

*“Expand the ropes of your tent...”:
reflections on new forms of Mercy commitment*

Isaiah 54:2

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Isaiah opens Chapter 54 with a song of celebration, a promise of fruitfulness and blessing, and a call to lengthen the ropes and expand the space of the tent, to be ready to burst out and not hold back. This is followed by an admonition--do not be afraid or worry--Yahweh's faithful love will last forever. Yahweh's faithful love has inspired women and men throughout the ages to lives of service and mercy. These words of hope should inspire us as we examine what expanding the ropes of the tent of religious or committed life might mean today. What might it mean in the community of mercy to widen the tent to include, enclose, and embrace newer forms of commitment, participation, and contribution?

A vocation is a very personal experience; it can be a persistent, nagging notion, an irritating yet irresistible invitation, an energizing, compelling call. Whatever form it takes, it cannot be denied, suppressed, or ignored. A vocation is a sacred invitation to follow God's call, to acknowledge and act on one's deepest longings. In some cases, this call, this vocation, is an unmistakable invitation to a life of Gospel service.

Throughout history, women and men have responded in different ways to this call. In apostolic times disciples, apostles, and other followers of the Christ—the Lydias, Priscas, Susannas, Marthas and Marys—lived out the teachings of Jesus with no formal organizational structure. Centuries later vowed religious life came into existence and this life form has evolved over time with many manifestations—monastic, mendicant, apostolic, postmodern.

Outside of the evangelical religious life, other forms of committed service have always existed. One need only to recall the history of the Beguines coming into existence at a time when Rome withheld approval of any new form of religious life. Also coming to mind are individuals such as Louise deMarillac and Vincent dePaul, Angela Merici and others who felt the enclosure prevented them from directly serving the needs of the poor and thereby led to new expressions of committed life.

Writing on this topic of new forms, Maria Casey, RSJ, also quotes from Isaiah: “Here and now I am doing something new; at any moment it will break from the bud! Can you not see it?” (Isaiah 43: 18-19.) She refers to this type of development as a “new form of

consecrated life.” “What is critical,” she writes, “is that the notion of consecration perdures and the means by which individuals and groups enact that consecration change with time. In this new millennium there are new needs, as never before, it is not only possible but imperative that more new forms be permitted to emerge, to break from the bud.”¹

The call in Catherine McAuley’s heart was a call to serve the poor and uneducated and only reluctantly and under pressure with the threat to dissolve her little group did that call take form in vowed consecration. In order to preserve her original vision into the future, Catherine agreed to establish a religious congregation. And this was only on the condition that the charism of service form the heart of the new congregation. Thus, the community of mercy take four vows—with the implicit understanding that poverty, chastity and obedience are pledged in service of the fourth vow of service to those who are poor, sick, or ignorant.²

This call to service, specifically the call to mercy service, echoing across time, is today responded to in different ways. Answering this call may take forms other than vowed evangelical life, such as covenanted Association, Mercy Volunteer Corps, and more recently a form known as Companions in Mercy. While all forms of committed service will be touched on in this paper, the main exploration will be the newest form: Companions in Mercy.

The foundations of this call are simple: apostolic spirituality, mission, and community.

Apostolic spirituality

Companions seeking vowed commitment to a life of mercy and service burn with a desire to live the Gospel in the spirit of Catherine McAuley and in mutuality with the Religious Sisters of Mercy. They seek to share in the spirituality of mercy, to live lives of service, to be and bring God’s mercy to our world. They do not feel called to do this in the context of the evangelical counsels, yet want to orient their lives to God and to the service of the poor and needy in a public way that recognizes their relationship to the Mercy congregation and fulfills the passion and commitment of their hearts.

At baptism, all Christians are called to live a Gospel life. How this is expressed in each individual life is one’s vocation or calling. What is characteristic of the call being responded to by companions is: fidelity to an apostolic spirituality, grounded in prayer and the sacraments; commitment to building and being a community of persons with the same purpose; and intention to hold one another in fidelity. There is no doubt that individuals could live this commitment individually and personally but this is not part of the vision of companions. They yearn to be nurtured in the apostolic spirituality of mercy together with community of mercy, signaled by a public commitment to these actions through a private (non-canonical) vow of mercy service.

