I hope that the experience of art journaling deepened your sense of our core identity as women centered in God, making a home for one another in the Mercy of God and discovering our bliss and blessing when God’s mercy flows through us to the world. Truly is it not our joy to be gifted with the charism of mercy?

This afternoon, I want to try to make some links among the critical concerns we embraced at our Institute Chapter as you decide how you want to act on these concerns. I cannot, of course, in these few minutes talk about all of them. Not because any are of less importance but because all are deeply connected to one another theologically and systemically. By making these links, we may be able to claim resources in our developing mercy tradition freshly and recognize some of the factors preventing us from the deeper conversion and liberated action in mercy flowing outward to our world.

Denise Levertov’s poem, “To Live in the Mercy of God” expresses profoundly for me the challenge and the blessing of the life God gives us in mercy.

To lie back under the tallest
oldest trees. How far the stems
Rise, rise
before ribs of shelter
open!
To live in the mercy of God. The complete
sentence too adequate, has no give.
Awe, not comfort. Stone, elbows of
stony wood beneath lenient
moss bed.

And awe suddenly
passing beyond itself. Becomes
a form of comfort.
Becomes the steady
air you glide on, arms
stretched like the wings of flying foxes.
To hear the multiple silence
of trees, the rainy
forest depths of their listening.

To float, upheld,
salt water
would hold you,
   once you dared.
To live in the mercy of God.
To feel vibrate the enraptured
   waterfall flinging itself
   unabating down and down
      to clenched fists of rock.
   Swiftness of plunge,
   hour after year after century,
      O or Ah
   uninterrupted, voice
many-stranded.
   To breathe
   spray.  The smoke of it.
   Arcs
   of steelwhite foam, glissades
   of fugitive jade barely perceptible.  Such passion—
   rage or joy?
      Thus, not mild, not temperate
God’s love for the world.  Vast
   flood of mercy
      flung on resistance. (31-32)

Levertov’s poem suggests that living in the mercy of God begins first in awe.  Awe, appreciation for and love of the creation and love of God become the steady air we glide on.  Living in the mercy of God and living the works of mercy is possible only because we are held and supported by the God to whom we have entrusted our lives—like floating on salt water.  Her images of gliding on air and floating imply risk and trust.  And then she moves into the image of a vast waterfall flinging itself down to clenched fists of rock.  In this powerful image of water cascading onto rock, she shows us God’s persistence and passion toward us in mercy.  Such a flood of water over time wears down the rock.  Mercy cascading into our world is met with resistance as the connection between mercy and justice becomes ever clearer.  Resistance—clenched fists of rock, yet God persists hour after year after century passionately loving the world, embracing it and us in mercy.

This passionate mercy of God despite resistance, “not mild, not temperate,” fills us with hope as we meet our own and the world’s persistent resistance to the justice-making that would make most of the corporal works of mercy unnecessary.  We would not need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, shelter the homeless or welcome the stranger, instructing the ignorant.  These basic human rights would be met by just societies.  Visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead would still
be needed and our primary focus would be the spiritual works of mercy since people would still experience doubt, sorrow, death, wronging-doing, a need to forgive and to be forgiven, a need for religious education and spiritual counsel. I was surprised that The Catholic Catechism treats the works of mercy in the section on “The Ten Commandments,” article seven, “You shall not Steal,” rather than with the beatitudes. This summary of Catholic teaching develops sections on the earth’s belonging to the whole human community, the integrity of the creation, economic solidarity and interdependence, and love for the poor. This section “On Love for the Poor,” acknowledged [the works of mercy] as the church’s constant tradition inspired by the beatitudes” and is immediately followed by a description of the church’s preferential option for the poor and its theological basis rooted in Jesus’ compassion for the poor and in Matthew 25, that what we do for the least we do for Christ. (III. 7. 2443-2449)

This compact treatment highlights the remarkable theological developments we have experienced since Vatican II that have directly affected the reinterpretation of our mercy charism. Mercy encompasses a life inspired by the beatitudes and includes a preferential option for the poor and the promotion of justice in order to end the poverty and oppression of so many in our world as well as the degradation of the earth itself. However, teaching about the dignity of women and aspects of social injustice and violence that are specifically gendered do not appear in The Catechism. Every social scientist and every relief organizer knows that poor women and their children, especially women of color throughout the world suffer injustice and violence disproportionately. And frequently women who control fewer economic resources and exercise less power worldwide make the greatest effort to respond to this situation.

