

**“FIRE CAST ON THE EARTH -
KINDLING”:**

**BEING MERCY
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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

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Our conference theme evokes the apostolic zeal Jesus and Catherine McAuley shared: “fire cast on the earth, kindling,” which continues to animate Mercy life into the 21st century. Luke captures Jesus’ impatience at the resistance of his hearers to grasp and respond to the core of his teaching and his intensity, as he heads toward Jerusalem and exclaims, “I have come to cast fire on the earth and how I long for it to be kindled.” (Luke 12.49, RSV) This is the same Jesus, who repeatedly responds with deep-felt compassion for the suffering of the excluded, the downtrodden, the poor, women, those ignorant of the Torah and of the relationship God desires to have with everyone, and, of course, for the sick and deformed. By so doing, he demonstrates God’s universal love and concern for each person and evokes, in the recipients of his attention, healing, and compassion, a sense of their intrinsic human dignity. Jesus’ saving, wholeness-making life, ministry, death, and resurrection bring about the fullness and abundance of a deeper and more all inclusive communion with God and solidarity with one another.

Catherine’s letter to Elizabeth Moore in which she echoes these words of Jesus, expresses a similar urgency but a slightly different mood. Although Catherine was approaching the last year of her life, the arrival of the English women for the Birmingham foundation fills her with hope and consolation. She interprets an abundance of joy-filled candidates for Mercy religious life as “some of the fire he cast on the earth—kindling.” (*Correspondence* 282) Catherine discloses her conviction that “the service of the poor for Christ’s sake” (282) is at the heart of Mercy life just as it lies at the heart of Jesus’ mission. Catherine’s vision of religious life is profoundly Christological.

In an earlier letter to Frances Warde in which she comments on the arrival of the first of the five women, she shares how enlivening and animating it is for her to witness their generosity, admitting frankly that they were embarking on “a mission so contrary to our natural inclinations.” (*Correspondence* 270) And she senses “the fire Christ cast upon the earth is kindling very fast” in this influx of desirable and accomplished candidates with solid vocations. (270) This consoles her in the face of many deaths within the community and the challenge of new foundations. Catherine expresses excitement and confidence about the future of the community which she anticipates will extend beyond her life-time.

These interior movements of zeal and confidence are the work of the Spirit. Vocations to a new form of religious life are clearly the Spirit’s doing as well as the joy that animates both the English women and Catherine who chose “downward mobility”¹ in their solidarity with the poor and their dedication to their service.

IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

I would like to connect this inspired interpretation of Mercy life with Hildegard of Bingen’s plethora of images for the work of the Holy Spirit in individuals, in creation,

¹ See “Downward Mobility” in Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 90-104.

and in the human community. When Hildegard writes about the sacrament of confirmation she says: "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." (*Scivias*, II.4.2) The Spirit is inexhaustible as a consoling presence and peace-giver. At the same time the Spirit "kindles" the specific strengths needed to hold the darkness at bay. In her sequence for Pentecost, Hildegard exuberantly addresses the Spirit in part:

Fiery Spirit,
Fount of courage,
Life within life
Of all that has being!

Holy are you, transmuting the perfect into the real.
Holy are you, healing the mortally stricken.
Holy are you, cleansing the stench of wounds.

O sacred breath O blazing love
O savor in the breast and balm
Flooding the heart with the fragrance of good,

O limpid mirror of God
Who leads wanderers home and hunts out the lost,

Armor of the heart and hope of the integral body,
Sword-belt of honor:
Save those who know bliss!

Guard those the fiend holds imprisoned,
Free those in fetters whom divine force wishes to save.

O current of power permeating all
In the heights upon the earth and in all deeps:
You bind and gather all people together. (*Symphonia* 149)

While it is impossible to comment on all the graces that the Spirit accomplishes within us, I note a few. The Spirit strengthens, encourages, transforms, and heals. 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 the Holy Spirit permeates everything in heaven and on earth, the Spirit reconciles, binds, and gathers all people together. Ultimately, the Spirit intimately works within each person and through each person in community and the Spirit enkindles the fire, the reign of God among us that Jesus so desired.