Mission

Mission is perhaps the most central elements of the three: a deep call to live the Gospel in the spirit of Catherine. Mission is the magnet, or in New Science language, the strange attractor, drawing women and men to lives of service. Prominent authors reflecting on religious life itself speak to the need to re-establish the centrality of mission in this postmodern era. Howard Gray, SJ, writing in a volume of collected essays, *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, challenges religious leaders on the issue of "mission or maintenance." His arguments anticipate the articulated desire of those seeking deeper communion and relationship in ministry. He writes of three principal elements, formation, community, and apostolate: formation in the spirituality and charism of the congregation, community of heart and purpose, and apostolic action.³

Catherine Harmer, Medical Missioner, issues a strong challenge to religious to "be very open to a variety of ways to live the committed life."⁴ She asserts that "religious congregations...could be a conduit and a support" for those seeking a committed life. "Associate programs are a first step, but it is possible that the future will see a more radical step, one that recognizes different forms of *membership*⁵ [italics hers], including core members and other members ..." She concludes by acknowledging there would need to be "clearly delineated policies and practices, clarity about rights and responsibilities," and more significantly a "recognition of an equality of commitment."⁶

Harmer looks ahead to a time when the mission is the central focus and essence of the committed life, and things such as retirement, voting, leadership which are so often raised as obstacles to welcoming newer forms of connection, inclusion, and ministry disappear altogether.

Community and inclusiveness

Companions seek inclusiveness within a community of mercy. They seek no offices, no rights beyond that of belonging in spirit and action to the ministry of service expressed so well in the fourth vow: service to persons who are poor, sick, or uneducated. They seek to be *a part of* and still *apart from* and to self-differentiate within the larger context of the Mercy congregation. This is a new form developing in relationship to an already existing form (vowed religious life) of which there is other recently established forms-- Association and Mercy Volunteer Corps. Praying and celebrating with, being called upon for their individual gifts and talents, and ultimately being accepted within the community as integral "members" are public manifestations of this broader community, united in heart and mind.

Holding lightly to and still respecting boundaries, companions describe their deepest desire to be accepted and recognized as viable, committed, dedicated, and faithful to the call of mercy. Conceiving of community in the broadest sense, not of a community of place, they seek a community of purpose and common passion for service. They only ask that the ropes of the tent be expanded . . .

In this respect, one is reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theory of community as being formed by attachment to the center. Those participating come from various points/space(s) of distance and what holds each one and the group is their attachment to the center.⁷

Charisms and strange attractors

When a single charism is like a magnet attracting various forms of response--vowed, committed associates, dedicated co-workers, volunteer corps, and companions--the challenge is to describe how these disparate parts relate to one another. Images of an umbrella with many spokes, concentric circles, a tree with many branches have been offered. None adequately capture the heart of belonging and relating.

Searching for a metaphor to describe how various new responses relate to existing structures yields two quite different examples of sewing/knitting together into some kind of whole, that of a quilt or of a weaving or tapestry. A quilt has unity through a thematic pattern, color, motif, or other unifying vehicle. Each distinct part is carefully crafted and can stand alone. The parts are ultimately sown together to make a whole. A weaving, on the other hand, has internal integrity; the warp and woof ultimately holding the cloth together as a single fabric. No part can stand alone; no piece or part has meaning outside of the whole. Both metaphors could be used to describe or situate forms of "membership" which can be a piece, sewn into the fabric of the mercy community or it can be an integral component, inseparable from the whole.

Looking back to the foundations of the Sisters of Mercy, one might argue that Catherine's vision most resembled a weaving, where individuals--vowed, volunteer, even donor---were all part of the vision of serving the poor in a seamless fashion. She attracted women and men who responded to the call to serve the poor and not as ordained or vowed, cloistered religious.

At the heart of the call are the Gospel and the attractiveness of the life of Catherine McAuley. Beyond that, lifestyle, personal commitments and obligations, professional responsibilities, and personal discernment shape the various modes of responding. "We fear both ambiguity and complexity . . . because we still focus on the parts, rather than the whole system. . . We still believe what holds the system together is point to point connections that must be laboriously woven together by us. Complexity adds to our task, requiring us to keep track of more things, handle more pieces, make more connections. As things increase in number or detail, the span of control stretches out elastically, and, suddenly, we are snapped into unmanageability."⁸

Employing more contemporary theories-- systems theory, quantum physics, chaos theory--all tell us that we are united; we are one with the universe, with the past and the future; that there is meaning in chaos; that the whole is contained in each part. The image that begins to emerge from this seeming chaos is one of a community in service, of many individual players contributing their gifts to building the reign of God on earth

in the tradition and charism of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy. The intent becomes one of understanding the new movement based on a deep respect for the web of activity and relationships that comprise the system. The intent is not to push and pull, but rather to let go and to give form to what is unfolding.