I will focus my reflection on our concern for women and the practice of nonviolence. I want to point out from the beginning that racism is a form of cultural and economic violence and our concerns about earth are directly related to the conditions of sustainability for all forms of life, but most especially the life of women and children. Immigration work cuts across all the concerns. As an Institute we have embraced each of these concerns with differing levels of enthusiasm. Each of them has struggled to rise to new levels of our consciousness against internal and external obstacles. We are experiencing a profound process of evolution in the understanding of our charism of mercy and of our identity as women religious in both church and society.

Developing Understanding of our Charism

We have embraced these concerns now because of this development in the understanding of our charism through reflecting on the lived experience of Sisters of Mercy in dialogue with the social, intellectual, economic, and religious currents affecting us in church and society. At the first Institute Chapter, our ethnocentrism was barely conscious and so we embraced our multiculturalism as an opportunity for conversion. The Fourth Institute Chapter returned our unacknowledged history of racism to our awareness, a topic the Union began to address before the founding of our new Institute. The Direction Statement from our First Chapter reaffirmed our traditional commitment to the economically poor, especially women and children. It also moved a step further under
the influence of feminism. The Third Institute Chapter furthered implemented this concern through convening a commission on women.

Concern for or with Women

I was personally rather surprised when the Fourth Chapter affirmed concerns around women but rejected changing its wording from a concern for women to a concern with women. This small change would include ourselves among the women seeking their place in church and society and the recognition that women in different social locations need to set their own priorities for themselves. This seems like a small point, indeed. But I wonder. Since this discussion took place at the end of the chapter, it was unclear whether this response was a result of time pressure, a lack of familiarity with feminist theology and social analysis, or a rejection of feminist analysis as integral to the reinterpretation of our mercy charism. Some of us are more comfortable with generic language about women rather than language about women as it has been developing in feminist theology and thought.

As I connect feminism and mercy charism, I see the 19th century awareness of the suffering and poverty of women to which Catherine and others responded generously and wholeheartedly an insufficient basis from which to express that same concern today. The awareness of social justice as constitutive of the Gospel (1974) led us to recognize that mercy has to be linked with social justice. Mercy not only relieves immediate suffering but also works to change its causes. Feminism is a social justice movement encompassing many disciplines that analyze the injustice women experience and that propose an alternative vision of reform. Christian feminism does so within the framework of Christian tradition, practice, and belief. Among Christian feminisms, African-American Womanist theologians analyze the effects of racism on the relationships between white women and women of color.¹ Our need to address our racism is also a feminist issue.

Catherine McAuley in her time can not readily be identified as a feminist. She did not propose social changes in law or government policies that addressed the causes of women’s poverty and lack of opportunity in the Ireland of her day. Nor were these causes evident in the early community as it responded to the immediate needs of the poor in Ireland and followed Irish immigration throughout the English speaking world. The Sister of Mercy concern was more with Catholic emancipation in Ireland and with ministering to the tragic emigration of generations of Irish elsewhere. (Luddy and Clear)

