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2008

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Recommended Citation

Misto, RSM, Leona, "Mercy Spirituality, the Foundation for Compassionate Service" (2008). *Mercy Illuminates* . 9.

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MERCY SPIRITUALITY, THE FOUNDATION FOR
COMPASSIONATE SERVICE

*Sister Leona Misto, Ed.D.,
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*“If we are humble and sincere, God will finish in us the work He has begun.
He never refuses His grace to those who ask it.”*

Mercy spirituality is the core of my life. In this personal reflection on mercy as the foundation for compassionate service I begin by describing briefly the events that led to my writing this paper. When I was appointed to the newly created position of Vice President for Mission Integration and Planning at Salve Regina University one of the first things I did was to invite faculty to participate in the 8-day national Collegium which is a joint effort by Catholic colleges and universities to recruit and develop faculty who can articulate and enrich the spiritual and intellectual life of their institutions. Two faculty attended and were so enthusiastic about the experience that they suggested we develop our own mini SRU-Collegium to extend the experience to their colleagues and provide an opportunity to share ideas on Catholic social teaching, preserving the University’s Catholic identity and its mission.

I thought it was an excellent idea, so we began our work by setting goals and objectives for a 28-hour retreat which would include community building and discussion of selected readings on Catholicism and Catholic social teaching. The faculty requested that we have a session on mercy and mercy spirituality since our University mission centers on mercy. It was also important to the faculty that we build in time for reflection and meditation.

Various faculty led all of the discussions except for the one on mercy which was assigned to me. What follows here, then, is my reflection on mercy spirituality that I share with faculty at the SRU-Collegium.

If we turn to scripture to find examples of mercy, we discover that the perfect model of mercy is God, who is love. Our merciful actions originate in love: love of God and love of others. Mercy, or loving-kindness,

is giving to others as we ourselves have received.

We learn of God's mercy from countless examples throughout scripture. In Genesis, we read that God called Abram to leave his country and kindred and go to the land that he would show him. God made a Covenant with Abram, promising that his descendants would inherit the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates.

For the people of the Hebrew Scriptures, the concept of covenant was a familiar one that covered all sorts of social transactions such as settling disputes, designating alliances and terminating war; however, something new was introduced when Yahweh made His covenant with Abram, Moses and the People of Israel. Yahweh personalized His covenant. The Lord proclaimed to Moses: "He is a God merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin."²

This covenant initiated by Yahweh is often referred to as the "election" of Israel. The election is an act of love on Yahweh's part and is not based on the merits of Israel. This kind of love is known as *hesed*. From the Greek and Latin translations of *hesed* come the words 'mercy' and 'loving-kindness.'

Very simply put, the concept of *hesed* can best be expressed as the love that a parent has for a child. This love is unconditional, it is ongoing, and it is forgiving. This is Mercy. Each of us has experienced God's mercy in His love for us. For some that mercy has been almost overwhelming, for others it has blossomed gently but surely. This is also what we observe in the acts of love Yahweh showered on the tribe of Israel, when He delivered them from Egypt. Through Yahweh's actions we begin to understand mercy not only as loving-kindness but as liberation and restoration to wholeness. These are the underpinning values of compassionate service. When we encourage faculty and students to practice mercy, we are asking them to engage in the process of liberating others, extending loving-kindness to them and, in doing so, restoring them to wholeness.

Covenant love is also associated with "salvation." We read that, "God so loved the world that God gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life."³

In the first letter of St. John we learn that God's love was revealed among us in this way:

God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that

He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.⁴

This loving-kindness is the heart of compassionate service. It is love, it is relationship, it is giving of ourselves for another.

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. An eager young lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life. The answer is to: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with your entire mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” This is not the answer the young man was expecting and it unsettles him, so he probes further with the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

If you were reading this parable for the first time you might think at the beginning that the answer to “Who is my neighbor?” is, the man lying wounded on the road is my neighbor. However, by the end of the parable we are no longer looking at the man who is wounded but rather at the person who is acting out of human compassion. The lawyer correctly answers that the neighbor, in this instance, is the one who shows mercy. Mercy calls for action. Mercy is compassion in action. The role of compassion is to suffer with those who suffer regardless of what their suffering may be.

