

Sisters of Mercy Daring to be in the 21st Century

“Where should we be as Sisters of Mercy? What should we be doing?” *Mercy Kindling* is the theological reflection process through which the Mercy International Research Commission in 2007 invited Sisters of Mercy to engage in answering these questions.¹ This reflection continues that dialogue.

Although we may take it for granted, the extent of theological, ecclesial, religious and social change since 1965 related to our governance and leadership, the visible expressions of who we are, our celebrations of Eucharist and prayer, our living arrangements, our ministry, and our relationships with the Church hierarchy has been astounding. What is even more amazing is that it has all happened without any central control. Sisters of Mercy everywhere have experienced the same trajectory of change. Vatican II was the catalytic event, but each of our congregations allowed, encouraged and nurtured the transformation. This transformation has now become the ordinary, but another seems to be emerging in the midst of changing realities.

Among the social changes which are reshaping the mosaic of our realities are changing demographics of our countries, the changing family, increasing urbanization, increasing poverty,² increasing violence and threats to security, planet warming caused by human activities with multiple adverse effects, emergence of the network age with a proliferation of communication technologies, and a growing recognition of the essential value of diversity.

In our Church, the same intensity of change is evident. Ministry now belongs to laity and clergy, financial challenges are hurting dioceses, and the Church has lost much of its authority and credibility among its own members and in the larger society. Most persons indicate affiliation with an established religion yet very few attend church regularly. Third-world theologians redefine spirituality as “the name we give to that which provides us with the strength to go on, for it is the assurance that God is in the struggle. Spirituality spells out our connectedness to God, our human roots, the rest of nature, one another and ourselves.”³ We are coming to realize that a universal Church does not mean a uniform Church – the Church in North America differs from the Church in Europe or Asia or Latin America or Africa.

Elizabeth Johnson, in assessing this new mosaic, maps five frontiers in the theology of God, all calling for our response: wretched poverty, women’s experience of gender-based discrimination, white privilege and racism, religious pluralism, and awareness of earth as a place of beauty and suffering in an evolving universe.⁴

In all of this, what is non-negotiable in religious life? Three visions of apostolic religious life, varying in their identification of the essence, are held by Sisters today. A *non-elitist vision* focuses on religious life as another elite office in the hierarchical Church. Those who hold this vision have ceased to participate in the liturgical life of the Church, do not hold the three vows as essential and would prefer that we become non-canonical communities of women. A *structured vision* is best expressed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Apostolic Visitation in the United States: “It (the Visitation) will examine promotion and retention of vocations; initial and ongoing formation; the concrete living out of the evangelical counsels; common life and religious houses; the structures and practical application of internal governance; the soundness of doctrine held

and taught by the religious; the nature and variety of apostolic works; and the overall administration of temporal goods.”⁵ Those who hold this vision have unquestioning loyalty to Church institutions and desire to preserve traditions and customs. An *organic vision* imagines religious life as integrated and contemplatively grounded ministerial life, a charismatic life-form.⁶ Within this organic entity, there are sub-groups: *liberationists* (holding a preferential option for the poor, giving priority to justice and being critical of unjust structures in Church and society),⁷ *feminists* (placing emphasis on empowering self and others, being engaged in re-visioning and re-imagining, and placing high value on inclusivity),⁸ and *ecologists* (giving primacy to the universe story, creation spirituality and engaged cosmology).

Whatever the vision, new images are emerging among us, globally and without any central direction, signaling that transformation is happening once again. Among these images, these are most evident:

1. growth of creation spirituality, focus on ecological theology, commitment to care for Earth;
2. focus on right relationships with God, self, others, Church, and Earth;
3. recognition that diversity is essential to all life, that “the dignity of difference is a source of blessing;”⁹
4. our ability through our connections within Mercy International Association to be more engaged cross-culturally and globally, engendering common values for our world in the face of globalization (e.g., respect for human dignity, responsibility, solidarity, subsidiarity, transparency, accountability);
5. awareness of our own complicity in the brokenness of people and Earth and our need for forgiveness;
6. commitment to partnerships in ministry linked with new ways of sponsoring ministries (e.g., financial support, use of our property, participation in networks);
7. increasing participation of women in leadership;
8. witness to the wisdom and influence of older women in a society which devalues older women;
9. revitalization of theological reflection processes to deepen our theological understanding and praxis;
10. a yearning for God to be imaged as female as well as male so that women will have confidence in knowing that they have been made in the image of God;
11. recognition that theology is contextual – God speaks to us and we speak to God in this time and in this place.

The evidence of these “new things” happening among us, combined with the experience of transformation which has been ours for forty-five years, gives us both the confidence and the impetus to engage in finding a new, integrated vision. It is not about us – it is about those with whom we walk and among whom we minister. In this new age, with the intensity of social change and the growing fragility of Earth, we must be about this new thing. We must be intentional in our focus, persistent in our pursuit, courageous in our undertaking and confident that, if this is God’s work, it will flourish. Only when we do this will we be able to say with truth that we dare to be Sisters of Mercy in the 21st century.

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Notes

¹ The *Mercy Kindling* process was developed for and used at the International Mercy Research Conference in Burlingame, CA in November 2007, accessed at <http://www.mercyworld.org/mirc/vision.html>.

² The richest 20% of the population hold three-quarters of world income while the poorest 20% hold just 1.5%, United Nations Human Development Report 2005, *International cooperation at a crossroads: Aid, trade and security in an unequal world*, accessed at <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/>, 36.

³ *Statement of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, 1992.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007), p. 178.

⁵ *Instrumentum Laboris*, Apostolic Vision of Religious Institutes of the United States of America, 2009.

⁶ Sandra Schneiders, "The past and future of ministerial religious life," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 2, 2009, p. 4a.

⁷ Marie Chin, RSM, *Hunger for Right Relationships*, Presentation to Congregation of Notre Dame Visitation Province in Halifax, NS, July 2003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Johnson, p. 178.