Catherine followed the more typical pattern of middle and upper class female philanthropy in which Mrs. Callaghan encouraged her.. Wives of Protestant and Quaker landowners were charged with caring for the needs of their servants and tenant farmers as were a fewer number of Catholics. Catherine McAuley fulfilled this function for Mrs. Callaghan, bringing to this ministry of visitation an acute awareness of spiritual and class dimensions.
The majority of landowners were Protestants and their cottagers were mostly Catholics. When Catherine acted on Mrs. Callaghan’s behalf, the equation changed. Class and education differences remained but Catherine recognized the spiritual and instructional needs of impoverished Catholics. When she wrote *Cottage Controversies in 1832*, she inscribed within her text a nonviolent model of resistance to Protestant proselytizing and she enhanced Margaret Lewis’s human dignity, the Catholic cottager by making her the heroine of the story. Margaret patiently, courteously, and accurately explains Catholic belief to Protestant and misinformed Lady P., her interlocutor and benefactor. This is a dialogue that takes place between two women of differing social standing. Margaret Lewis is portrayed as intelligent and refined despite her social status. Catherine’s series of dialogues written as a catechetical tool counteracts prejudicial descriptions of Catholic cottagers as ignorant, lazy, and slothful, needing to be instructed in morals and domestic skills by the landowner’s wife. Catherine had clearly recognized the demeaning attitudes that governed relationships between the English and the Irish, Protestant and Catholic, wealth and poverty, and the weight of all of these unequal power relationships falling on poor women and children. Her analysis, however, did not lead her to address these unequal power relations nor to develop strategies to change them.

**Feminist Consciousness**

Feminist historian, Gerda Lerner describes that the “creation of feminist consciousness” in her book of the same title, requires a particular set of conditions to emerge. Religious life itself served to expand the role of middle and upper class women in meaningful work outside the home for many altruistic and religiously motivated women. For women religious the conditions required for feminist consciousness to develop did not converge until second wave feminism developed simultaneously with and immediately following the civil rights movement in the U.S. Sisters for the most part were so engaged in their own ministries and in running their extensive institutions that it was only as a result of the convergence of Vatican Council II which recognized the desire of women to take their place in society was affirmed as one of the “signs of the times” and the influence of second wave feminism as it developed in the sixties and seventies that some sisters developed a Christian feminist consciousness.

We have all benefited by the gains made by the secular feminist movement, but only some of us identify our mercy charism’s concern for poor women and their children as related to feminism. At chapter, Deirdre Mullan’s keynote on “Mercy in a Dialogue with a World at Risk ” argued that embracing a spirituality of sustainability involves all kinds of new relationships with others. To be about the works of mercy requires us to find new partners. If we do not recognize our concerns for and with women as an authentic version of Christian feminism, we remain unable to partner with other NGO’s, women’s groups, the theological reflection of women, governmental groups, the efforts of other Christian women and women in other religions who recognize gender as the primary reason for discrimination and violence against women. Feminism identifies gender based oppression and proposes an alternative vision of society. As we know, this violence against women occurs within the home, in society, and in religions which tend to maintain systems of gender oppression on theological grounds, further damaging women
spiritually. Fourth wave feminism is now a spirituality movement linking women’s spirituality and the peace movement. (Peay, 59-60)

I wonder why our growing consciousness around the need to sustain life on the planet moves us to embrace the Earth Charter so easily and to recognize the need to work for universal water rights but not the international women’s agenda embodied in the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women to which our government has yet to sign on. This CEDAW document claims that women’s rights are essentially human rights and applies the international agreements around human rights made in 1948 to women who have consistently been denied them in the family, in religious institutions, and in other private settings. CEDAW did not explicitly confront violence against women, and two additional recommendations were adopted to legally protect women from family violence, abuse, sexual assault, and other gender based violence such as trafficking, rape in war time, the exploitation of refugee women, etc. There have, of course been many subsequent developments to CEDAW and The Beijing conference on women in 1995—both UN projects. It is in the context of the CDEAW convention and the data on violence against women that has focused attention on the globalization of trafficking of women that LCWR has encouraged its members to focus on trafficking. Because trafficking is a coerced form of immigration, these women are often unable to extricate themselves because of local immigration policies and the criminalized aspects of trafficking in which families at home are threatened with retaliation if a woman escapes.

Spiritual Dimensions of Gender Based Violence

There are also profoundly spiritual dimensions to gender-based discrimination and violence. Beverly Lanzetta in her book *Radical Wisdom* proposes a feminist mystical theology or a contemplative feminism. Building on feminist theological, scriptural, and mystical studies in the last thirty years and the deepening understandings of the extensiveness and pervasiveness of the discrimination and violence that women suffer in every culture and region of the world, she proposes a new category of rights—the “spiritual rights” of women. By so doing, she names the spiritual harm done to women by theologies that deny the feminine divine in women and the result of physical and spiritual violence that profoundly wounds the feminine soul and that remains beyond speech for most women. These wounds include internalized inferiority, the lack of symbols for the divine feminine,( Lanzetta,182-195 ) and according to Brazilian theologian, Ivone Gebara, feelings of guilt that are not related to actions but simply to the fact of being women in patriarchal societies.(Gebara,  )

Effects of Violence Against Women

Violence against the earth and attitudes of ownership of the earth and the right to exploit its resources are almost always also violence against women and the feminine. This is why theological feminism very rapidly became ecofeminist theology.