Finally, in Hildegard's great cosmic vision, the Spirit is closely associated with love, with *Caritas* (feminine in Latin) who claims:

I am the supreme and fiery force that kindled all living sparks and breathes forth no deadly things—though I suffer them to exist... I am the fiery life of the essence of divinity. I flame above the beauty of the fields and I glisten in the waters. I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. With an airy wind I stir up all things vitally through invisible life that sustains all things. (*B.D.W.* 1.1.2)

In these poetic texts, we discover an integral harmony within creation and the human community brought about by the Spirit of Jesus who enfolds us in Trinitarian life and who nudges us toward greater unity, greater inclusiveness, greater harmony, and greater compassion because this is the nature of who God is, and the divine life we are destined to share in a communion of interrelatedness. If we are to be Mercy in the 21st century, we depend on the Spirit's acting in us and our response to this divine initiative.

FIRST WORLD CONVERSION

From the perspective of spirituality, the situations analyzed or described in the social analysis papers, from extreme poverty to ecological degradation, require an interdisciplinary approach that includes the spiritual distress and deficiencies that we need to address in order to contribute toward the implementation of such world-wide consensus goals as the Earth Charter and the Millennium Development Goals as works of mercy for our times. These programmatic proposals are creative attempts to change the situation for the poorest and most disenfranchised persons in our global society. A massive change of heart is needed: a radical conversion of first world persons and communities 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 of energy, goods, services, combined with governmental and non-governmental investment in the infrastructure needed to convert to a sustainable level of living that includes the well-being of the two thirds world as well as the first world. 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 for more. (*Gratitude* 14-32)

The "more" for which we crave can never satisfy the deeper longings of the human heart but creates a dynamic of "systemic distraction" and busyness that leave us harried, fragmented, driven to secure our self-esteem either through achievement or acquisition. Because we always need "more" of something—time, money, attention, experiences (even spiritual ones), entertainment, and "things," we become incapable of recognizing we are enough and even have enough and that we can make a difference in our world. 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. Such radical gratitude leads

to or is supported by detachment, simplicity, and a sense of abundance. (*Gratitude* 38-42) It is ultimately radical interdependence with God's Spirit—an availability and a disposability to partner with the Spirit in our ministries and personal lives.

In Leddy's analysis, this culture of dissatisfaction is radically disempowering, because if we aren't good enough or don't have enough, or whatever we might do won't make a difference, we acquiesce in joining the ever expanding group of innocent victims and fail to do what we can in response to others in greater need. (*Gratitude* 79-81) Radical gratitude begins in an emotional economy of abundance and leads us to recognize and appreciate the most basic of all gifts—"our one precious and wild life." (Oliver, *Poems* 94) God sustains us, often gratuitously, if we stop long enough in our harried and driven lives to notice and respond to Creator God and the Spirit who strengthens, enlivens, inhabits, and invites us to move toward gratitude. In its core, this attitude of radical gratitude recognizes and responds to God whose life we share, in whose creative energies, and in whose inspired life we participate—all the activities of the Spirit evoked so poetically by Hildegard of Bingen.

Leddy proposes a spirituality that is an antidote to the learned habits of powerlessness and dissatisfaction fostered by our first world consumerist culture. She claims that for us, "authentic spirituality, genuine politics, and good economics arise from a spirit of radical gratitude." (*Gratitude* 4) Because we are subject to such pervasive social and cultural pressure to indulge our insatiable cravings and assuage our vague sense of guilt for not being or doing enough, we will need to adopt practices of resistance to our cultural expectations and claim the time we need for contemplative Sabbath, for prayer, for gratitude, for appreciating and consciously receiving the good gifts of God that fall daily into our laps. This critical disengagement from our all-pervasive cultural pressure can open a space for God, for the other, for a richer relational and communal life, and for our continued participation with God in the works of mercy we undertake for Christ's sake. This may open a new way of "being centered in God" in life and in ministry in 21st century conditions.

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. In most of the developed world, many basic needs are met, at least minimally, by governmental and non-governmental groups of different kinds. And while there is no truly just society which would obviate the need for most of the corporal works of mercy, the pressing need to respond to the spiritual hunger and perhaps spiritual bankruptcy of much that passes for religion and even spirituality in its self-centered, self-improvement mode is paramount.

Our social and economic discontentment leads us to plunder the earth's resources and to fail to recognize the two thirds world in the person of Lazarus lying at the gate of the one third world. The economic system of late capitalism depends on growth. This growth requires consumption increases in goods and services beyond sustainable levels for our planet if all peoples' most basic needs are to be met at a level commensurate with their human dignity. World-wide globalized, neo-liberal capitalism results in economic benefit for some but also in the diminishment of local cultures and the way people in those

cultures construe meaning and foster community. 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 display to them the extravagant and wasteful consumption of the conspicuously affluent.

