

Fire Cast on the Earth: Spiritual Implications for Mercy in the 21st Century

Janet K. Ruffing, RSM

My focus in these reflections is a Spirit-Christology which Theresa mentioned in her contextual theology which draws on both liberationist and feminist perspectives.

Hildegard of Bingen images the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals, in creation, and in the human community. The Spirit is inexhaustible as a consoling presence and peace-giving consoler. At the same time the Spirit “kindles” the specific strengths needed to hold the darkness at bay. The Spirit enlarges our capacities for love, infuses our hearts with appreciation and attraction to the good. As a consequence of this interior transformation, the Spirit works in the world interiorly as well, leading the lost home, searching out both those who know bliss, those in harmony with God’s life but also those who are imprisoned by evil. Since Holy Spirit permeates everything in heaven and on earth, the Spirit reconciles, binds, and gathers all people together. The Spirit of Jesus who enfolds us in Trinitarian life nudges us toward greater unity, greater inclusiveness, greater harmony, and greater compassion. To be mercy in the 21st century, we depend on the Spirit’s acting in us and our response to this divine initiative.

The painting we are viewing was created by Celeste Marie Nuttman, RSM in the mid eighties when we became a sanctuary community. It represents the Misericordia—Mary as the Mother of a Refugee family. It points to resurrection hope in the multi-colored dove from Central America and the butterfly from Asia. This inculturated mary image draws on symbols both from Asia and from Central

America. In the context of Pat's reflections on images of God, this image of the mother could also be understood as an image of the feminine God embracing these refugees in her mercy.

First World Conversion

A massive change of heart is needed toward the "downward mobility" of recognizing that the well-being of the entire earth community requires not simply the voluntary actions of individuals economizing but an intelligent reduction of our consumption. There is a spiritual malaise and captivity resulting from exaggerated individualism that leaves first world persons with great freedom of choice but also often lonely, anxious, and empty. Coupled with the consequences of this post-modern over emphasis on the non-relational, non-contextual self is the massive effect on our psyches and spirits of living in what Mary Jo Leddy names a culture of "perpetual dissatisfaction"--the effect of the culture of money which so manipulates our desires that we incessantly crave more. (Gratitude 14-32) We become incapable of living in an attitude of radical gratitude and awe, of receiving and being nourished by that which we actually have, are, and do. "Authentic spirituality, genuine politics, and good economics arise from a spirit of radical gratitude." (Gratitude 4) It seems to me that Mercy in the 21st century needs to focus as much if not more on the spiritual works of mercy than on the corporal.

This cultural and economic situation is as much a spiritual issue for both the 1/3 world and the 2/3 world. In the 1/3 world, we have the material resources and

technological ability to end extreme poverty and to ameliorate the humanitarian disasters which result. In the 2/3 world, there are also profound spiritual wounds inflicted by extreme poverty, forced migration, and the very gender specific violence and diminishment of the life potentials of women and girl-children. This situation requires intensive nourishment of authentic spiritual well-being, based on the Gospel which leans toward a preferential option for the poor, who are also always disproportionately women and their children. In today's world, the rich never feel as if they "have enough" or "are enough" while the despair of the poorest of ever having even basic necessities deepens because technology and mass culture displays the extravagant and wasteful consumption of the conspicuously affluent. In the 1/3 world, a conversion is required at both the level of government action and in the lives of not just the extremely wealthy, but the ordinarily comfortable to follow through on the commitments already made internationally and nationally to shift the expenditure of the funds from war and weapons to humanitarian aid and social development both within and beyond the 1/3 world

Signs of Hope

Albert Nolan notes that on the spiritual level there is a growing process of "globalization from below." (Jesus 35) Compassion is now becoming globalized as more members of the world community recognize as brothers and sisters, people who are suffering anywhere in the world. There is a countermovement of peace-making, compassion, and justice.

Spirituality/Conversion in the 2/3 World

In the 2/3 world, spirituality must inspire and support changing unjust conditions of oppression that limit the full flourishing of the life of the oppressed. It requires a serious critique of a spirituality of the cross that reinforces alienation and that secures compliance with one's place in society (usually the bottom). The spirituality called for in the 2/3 world within a Christian context is a contemplative liberation spirituality. For Jon Sobrino mercy, indignation, and joy are marks of a spirituality of liberation, Albert Nolan like Mary Jo Leddy shows that compassion and gratitude are not incompatible when we are moved to compassion in the face of seemingly intransigent evil. "We can therefore thank God for our feelings of compassion without in any way diminishing the reality of the suffering that evoked our feelings of compassion in the first place." (Sobrino) It is our joy to be gifted with the charism of mercy. But it will, as Nolan suggests, drive us deeply to prayer, to living in union with our Trinitarian God as intensely as it will drive us to action where we find the face of Christ in the poor.

Gender, Poverty, and Education

All international actors agree that the education of women is essential to reaching development goals. This includes basic literacy but also includes human rights education and liberating feminist analysis not exclusively in traditional educational formats. Gebara claims we know the what oppresses us. "To change the very conditions that produce relationships of domination, there must be a collective process of education. There must be agreement, a minimal consensus, a common

analysis to intercept what has become habitual. . .there must be change in the symbolic order and then change in actual practice, in the daily life of the culture.” (Depth 69). This changing of the symbolic order is a major part of our work as theologians today.

I propose a vision of Christian feminism that is rooted in the gospel and not simply a reversal of oppressors. Women’s spiritual wounds according to Beverly Lanzetta can only be healed through a contemplative feminism. We can name them as an attack against the feminine divine, wounds beyond words, female guilt causing a dark night of the feminine divine and requiring support for the spiritual rights of women. This healing is God’s work and requires our participation and availability within the contemplative dimension of our religious lives.

This transformation is the work of the Spirit, and requires our participation and availability within the contemplative dimensions of our religious lives. Our need for the Spirit’s nurturance, strengthening, and healing is even more poignant as we, unlike Catherine are not longer animated by the “kindly” of a rapid influx of vocations. We live in different times an partner with God’s Holy Spirit in mediating God’s mercy to our world. Therefore, we must rely as Catherine did on God’s own self so that we can trust “the Holy Spirit is a burning and shining serenity that will never be depleted and which kindles fiery virtues so that by the Holy Spirit, all darkness is banished 9SCII.4.2)” and the fire of God’s mercy is kindled even more vibrantly in us.