Intimate violence against women is soul destroying as well as disintegrative of personality. These wounds imperil inner security, propel a crisis of faith, and estrange
women from their most significant personal and community relationships. (Lanzetta, 190) Ivone Gebara in *Out of the Depths* makes the case that women both experience the effects of social and personal evil pervasively in gender specific ways but themselves once victimized become abusers or dominators in the specific areas in which they hold power, usually over children in the home. (95-97) We ourselves are not exempted from these dynamics. Some of us have experienced intimate violence at some time in our lives and all of us have exercised some kind of “power over” others in our ministries where we have been in charge, not always nonviolently. As highly educated, professionally trained women, we, nevertheless, continue to experience covert and overt forms of gender based discrimination in both church and society.

The Dark Night of the Feminine

The contemplative feminism, Lanzetta describes traces a new trajectory of mystical development in which women pass through stages of the journey not named by male mystics. Women mystics eventually discover God dwells in them and that they are godly, images of God and mirror God. This level of development requires recognizing and resisting all the messages of culture and religious traditions that deny this possibility of women imaging the divine and becoming divine in their mystical development. To reach the fullness of this transformative healing requires God to heal the unnamed and often unrecognized soul wounds in women that are the result of sexism. Lanzetta names this healing process the dark night of the feminine divine. This is the impasse/breakthrough I believe many of us may be encountering or approaching. We know we are equally in the image of God and that God indwells us in our feminine selves, but our church consistently denies this in practice. 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 knowing. Apostolic religious life is meant to be prophetic both in church and society, and neither are listening very well at the present time.

[A healing image for me is this classical one of Our Lady of Mercy³ encompassing both church and society under her mantle—an image combining the ancient great goddess –the feminine divine with Mary’s mothering overshadowing the patriarchies her mantle embraces.]

I don’t know about you, but I am angry more often about more things in contexts in which it is neither safe nor constructive to express it directly. I am neither timid nor without personal and professional strength. I do act where I can and tend to be more optimistic about exerting influence than often proves to be the case. Yet I experience more anger surges now than I did in my Christian feminist awakening more than 35 years ago. What has changed? Perhaps, not enough. Or perhaps a deeper healing of the feminine is going on.

As women, not only do we contain our anger, but because many are uncomfortable in the presence of the anger of women and are afraid of unleashing this anger we all have somewhere binds a lot of our energy. In our church context, the researchers in one study noted that “There is a much stronger and consistent anger, and I might even say rage, that
comes through about the lack of recognition and inclusion and about the abuse that women in the Catholic Church experience.” (Winters, et al, 103) If we look beyond our negative experiences in the institutional church, we are also for the most part angered and saddened at our seeming powerlessness to change our national pre-emptive conduct of war and multiple other social evils resulting from unbridled corporate greed and the private gain of the wealthiest in our country.

I think as a community we could be more helpful to one another if we overcame this fear of our anger and our judgments about ourselves when we feel angry. Kathleen Fischer in the third section of her book, *Transforming Fire: Women Using Anger Creatively*, discusses creative ways of using anger for transformation and for action. But she claims, we cannot get to the transformation if we do not deal with power. Among the particular triggers of women’s anger, powerlessness--a sense of helplessness-- is the most frequent, two thirds of all responses in the women’s anger study. The other two triggers are injustice and the irresponsibility of others to live up to commitments.(123) Does this sound familiar? Consciously working to transform our anger into justice-making and to overcome our feelings of powerless are physical, psychological, and spiritual necessities. It is bad for our spiritual lives to be containing so much anger (or suppressing it); it is bad for our health because it leads to various stress related illnesses or depression; and it impairs our ability to be mercy in the world. I suspect it is this latter intuition that is leading us to corporately recognize that the practice of nonviolence is intimately related to mercy and to peaceful justice-making.