This cultural and economic situation is as much a spiritual issue for both the one third world and the two thirds world. In the one third world, we have the material resources and technological ability to end extreme poverty and to ameliorate the humanitarian disasters which result. In the two thirds 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 in patriarchal systems are also always disproportionately women and their children.

In the one third 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 one third world. This shift requires not simply individual voluntary action, but the investment of the promised minimal .07% of every country's GNP to relieve extreme poverty (MDG) and of even greater investment in systemic changes within the countries of the one third world to achieve sustainable development. Among the developed nations, the US is the stingiest and most recalcitrant in making and keeping these promises.

Living in harmony with the earth in a sustainable life-style will require a certain voluntary movement toward downward social mobility, consuming less of everything and assuming responsibility for the long-term consequences of our corporate greed and waste. Because the one third world is responsible for the current state of global warming and ecological disaster, we are responsible for cleaning up our enormous footprint on the planet even as more populous countries in the two thirds world, especially in Asia, seem bent on repeating our mistakes resulting in even greater planetary devastation.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Despite the overwhelming challenges on this level, there are also signs of hope and possibility. Albert Nolan has recently pointed out that on the spiritual level there is a growing process of "globalization from below." (*Jesus* 35) Our Mercy International Conference is one version of this movement. Because of the world's interconnectivity, Nolan suggests that compassion is now becoming globalized. A certain proportion of the human community now responds with compassion to all victims of injustice and affliction. While we remain challenged to overcome the racism of white privilege and intertribal and interreligious exclusion, nevertheless, more members of the world community recognize as brothers and sisters, people who are suffering anywhere in the world. The world responds to extreme need and disasters such as the Tsunami in 2004, the AIDS epidemic in Africa and elsewhere and in the depth and strength of the peace

movement. Not only is a rather vicious economic system globalized, so too is a countermovement of peace-making, compassion, and justice. This is an engaged spirituality movement that is creating new ways of working for social change, empowering those who are most negatively affected in local situations, and discovering the need for new spiritual resources for resisting the "compassion fatigue" that can result by becoming personally overwhelmed by the world's needs.

SPIRITUALITY IN THE TWO THIRDS WORLD

The spirituality and the theology that grounds the two thirds world must function toward changing unjust conditions of oppression that limit the full flourishing of the life of the oppressed in every area of life, including in the churches. This 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). This inauthentic spirituality of suffering is usually inculcated by the oppressor as good for the oppressed. It proposes a mysticism of suffering with the crucified Christ and looks exclusively beyond this life for any change or happiness in life,² while a robust spirituality of the cross can be an important spiritual resource in a perpetual condition of suffering, offering meaning and hope. Schillebeeckx names an inauthentic version of the spirituality of the cross "dolorism" (*Christ* 699) and points out that this theology never distinguishes necessary suffering (the human condition) from unjustly imposed suffering, and that it matters for our discipleship what causes we are willing to suffer for. Glossing over why Jesus was executed and by whom conceals the concrete circumstances that are likely to follow whenever anyone contests current power arrangements for religious reasons. It matters in terms of the Christian story what we are voluntarily willing to suffer for.

The spirituality called for in the two thirds world within a Christian context is a liberation spirituality. Liberation spirituality is unwilling to postpone all fulfillment of the reign of God to the next life, but requires a faith commitment here and now to work toward this vision in the present. Jon Sobrino identifies the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as the attitudes one discovers in men and women who express the values Jesus promotes in his life and teachings. But he asserts that prior to the Beatitudes is:

...a proclamation of mercy to the great masses that writhe in poverty, oppression, and repression—a proclamation that should fill us with mercy, and inspire us to a practice calculated to overcome these evils. But before all else, here is a mercy that ought to be maintained as something of ultimate value, and not trivialized in the name of eschatology or the plenitude of the Christian life. It is a matter, simply, of recovering, and especially of maintaining, that prior attitude of Jesus, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd." (Matt. 15. 32) (*Liberation* 128)

This core response of mercy to the suffering masses which now floods our consciousness worldwide leads to an indignation that denounces the guilty, and a joy in the good news—the Gospel—and the corresponding relationship with God it offers. This is "the

² See Gebara, *Depths*, 104-108, and Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 670-730, and my "Catherine McAuley's Spirituality of the Cross," *The MAST Journal* 2 (Spring, 1992): 14-19.

pearl of great price" for which men and women alive with the good news are willing to give their own lives if necessary.