Creative re-ordering and evolving

Recalling that Catherine's initial vision was to gather persons of the same mind and heart, willing to live the Gospel, to pray and support one another, to sacrifice and strive to alleviate poverty, oppression and their causes, one begins to understand the roots of the mercy charism. "Charism," Mary Jo Leddy describes as "an energy, a dynamic, a power which cannot be contained or possessed...but must be shared."⁹ Or as the *Mercy Constitutions* reads "By collaborating with others in the works of mercy, we continually learn from them to be more merciful."¹⁰ And even stronger "we rejoice in the continued invitation to seek justice, to be compassionate and to reflect mercy to the world."¹¹ The challenge is to do so in a variety of ways of serving, belonging, and do this mirroring the creative energies of the universe in all its diversity and complexity.

Boundaries: skin or barrier

Often the argument of boundaries is made: stressing how important it is to keep distinctions clear and defined. No one would argue against this. Both Mercy associates and companions seek not to destroy boundaries but in respecting them seek to treat them as permeable when appropriate. If the frame of reference were a community of mercy, with the Gospel and Catherine's life as central, associates, co-workers, companions, candidates, former members, volunteers, and others all sharing the same mission and values, consider how far the reach of mercy could be extended, expanded, and enriched. The space of the tent opened wider. . .

Emphasis on boundaries has at times lead to inaccurate and sometimes hurtful misunderstandings and assumptions. Boundaries may be viewed as skin or as walls.¹² When viewed as the skin of the self, boundaries are essential: they breathe, protect, absorb light. Boundary, as border or wall, on the other hand, separates and divides. This meaning of boundary has been common in religious life in the past. The vows were often used as a border/wall separating vowed persons from others. The structures of religious life-- convents, horaria, ministry, vows, and habits--were all boundaries used to identify an individual with a group. They were sometimes a means of encouraging inner "structures" of identity but often that reflection was guided by boundaries imposed from without, for example, "You keep the rule and the rule keeps you."

Evidence of Chaos

Some things must be lived and then defined and described, not the other way around. This is particularly true of evolving realities and the difficulty sometimes gives rise to misunderstanding. The most commonly heard negative comments about the call to

deeper participation in the mercy mission include: “You are trying to have your cake and eat it too,” “You’re just Sisters-of-Mercy-wannabes.” Fears spoken in terms of these comments are understandable yet misplaced, often voiced to impede or obstruct the emergence of new forms asking to be born. The promise of the Christian life is life in abundance—abundance that invites all to participate and partake and is characterized by rich diversity.

The “wannabe” comments cut deeply. Companions do not want to be Sisters of Mercy. They do want to be part of a larger community of mercy in a distinct and evolving form of committed life. They seek intentionally to orient their lives to the Gospel and to the charism of mercy, ultimately to be faithful to their own unique vocation.

In attempting to diffuse some of the misunderstandings and addressing some of the concerns, one might be guided by Henri Nouwen’s thoughtful commentary on moving from hostility to hospitality. “Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines . . . to open a wide spectrum for choice and commitment . . . the opening of an opportunity for others to find their God and their way.”¹³ Nouwen sees this conversion as an essential dimension of genuine spiritual development.

The heart of the matter

One thing is certain, the Spirit is alive, the call is being heard, and the paradigm is shifting. One knows that it is impossible to reverse a paradigm shift. Institutional religious life has experienced a dramatic reduction in numbers of vowed members and at the same time experienced a dramatic increase in associates, in volunteer organizations, in individuals wanting to be connected to the charism of the congregation.

Data suggest that the numbers of individuals seeking association, co-membership, and other related forms of inclusion in the life and spirit of a congregation are growing rapidly, more rapidly in most cases than the numbers of vowed religious. A recent study by Kathleen Wade, *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: The Associate Movement in Religious Communities*, gives some details of alternative modes of relating and expanding the ropes.¹⁴ The author cites a recent 2000 study of 11,000 religious congregations which reported 27,400 associates, with an additional 2,700 in formation.