[Another healing image of Mary as the Mother of a refugee family—this time a low Mariology. A woman of color, holding a family together, uniting the wisdom of the east and the west, her mantle of mercy embracing the suffering of the world family, resolute, despite the suffering and challenge, the lotus blossom unfolds, the symbols of spirit and new life take flight and the human family nurtured by the feminine continues its journey toward fullness of life.]

Only God can heal this wound of the feminine soul, the spiritual effects of sexism, in our contemplative practice from the inside out. “Contemplation is both source and fruit of spiritual virtues, the former leading to the attainment of humility, compassion, and detachment of soul, while the latter overflows into concern for the happiness and betterment of all beings.” (Lanzetta, 197) Lanzetta describes a mystical ethic of the feminine using maternal imagery, bearing the intimacy of the world, bearing the love of the world, and bearing the holiness of the world. In order to live in intimacy with God and the world, to bring love everywhere, and to manifest the holiness and sacredness of the world, requires an internal transformation

Link with Nonviolence

This transformation is the link to a practice of nonviolence: Rights are the political expression of the deepest core of freedom already granted by the spirit. “Their advancement is indelibly tied to religious values that teach and practice compassion, equanimity, nonviolence, and peace. Every commitment to advancing human dignity also
involves a necessary awareness and transformation of hidden states of consciousness that perpetuate acceptance or silence in the face of the inferior status of the “the other” or violence directed at another’s life. A right always involves growth in consciousness, which in turn obligates the right holder to combat the inferiority, self-hatred, or lack of self-worth that demoralizes personal integrity and crushes one’s ability to resist. Similarly, on the side of abusers and those thus obligated to effect remedy, there must exist an inner repentance, or coming to terms with the shame and sorrow one feels and the suffering and pain one has caused. This, too, involves engagement with the spiritual issues of life.” (Lanzetta, 184)

Lanzetta asserts that overcoming spiritual oppression of women is no less necessary than other forms of gender based oppression. Since second wave feminism came of age on the heels of the civil rights movement and the protest against the Vietnam war, many of us who participated in these resistance movements were influenced by Martin Luther King’s espousal of nonviolence who drew on that of Mohandas Ghandi. Ghandi developed his principles of “truth force” and “nonviolence” on Jesus’ example and teaching in the Gospels and combined it with some elements of Hinduism. Ghandi’s fresh reading of the Christian scriptures affected the development of various Christian peace movements. Christian feminist women often espouse nonviolence as a way of life and as a strategy for working against injustice.

Among the Christian churches, the Society of Friends, the Mennonite, and the Brethren are the historic peace churches who recognized that violence is not compatible with the Gospel. This was the consensus in the early church until the 3rd and 4th centuries. In the 4th century, Augustine developed the beginning of the just war theory, and Christians have justified violence ever since in a variety of causes. In Irish and American history, the Quakers were consistent in their peace testimony and in their refusal to bear arms. They laid the groundwork for the recognition of conscientious objection to war and they also developed immediate links with Ghandi when he began his movement for Indian independence. Within Roman Catholicism, the peace movement has grown slowly and sporadically. The Catholic Worker Movement was nonviolent and pacifist from its beginning, drawing inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount. Pax Christi, the Catholic International Peace Organization began in 1972 and invites its members from all sectors of the church to make a vow of non-violence. The Sermon on the Mount of Jesus is the basis for this vow within a Christian perspective and it begins with recognizing the violence in my own heart. The vow is to carry out the love and example of Jesus, specifying the practices of nonviolence as follows:

- by striving for peace within myself and seeking to be a peacemaker in my daily life;
- by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it;
- by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence;
- by persevering in nonviolence of tongue and heart;
- by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live;
- by actively resisting evil and working nonviolently to abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth.
It remains for us to decide what the practice of nonviolence means for us in Mercy. At the heart of the practice of nonviolence within Christian tradition is the growing conviction that Jesus both taught and practiced nonviolence in his life and ministry and that according to Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, violence begets violence and that Jesus was promoting “a third way,” to use Walter Wink’s term, between acquiescence to oppression and violent resistance. This third way overcomes violence by transforming the reaction of the victim so as to defuse the natural response of violence rather than escalate it. Scripture scholars interpret the Greek work in the saying “resist not evil” as referring to “violent” resistance, and the tactics that follow “turn the other cheek” “walk the extra mile” are behaviors which claim personal dignity for the person offended. Christian tradition does not have a word that is equivalent to nonviolence. “Blessed are the peacemakers” and “Blessed are the meek, the gentle, the nonviolent, for they shall inherit the earth.” The Beatitudes are a program for promoting internal and external peace that requires a higher level of spiritual consciousness than most Christians, held hostage by a theology of domination and cultures of violence and greed, manage to achieve. The spiritual principle entailed in the beatitudes is that we become what we hate unless we transform our responses. Transforming our responses from the violence in which we are trained by cultures of domination and violence requires an ascetical program that trains us for nonviolence. Ghandi was very clear that nonviolence is not weakness but requires greater strength than a resort to violence. The practice of nonviolence does not mean acquiescence to injustice but interior and external resistance in a nonviolent mode. Love begets love; peace begets peace; joy begets joy.

Catherine McAuley seemed to have discovered in the Gospel, this way of Jesus. The spirituality of her times, which unfortunately could serve to maintain the status quo of oppressive relationships, did offer a way “to accept suffering rather than inflict it,” Catherine encouraged her sisters to practice to practice the virtues of gentleness, humility, compassion, and reconciliation. Without a conscious social critique, this spirituality did not distinguish between the differing conversions required by the oppressor and by the oppressed which we need to take into consideration for ourselves as we freshly appropriate the virtues that sustain nonviolence in our own times as a way of life and not simply as a strategy.

Catherine learned in her relationships with bigoted and hostile people that gentleness and kindness in the face of hostility achieved more than defense or argument. Catherine experienced her own powerlessness to change the opinions of those with whom she lived. Religious violence was open in the intolerance of the Armstrong family. As a young woman, she retreated into her own interior, maintaining her sense of self, integrity, and faith against great odds. She met this particular form of hostility with forbearance and love. She readily accepted the hospitality of Callaghans who offered her greater acceptance, love, and greater scope of activity. But even there, she feared making known her deepening commitment to practicing her own faith although she was met with respect when she did so. However, just before the Baggot Street House opened, Catherine fled to a safe house when her brother-in-law, enraged by the news of his wife’s reconciliation with the Catholic Church and his daughter’s desire to become a Catholic, ran for a knife.
She waited until William sent for her and she returned accepting his apology. (Sullivan, Limerick MS) Catherine’s prudence and caution in discussing religious matters with those who were so irrationally bigoted against Catholics indicated her awareness of the potential escalation of violence. She persuaded as much by example as by word.

Catherine had intuitively learned a variety of nonviolent approaches to living and exemplified these qualities and taught them to her sisters in the framework of imitating the virtues of Christ. In our own times, we need to live in the mercy of God, daring to trust in that mercy poured out in us healing and strengthening us. We need to discern how mercy expresses itself in the practice of nonviolence in a way that does not acquiesce to our own oppression, that continues to resist the status quo of the domination system and that cultivates this gentleness and peacefulness in our life in mercy. And we need to discern how to cooperate with the healing of the soul wounds in our feminine selves even as we draw all suffering women under the mantle of mercy.

Such Passion—
Rage or joy?
Thus, not mild, not temperate
God’s love for the world. Vast
flood of mercy
flung on resistance.

Works Cited


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1 Third Wave feminism developed attention to class, culture, and color.

2 Women belong to a subordinate group while suffering wrongs as a member of that group; their condition of subordination is not natural but societally determined; development of a sense of sisterhood; autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and the development of an alternative vision for the future.

3 La Vierge de Misericorde, Jean Miraillet (1394-1457)

4 Mary, Mother of Refugees. Celeste Marie Nuttman, RSM (circa 1986)