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. Nolan says Jesus "had a joyously grateful heart," and expands this view:

Compassion and gratitude are not incompatible. When we allow ourselves to be moved by feelings of sympathy and compassion for others, we are imitating Jesus. In fact we are experiencing something that is divine. Jesus was compassionate because his Father was compassionate, and he taught his followers to be compassionate too—because God is compassionate. (Lk.6:36).

Compassion is a gift from God, one of the most powerful of all God's gifts to us. 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. We don't thank God for the suffering, but we are pleased to see people waking up gradually to the pain and suffering of others, and to the reality of human cruelty. Human cruelty, of course, is what happens when we humans have no compassion at all, when we lose all feeling for the other, when the ego reigns supreme. Compassion finds expression in prayers of intercession and in action. (*Jesus* 117)

In previous reflections on Mercy life, I began to understand freshly the connection between our charism of mercy and the gift of joy. This leads us to a deeper awareness that the compassion suffering evokes in our hearts is God's compassion expressing itself through us.³ 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.

ATTENTIVENESS TO GENDER

Throughout our Mercy world, we continue to claim Catherine's concern for women while at the same time eschewing feminist analysis or identification with Christian feminism as significant to our mission, or for that matter, to our own self-understanding. A religious variation of feminism takes gender into account as one explanation of the particular form of oppression that women experience in often quite different social contexts. Today there is no one feminism, but because we are women and because poor women suffer complicated effects of gender discrimination and gender-based violence, it is important from the perspective of spirituality to pay particular attention to the way in which the spirituality promoted within Catholic ecclesial life serves to legitimate and maintain sexism in a way that is detrimental to women's spiritual flourishing. There are many

³ See my keynote addresses, "Proclaiming the New Dawn Centered in God" and "Living in the Mercy of God: Mercy Flowing Outward to the World," to the Mid-Atlantic Assembly, July 2006 and my presentation "Living in the Mercy of God: Our Joy and Our Bliss," to Sisters of Mercy of Aotearoa New Zealand, July-August 2007.

ways of understanding this relationship. I am currently finding the work of Brazilian philosopher and theologian Ivone Gebara and of American Beverly Lanzetta most suggestive and comprehensive in its approach to these issues. Ivone Gebara describes it this way:

To say gender is to say male and female in their relation to social and cultural output, in the creation and learning of behavior, and in the reproduction of those same behaviors. To say man or woman is already to introduce a certain way of existing in the world, proper to each sex, a way of being the product of a complex web of cultural relationship. Female and male also have their effect on relationships between women and men exercised in private and in public. The notion of gender, bigger than biological sex, incorporates this relationship dynamic....

...distinct identities are established as habits through an immense and continuous work of socialization. (*Depths* 68)

This socialization leads men and women to perceive the world according to the dominant social structure which appears simply to be the unchangeable way things are. This social construction of gender is a major factor for maintaining fixed behaviors for each sex in each society.

In the current climate of insecurity in the face of world-wide economic and social change, one very harmful religious response to women's aspirations and flourishing has been the fundamentalist attempt to return to an idealized past. This movement is world-wide and across cultures and religions. "These efforts take different forms but have in common the attempt to control women's bodies, their ability to move freely, and their freedom to speak openly within their societies." (Ramdas, "Feminists and Fundamentalists" 102) Religious guilt becomes compounded with the "unrealistic guilt" women often feel when they contemplate attempting to change their circumstances or it is a feeling that pervades some women's consciousness in male-dominated situations. (Gebara, *Depths* 90-94)

WOMEN AND POVERTY

Every major international foundation and financial institution has empirically demonstrated that no development goals can be achieved in the two thirds world without investing in girls' education and the full and equal participation of women in their societies. (Ramdas, "Feminists and Fundamentalists" 102) "Where women are more educated and independent, societies tend to be much healthier than would otherwise be expected." (Epstein and Kim, "Power of Women" 39). Evidence is mounting world wide that poor women who benefit from micro-financing schemes and begin to exert more influence in their households, financially invest in education for their children and achieve a higher level of nutrition and health in their families. Poor men world wide spend a disproportionate amount of their meager resources on alcohol and male social activities, including prostitution. (Kristof, "Wretched" 34-6)⁴

⁴ It is sobering to note that the educational level on which these assessments are based is primary school education for girls. Of the 920 million illiterate people in the world 600 million are women. Women and

EDUCATION

The implications for education are astonishing. Mercy sisters world wide already sponsor women's centers, garden projects, safe houses, affordable housing. Basic literacy for women of all ages is important as is education for girls throughout the developing world. However, it is important to recognize that education may also be related to women's full empowerment in the form of short term workshops and community groups. Ivone Gebara notes:

It often happens that we have knowledge of what oppresses us but we do not have the means to change the rules of the game of oppression. Knowledge is certainly important in the process of transformation, but it is not enough to bring about actual change. 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 a change in the symbolic order and then change in actual practice, in the daily life of the culture. (*Depths* 69)

This change in the symbolic order has a spiritual aspect to it. The lens of gender allows an analysis of a particular woman's situation. An alternative vision is required to capture imaginations and to propose a hopeful alternative. Within Christian feminism, most describe a vision of humanity, men and women together trying to build better relations of justice and solidarity. It usually does not imply that women want to dominate men, simply reversing roles, but rather envision a new community of sharing, of mutual recognition of men's and women's values, embracing multiple cultures, peoples, and their values. This vision would be profoundly rooted in the life and experience of Jesus of Nazareth, especially his creation of a discipleship of equals and his vision of the reigning of God in our midst evoked through parables, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes and the parables that demonstrate the radical compassion of God and our solidarity with one another.

ATTENTIVENESS TO WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL WOUNDS

Finally, Beverly Lanzetta in her recent book *Radical Wisdom* calls for a contemplative feminism that heals and recognizes the soul wounds that women suffer as a result of patriarchal religion. There are profound spiritual dimensions to gender-based discrimination and violence from which we ourselves are not immune. Beverly Lanzetta 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

girls comprise over 80 percent of the estimated 800,000 victims of human trafficking, and suffer from various forms of gender-related violence (Clarke, "Sisters' Keeper" 38). The WHO reports that one in three women world-wide has experienced domestic violence. Domestic violence is more common and entrenched in developing countries. One promising initiative added a series of workshops on gender issues to their microfinancing program. In only two years, women in this project reported half as much domestic violence as a result of women gaining both understanding and leverage to resist their abuse and support one another in their village in South Africa. (Epstein and Kim, "Power of Women" 40)

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. She claims that these soul wounds remain beyond speech for most women. These wounds include internalized inferiority, the lack of symbols for the divine feminine (Lanzetta, *Wisdom* 182-195), and as I mentioned earlier in Gebara's analysis, feelings of guilt that are not related to actions but simply to the fact of being women in patriarchal societies. (*Depths* 90-2)

EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against the earth, attitudes related to ownership of the earth, and the indiscriminate exploitation of the earth's resources historically contribute to 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, precipitate a crisis of faith, and estrange women from their most significant personal and community relationships. (Lanzetta, *Wisdom* 190) Ivone Gebara makes the case that women both experience the effects of social and personal evil pervasively in a gender specific way, but once victimized become abusers or dominators in the specific areas in which they hold power, usually over children in the home. (*Depths* 95-97)

As women religious, we are also not exempt from these dynamics. Some of us have experienced some form of intimate violence 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 non-violently. As highly educated, professionally trained women, we, nevertheless, continue to experience covert and overt forms of gender based discrimination in both church and society. We are both wounded and potentially wounding, spiritually and psychologically.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE FEMININE

In her contemplative feminism, Lanzetta traces a new trajectory of mystical development in which women pass through stages of the spiritual journey not named by male mystics. Women mystics eventually discover God dwells in them and that we are godly, that we are images of God and do mirror God. This level of spiritual development requires recognizing and resisting all the messages of cultural 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 calls 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. Theologically, 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 profound reality 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 wisdom and agency. Apostolic religious life is meant to be prophetic both in church and society. We need to recognize and open ourselves to this deep contemplative healing in ourselves even as we tend the spiritual wounds of other women.

According to Lanzetta, 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, *Wisdom* 197) Lanzetta uses maternal imagery to describe a mystical ethic of the feminine—bearing the intimacy of the world, bearing the love of the world, and bearing the holiness of the world. To live in intimacy with God and the world, to bring love everywhere, and to manifest the holiness and sacredness of the world, requires internal transformation and not merely a program for social change.

This transformation is characteristically the work of the Spirit, and requires our participation and availability within the contemplative dimension of our religious lives. Our need for the Spirit's nurturance, strengthening, and healing is even more poignant as we, unlike Catherine, are no longer animated by the "kindling" of a rapid influx of vocations. However, we live in different times and can only partner with God's Holy Spirit in mediating God's mercy to our world in our own context. Therefore, we must rely as Catherine did on God's own self so that we can trust that "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" (*Scivias*, II.4.2) and the fire of God's mercy is kindled even more vibrantly in us.