At the beginning of this parable we think the lesson is about what we should do. But in the end we realize it is really about who we are called to be. Of course, we must focus on good actions, but every action springs from an interior disposition. The Christian must first ask: What sort of person should I become? In moral theology this is referred to as “character ethics” or the “ethics of being.”⁵

Consequently, we may consider merciful actions as those actions which define who we are.

This parable is not primarily a story about how we should treat others: rather it is the story of our redemption by Christ, the fulfillment of the Covenant between Yahweh and His people. Through Christ’s death and resurrection He has liberated us and restored us to wholeness. We are called to follow the actions of the Good Samaritan because it is the retelling of the entire Gospel. The parable is not one among many: it serves as the foundational explanation of the commandment to love one another. It identifies mercy as the condition for salvation, the way to gain eternal life.

This parable is the reenactment of God's Divine Mercy. It is precisely what Jesus accomplishes in the Paschal mystery where He takes upon himself our pain, our brokenness and our sin. He forgives us, restores us to new life and rejoices in the fact that we are now able to live out our vocation to bring God to the world.

This is a large part of what our students are grappling with, how to discover and live out their individual vocations. Learning to render compassionate service can be a tremendous opportunity of growth for them because it embodies the qualities of mercy: forgiveness or relief of suffering, the disposition to kindness, and, through action, restoring another to wholeness. It is through practice that one arrives at a fuller understanding of concepts and theories learned. In a similar manner, we discover who we are and who God is by giving ourselves in loving-service to others. "Unless a grain of wheat shall fall upon the ground and die, it remains but a single grain without life."⁶ Faculty and students who engage in compassionate service begin to understand the meaning of this truth.

An example of this is a work of compassionate service designed by some faculty and students from the Business Studies department at Salve Regina University. Three of these faculty participated in the SRU-Collegium experience and each went away with the goal of trying to integrate mercy and mission into some component of her discipline.

One faculty member teaches Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS) courses in Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, and Outlook. Students who successfully complete any one or more of the courses become Microsoft Certified. We have in Newport, R.I., several agencies that provide various services to economically deprived persons and so our Microsoft Certified faculty member arranged for Salve students to engage in a community service outreach project by teaching the MOUS courses to persons from the Martin Luther King Community Center. The goal was to train Newport County residents to become proficient in the Microsoft applications needed to successfully enter or re-enter the workforce.

With supervision, the MOUS certified students provided one-on-one mentoring, two hours a week, to ten Newport County residents for fifteen weeks. At the end of this time the residents could take a MOUS examination to become Microsoft certified. As the MOUS training progressed, students from the Marketing Club, advised by another faculty member, decided that they could help with this project by providing a class

on job-interviewing techniques and proper dress for the interview. These students went so far as to raise money to give each successful candidate a \$100 gift certificate to the T.J. Maxx store to purchase an appropriate outfit for the interview.

A third group of students involved in another business program learned of this effort from their professor and decided to lend their help by offering to teach a session on how to prepare a resumé. These students made sure that the clients included Microsoft Certified Application Specialist on their resúmes. This is the perfect example of a group of people who wanted to express loving-kindness to others and in doing so helped to liberate them and restore them to wholeness.

When the faculty were asked about this project, their response was, "...this is so meaningful and such a neat way to integrate mercy and the mission into what we teach. We love doing this; it's so much fun."

At the first Mercy Symposium held at Salve Regina University in April 2008, the faculty involved in this effort presented a paper on the experience and other projects that they are working on. They are spreading the word that compassionate service can be a component of every academic department.

When we consider mercy in this perspective, we begin to realize that mercy spirituality is distinctive; it is unique. The spirituality of the Sisters of Mercy has always been significantly different from that of every other religious congregation. Catherine McAuley, drawn by God to continue His work of mercy, looked outward at the world around her, saw the great need of people suffering from physical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional pain and responded with her all.

