

A SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY WITHIN THE SFCC PROFILE

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WOMAN IN AN ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

As Sisters for Christian Community, we aim to be collegial in decisions which affect the community. Hence, I submit these reflections and this research to the community, not for action, but for collegial reflection.

The program planners are calling us to draw from the Profile some guidance for a matching spirituality. In one sense, of course, there will be diverse spiritualities among us. But in another, there will be some common ground for us in this matter.

We are no longer defined as in the 1970 profile as "non-canonical," but in a positive sense as "a prophetic ecclesial community," living in "a new pattern of the consecrated life."⁽¹⁾ Hence, we are self-determining, self-regulating, self-governing. This means, however, not only a gathering of self-determined persons, with diverse spiritualities, but also a self-determined community of persons committed to a common goal.

We are an "ecclesial community" of consecrated women. Hence the community also has, or needs to have, a spirituality. For spirituality draws into one center of energy all of our living, with that center of energy being the Spirit of God. Such a center of energy must give life to our common goal. That goal, in the words of the profile, is to "strive through all the means available to forward the realization of Christ's prayer, 'That all may be one.'"

As we know well, there is no box in the official church system to cram us into. We do not even fit into the Secular Institute box, because we have rejected the dualism of sacred and secular in our particular lives and as a community.⁽²⁾ We do not draw a dividing line between a church and a non-church universe when determining where to strive for a community of equals. We try to think no longer in dualisms (and the boxes and systems they generate), but in thought clusters, touched in the same moment by faith and by life.

We are simply "contemporary women gathered together to manifest our commitment to Christ within a new form of the consecrated life, as a prophetic, ecclesial community." "We strive through all the means available to forward the realization of Christ's prayer, 'That all may be One.'" (SFCC Profile, Kopp 60-61).

If we are truly prophetic, we must at times disturb the present order of things. We are to call the people of God, both women and men, to live as equals. We call ourselves to interact with one another in mutual respect as co-equal sisters.

Our spirituality, therefore, will be rooted in what we mean by:

- 1) Woman, and specifically consecrated women who are self-regulating, self-determining, not as isolated individuals, but as a gathering, with a specific goal.
- 2) Church, and specifically a prophetic church.
- 3) Community, and specifically one which strives to make its own the Christ-prayer for unity.

I. WHAT IS MEANT BY "WOMAN"

A. History: Women in the Evolution of Religious Life:

Women were involved through the ages in efforts to live community in Christ, whether as solitaires or as monastics, often in relation to what later became legislated as poverty, chastity, and obedience. The root aim of such vows is to transmute what could become disordered drives for money, sex, and power into grace-directed strengths for creating community.⁽³⁾ Only with difficulty have women left an imprint on the development of these vows.

a) Community in Christ Through Poverty:

The first Christians, men and women, tried to live the common life of Baptism in Christ. But as soon as this mystical common life was narrowed to mean a community of goods, trouble crept in, for equality is hard for human nature to accept. In the course of time, too, community of goods, as defined by law, could distract monastics from what it was to symbolize. Later, under the name of poverty, church law imposed the concept of dependence. This concept required the asking of permission for what was used, thus undermining the sense of individual ownership. Such laws stripped the person of responsibility over the essentials for human life but offered a high sense of security that those needs would be met. This system also invited manipulative behavior and legal maneuvering with the intent of the laws, so as to acquire what was wanted. (McKean 190-191) Furthermore, often the corporate entity gave the appearance of wealth and of doing well in a world filled with poverty. Yet this entity too was dependent on the hierarchy for use and disposal of its property. Such an arrangement left women's communities particularly vulnerable to the clergy's arbitrary use of power over them.