Writing on this movement several years earlier, Paul Philibert, OP, calls for “more apostolic options...this is God’s doing and not just an unfortunate consequence of our inability to keep business as usual functioning (relative to numbers of vocations [to evangelical life] and institutional supports). The time has come for us to be in serious dialogue ...about [an] understanding of this new moment in church life.”¹⁵ Thus it is imperative to widen the ropes of the tent.

When the patterns of this new call are observed, insights emerge. Two of these are: new forms of committed life are a unique, contemporary charism in the church and mission is the essence of the call. Margaret Brennan, IHM, has argued that religious life itself should be viewed as a charism in the Church¹⁶; perhaps the time has come to recognize dedicated, committed lay life as a comparable charism.

What individuals desiring to “enter the tent” seek are acceptance, welcome, and a share, insofar as appropriate, in the mission, the ministry, the spirit and spirituality of mercy. In essence, this is a moment to return to Catherine’s original design to have a tent big enough to include “all sorts of people,”¹⁷ people whose deepest desire is to meet the needs of the poor and to extend the reign of God on earth by following in her footsteps. Our challenge today is not to be afraid to expand the ropes of the tent and allow our God to continue to do something new.

Possible sidebar comments/notes

Other congregations of women and men have created opportunities for this call to be responded to. The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ have created a Fiat Spiritus community where women and men make vows into a non-canonical community.¹⁸

The Jesuits of the Wisconsin Province formed Ignatian Associates who are actually missioned by the Jesuit provincial and live a life of Ignatian apostolic spirituality within the Province. In a letter, dated 1994, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. Superior General, write to the Wisconsin provincial: ""May the God who placed Ignatius with His Son bless your efforts to see whether and how these candidates can, in their turn, become Ignatian companions of Christ in the mission entrusted to the Society bearing His name.""¹⁹

In his seminal work on Earth, Thomas Berry identifies three stages of evolution: differentiation, subjectivity/autopoiesis, and communion,²⁰ reminiscent of the three stages of psychological development: dependence, autonomy, and interdependence. This cycle may be useful in reflecting on the evolution of new forms of commitment wherein the new form emanates from an existing form, then self-defines and differentiates itself, and in the final phase is in communion with other forms. And as in the case of evolution, these phases are not clearly demarcated but are rather a gradual change in which aspects of the prior phases may appear and reappear.

¹ Maria Casey, RSJ, *Breaking from the Bud: New Forms of Consecrated Life*, (Sisters of St. Joseph NSW, Burwood, NSW, 1805, no date) pp 34-35.

² See Sheila Carney, RSM, "The Constitutions: Our Corporate and Corporeal Word, *MAST*, 2004, Vol. 14, No.1, p. 4.

³ Howard J. Gray, S.J. "The Challenge to Religious Leadership: Maintenance or Mission?", in Paul J. Philibert, O.P., *Living in the Meantime: Concerning the Transformation of Religious Life*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p.51.

⁴ Katherine Harmer, *Religious Life in the 21st Century*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), p. 66.

⁵For many, the term member should be reserved only for those in consecrated life. Harmer is using it here more broadly and the authors of this article prefer to do the same.

⁶ Harmer, p. 67.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1960), pp. 60-61.

⁸ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), pp. 109-111.

⁹ Mary Jo Leddy, *Reweaving the Future of Religious Life*, (Mystic, CT.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), p.161.

¹⁰ *Mercy Constitutions*, #6.

¹¹ *Mercy Constitutions*, #84

¹² . See also Sandra Schneiders, IHM, *Religious Life in the New Millennium*, Volume 1, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Culture Context*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 360-363.

¹³ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, (New York: Doubleday Press, 1975), pp??

¹⁴ Kathleen Wade, *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: The Associate Movement in Religious Communities*, (Cincinnati, OH: OPEL Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Paul J. Philibert, O.P. "Editors Afterword," *Living in the Meantime*, op. cit, p.221.

¹⁶ Margaret Brennan, IHM, *Living in the Meantime*, op. cit., pp. 153f.

¹⁷ Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pp.3-4.

¹⁸ Fiat community brochure.

¹⁹ Correspondence of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ.

²⁰ Thomas A. Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), pp. 74-77.