Catherine's Religious Institution centers on the works of mercy. Her legacy and her spirituality reflect this characteristic. First and foremost, but not surprisingly, mercy spirituality focuses on the poor in whom we find Christ. The Sisters of Mercy, in addition to taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, take a vow of service to the poor, sick and uneducated. Catherine McAuley had a deep concern for the poor, especially for young, unemployed women who had few skills and usually no place to live. She knew from her own experience of being orphaned at a young age that it was not enough to give handouts to the poor. The poor needed more than that. Her dream was to build a House of Mercy for homeless women with space for a classroom for poor children to receive an education.

In focusing on the poor, Catherine instructed the sisters that, “It is better to relieve a hundred imposters than to suffer one truly deserving person to be sent away empty.”⁷ There is a story told about how Catherine took great pains to care for an elderly woman who was most ungrateful and actually quite rude to Catherine while she was caring for her. The young sisters questioned Catherine about persisting in this ministry and her response was, “Mercy receives the ungrateful again and again and is never weary of pardoning them.” She is also quoted as saying, “It is for God we serve the poor not for thanks.”⁸

Another distinction of mercy spirituality is that it introduced a synthesis of contemplation and action⁹ that Catherine modeled for the congregation and which is its core of strength. Catherine knew that however well-intentioned or prepared her sisters might be in their apostolic works, they would not succeed without a prayer life rooted in union with God.

Catherine’s own spirituality was thoroughly centered in Jesus Christ. As a young girl, her favorite prayer was the Psalter of Jesus which she recited every day. Later in her life, when she was asked about the qualities required to be a “Sister of Mercy” she responded, “...the applicant must have an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor.”¹⁰

Catherine instructed the sisters to consider prayer and service as reciprocal dimensions of spirituality. She said, “Our center is God, the source from whom all our actions should spring.” Catherine realized that some of the young sisters found the practice of prayer and service very difficult. In a letter she wrote to Sister Mary de Sales, who was anxious about being sent to a new foundation, she explained in a very gentle, playful way the importance of integrating action and contemplation:

My Dearest Sister de Sales, I think sometimes our passage through this dear sweet world is something like the Dance called “right and left.” You and I have crossed over, changed places - your set is finished- for a time you’ll dance no more- but I have to continue. I’ll have to curtsie and bow, in Birr – to change corners – going from the one I am in to another, take hands of everyone who does me the honor – and end the figure by coming back to my own place. I’ll then have a Sea Saw dance to Liverpool – and a Merry Jig that has a stop in Birmingham- and, I hope a second to Bermondsey – when you, Sister Xavier and I will join hands and dance the Duval Trio back on the same ground. ¹¹

At first glance, this writing may seem a little frivolous, but it is followed by another paragraph that puts the situation into perspective and explains Catherine's desire that her Sisters integrate contemplation and action. She writes, "We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God – for whom alone we go forward – or stay back."¹² This letter to Sister de Sales demonstrates the great balance between contemplation and action that Catherine possessed in her own apostolic spirituality and which she encouraged others to seek.

Our challenge today is to help faculty and students in a similar way. Amid all the preparation for teaching classes, committee meetings, advising sessions, sports and other activities, how can we keep our thoughts and hearts always in the same place, centered on our mission to be merciful, which propels us to go forward? In our effort to accomplish this balance we refer again to St. John's letter. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another. If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."¹³

In the midst of our busy lives of rushing and tripping about we must constantly seek to find the center of our beings and the core of our spirituality. This is both the foundation and the fruit of compassionate service.

The third characteristic of mercy spirituality, which is also a prerequisite of compassionate service, is that it reflects God's loving-kindness. We are told that one of Catherine's favorite scripture passages was Matthew 25: 35-40 concerning the Last Judgment, where we read "... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." This parable is somewhat like the one of the Good Samaritan in the sense that everyone is surprised by the conclusion. The righteous people never realized that in showing kindness by feeding the hungry, they were feeding the king, and so on. Likewise and unfortunately the others never realized that through their lack of kindness and by not visiting the sick, they were not visiting the Lord. They were all astonished.

