging and supporting one another.

It's not necessary to persuade Sisters of Mercy that we have had an equally powerful vision laid before us in the life and example of Catherine McAuley and reiterated by countless of her followers. From the day that the doors of the first House of Mercy opened in 1827 Catherine was showing us the way of mercy. Words spoken or written by her echo in our collective consciousness today; practices of sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick and for women in distress, instructing young people still occupy our days. The convents she established followed a prescribed Rule and honorarium. Many of our documents since the post-Vatican II renewal began give contemporary voice to our inherited treasure.

At the same time, there are tendencies among us to an individualism in spirituality and a lack of shared practice that threaten to undermine the collective

¹⁴ "Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" The Santa Clara Lectures, Vol. 6, no. 2, pub. by Santa Clara University. Lecture given Feb. 6, 2000. Passages cited here are from pp. 3-5.

witness. The challenge of renewal has been to deepen our appropriation of our shared charism and to adapt our expression of that charism to contemporary needs--tasks of interior and exterior change that are reciprocally related. Without a doubt the Council (and our leaders) under-estimated the difficulty of the task, particularly of the interior change required. Perhaps forty years is too short a time to accomplish it. But the example of the movements tells us that a deeply appropriated common spirituality has the power to unite members and attract others. Moreover, the spirituality of Sisters of Mercy is an ecclesial one, nourished by the Eucharist and sacraments, a point which connects us to the next learning.

A second learning from the new movements is *the importance of our ecclesial identity and relationships*. One of the characteristics of the movements we have profiled is their cultivation of episcopal and papal support (sometimes to the detriment of parish participation.) They are also closely aligned with clerical groups (CL's priestly fraternity, the Redemptoris Mater seminaries, the Legionaries of Christ). And, whether one participates in a CL fraternity, a NC Way community, or in a Regnum Christi team, there seem to be clear requirements and boundaries of belonging.

One of my favorite passages from the Apostolic Constitution on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata*, reads as follows: "The consecrated life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church . . . [it] is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission . . . it is a precious and necessary gift for the present and the future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness, and her mission." (#3) It is my observation that we have not always embraced this central role nor considered ourselves as being at the very heart of the church. Perhaps we subconsciously generalize from an experience of an unsympathetic bishop or a misguided pastor to the totality of the church and choose to stand apart from it. An aid to a deeper reflection might be the lines from the *Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas*, "We carry out our mission of mercy guided by . . . the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church." (#7) Unlike some of the lay movements, religious congregations have historically interfaced well with local churches. For this reason pastors and bishops have sought them out, knowing that the establishment of a new congregation in a parish or diocese will bring blessings in its wake. Thus religious life became a reality which affects the whole church, a decisive element for her

mission. The witness of a distinctive way of life contributes to the holiness of the church.

Another task for our future might be to give clearer identification and focus to our lay associates. How are they distinct from the members, while nourished from the same spirituality?

The challenge of choosing an ecclesial identity and cultivating ecclesial relationships was certainly known by Catherine McAuley. The fact that she only chose to found the Sisters of Mercy when it became evident that it was a necessary step to ensure the continuance of the mission she had begun, and the correspondence she maintained with numerous priests and bishops, attest to the attention that she gave to this responsibility.

The third learning has to do with *the centrality of corporate mission*. Here I am raising up something which is not a particular strength of the movements. This is an area where the gift of the Sisters of Mercy to the church can be most clearly demonstrated and where our visibility can be most evident. The Gospel rootedness of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy is direct and unequivocal. The works of mercy address the widespread phenomena and specific problems with which our Conference is concerned. But the fact that the works of mercy embrace so many human needs can mean that our corporate effort becomes diffused.

Fifteen years ago a study entitled, The Future of Religious Orders in the United States came up with the observation that “Under the guise of ‘we are more than what we do, many individual religious and groups have relinquished the power of corporate witness for a variety of individual commitments in effective but unconnected ministerial positions. The emphasis on individual ministry or at times on simply procuring a position, has eclipsed the symbolism of and statement previously made by corporate commitments.’”¹⁵ I find that statement perhaps even truer today than when it was first published. More recently, sociologist Patricia Wittberg asserted that the loss of connections with institutions contributes to a diminished sense of congregational purpose and public identity, lessens the sense of communal identity and culture, re-directs the energies of the members into diverse and unrelated services, impacts personal and professional development, including mentoring of new leaders,

¹⁵ David J. Nygren, CM, and Miriam D. Ukeritis, CSJ. Chicago, IL: De Paul University Center for Applied Social Research, 1992.

and, finally, diminishes a group's power in the church and society.¹⁶ While the authors of both studies are generalizing about religious congregations in the United States, I find their observations pertinent to the Sisters of Mercy as well. The situation will not be easily reversed.

There is a need to reaffirm our corporate mission for our times, not necessarily to choose corporate ministries—although these can be powerful expressions of the shared mission. The twofold test of whether a congregational mission is more than rhetoric is how effectively it shapes each member's choices (and the leadership's affirmation of those choices) and how much it contributes to the public perception of the congregation.

After Thought

Any conclusions from this brief review of the phenomenon of the lay movements would have to be tentative and partial. My purpose has been rather to introduce a topic which deserves greater examination and analysis from the perspectives of sociology, theology, and religion. My suggestion is that the movements are a sign of our times, that they address “the fundamental hunger for happiness and for genuine spiritual, even religious understanding and peace.” and that the Sisters of Mercy have the resources to examine them further. Our goal should not be to adopt their characteristics, but to embrace more decisively what makes us unique and distinctive, while learning from their genuine gifts. The same Spirit animates both religious congregations and lay movements. The church is richer for this diversity.

¹⁶ From Piety to Professionalism—and Back? Transformations of Organized Religious Virtuosity. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006.