A Salve graduate who is living this parable today is Leila de Bruyne. In her first year at Salve, Leila took a course titled "Children: a Global Perspective" which moved her so much that she began searching for an orphanage to visit. Via the Internet, she found a place called By Grace, an orphanage in the outskirts of Nairobi run by an African woman. That

summer, Leila and her sister spent three weeks in Kenya at the orphanage.

Leila was so overwhelmed by the plight of the hundred plus children she encountered that she began raising money to purchase necessities such as running water and electricity for them. With the help of her classmates, she raised over \$50,000 in her sophomore year. Then, she and four classmates returned to By Grace for two months, armed and ready to make major improvements.

When she returned to the orphanage for the third summer, she became acutely aware that even with all the improved conditions as a result of their work, the children were not making significant progress in their health. Because of the crowding, the lack of facilities to boil water and the pollution of the city, many of the children were sick on a continuous basis. Added to this, there was a high crime rate in this section of the city, the price of grain was increasingly rising and fresh vegetables were virtually nonexistent. By Grace had no way whatsoever to supplement their source of income or move towards a sustainable future.

When Leila returned to school for her senior year she started a 501-c3 registered charity called Flying Kites. She envisioned an orphanage outside of the city on a parcel of land near a water source where children and staff could grow their own vegetables. Upon graduation, Leila and one other graduate made a yearlong commitment to establishing such an orphanage. They returned to Africa to find a piece of fertile land in the mountains.

It is clear that God was directing them because they became aware of a retired businessman who owned just such a piece of land and he was willing to donate his five acres to Flying Kites. Leila then purchased the adjoining four acres and began the process of obtaining a permit to build a large house. There is now an existing house on one parcel of land and as of this time they have adopted twelve children. Four permanent staff members care for the children and the land.

Leila is overseeing the orphanage and raising money for all that they will need to do to make this a sustainable project. She believes that there has to be a better way in this world to show love to these children and she is committed to building a model of childcare that will be innovative both environmentally and socially. Leila is living out the message: "Whatever you do to the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me."

Through Leila and her compassionate service, these children are experiencing the love of God. They are being restored to wholeness. If you want to learn more about this project the Web site is *flyingkiteskenya.org*.

There are many ways to reflect on charity and loving-kindness; St. Paul does it best when he writes: “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”.¹⁴

This virtue of charity was so important to Catherine McAuley that she devoted an entire chapter to it in the *Holy Rule* of her religious community.

In reflecting on the virtue of mercy, then, we have noted its components of liberation, loving-kindness and restoration. So, too, mercy spirituality has these three components: it focuses on the poor and the broken-hearted in order to find ways to liberate them, it reflects God’s loving-kindness and it combines contemplation with action to create a strong base from which to restore others to wholeness. Mercy spirituality is about encountering the love of God. The love of God makes possible the love of self and these together make possible the love of neighbor.

This is how mercy spirituality becomes the foundation of compassionate service. When we reflect on the qualities of liberation, loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and service, we come to a clearer understanding of the purpose of our lives. Those of us who serve in Mercy institutions of higher education have been graced and blessed with a spirituality that binds us as we journey together under the loving care of Divine Mercy in whom we live and move and have our being.

NOTES

¹ Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley (Dublin), 7

² Exodus 34:6-7

³ John 3:16

⁴ 1 John 3:9-16

⁵ Richard Gula, SS, Reason Informed By Faith (Paulist Press), 7

⁶ John 12:24

⁷ Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley (Dublin), 46

⁸ Ibid, 58

⁹ M. Angela Bolster, RSM, Catherine McAuley Venerable for Mercy (Dominican Publications), 104

¹⁰ Mary C. Sullivan, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley (Four Courts Press), 77

¹¹ Ibid, 332

¹² Ibid, 333

¹³ 1 John 4:11-12

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.