Hence, efforts to live the Gospel, through the vow of poverty, however practiced, left unrealized what it was supposed to witness to: equality in a community of Christ bestowed in baptism.

b) Community in Christ Through Chastity:

Women tried also to find a lifestyle which would give them the freedom in Christ which the epistle to the Galatians proclaimed: a state in which there was no overlording by males and other masters (Gal. 3:28). The celibate state offered such an option. It must be stressed that women themselves chose this life pattern: it was not imposed on them. They often chose it against great odds, sometimes fleeing from an unwelcome betrothal; sometimes escaping from a marriage that was either abusive or less than optimal for a life of prayer; or at other times freeing themselves of

the threat of violence or the societal controls on women in general by taking on the disguise of a man.

In their choice of celibacy women were the heirs of a folklore tradition from pre-Christian centuries. "[Virgins] were linked with water images and the moon to form a triad of talismans that were to guarantee fertility" (Salisbury 98). They were endowed in the popular mind with magical powers, especially in assuring a fruitful harvest from the earth. The Roman world in which Christianity took shape shared the view that virginity conferred, not only ritual purity, but power and strength (Warner 48). In its origins then, celibacy, whether adopted by choice or circumstances, was seen as an influence for good on the earth and all who depend on it. By bearing children women who married "brought fertility into the private sphere of the family, insuring its survival. Virgins, on the other hand, by renouncing private regeneration brought prosperity to the communal or public sphere of the village as a whole."(Salisbury 99).

However, the church circumscribed this view of fertility and brought women under strict control. Their fertility was seen as limited to bearing and mothering children in the family that was the church. Curbing the independence enjoyed by single women and their freely chosen companionship with others, as well as their focus on the divine, church law prescribed enclosures and convents for women. Otherwise, they were not to call themselves "religious." >From the seventh century on, "dedicated virgins lived in communities bound by legal vows and under episcopal discipline."(Salisbury 104).

In the early centuries of the church, of course, men allowed women an equal status in becoming food for lions in the Roman arena. In fact, the witness of martyrdom was a step in allowing women to set aside the restraints of a role which denied full personhood and defined them by their bodies alone. For example, Perpetua, in the third century, chose to accept death rather than be coerced into burning incense before false gods. She did not make this choice as an act of piety, simply to avoid hell or save her own soul. Rather, she took on a public role and became a witness to the faith in order to strengthen the community. She chose death at the cost of leaving behind her nursing infant and her family, thereby testifying to her personhood before God. As she approached death she recounted a dream in which she entered into the arena to contend with beasts. There she was faced with "a certain ill-favored Egyptian who challenged her to fight with him." Then young men came to her as helpers. "I was stripped naked, and I became a man," she said. This claim should not be read as a denial of womanhood, nor as a desire to protect her womanly modesty. Rather, it was a rejection of a purely private role which society imposed on women. It is equivalent to saying: I claimed my humanity, face to face with my God. I became "church" (Harris Acts 700).

When martyrdom was no longer a general threat, women crafted for themselves, as virgins, widows, or women no longer bedding with their husbands, a pattern of consecrated celibacy. Celibacy as a religious commitment in the Church was initiated by women (McNamara, Celibate Women; Brown). The deliberate adoption of the single state enabled them to break out of socially-imposed roles into the freedom of the people of God. The women were thereby finding a way to God by, in fact, redefining the gender roles which kept them subject to a male--father, elder brother, or husband. The independence they thereby attained drew down the disfavor of the

clergy. For the clergy were unable to reconcile their own view of women as subordinate to men with this life of female freedom from patriarchal control.

Women themselves found a strategic defense against this hostility by arguing that they were not destroying the established order, though, in fact, they were. They affirmed that they were "brides of Christ." In patristic times to be a bride of Christ, whether one was male or female, meant that one was "church," in a symbolic sense, for the church is the bride of Christ. Gerta Lerner cites what she speculates may be the earliest known example (second century, A.D.) of a woman arguing for the right to remain a "consecrated virgin," against the objections of her parents and the law. When the judge insisted that she marry, she retorted that she was taking Christ for her husband and thus not subject to another male.(140, citing Salisbury 140).

It should be noted that this argument was a defense against oppression and not a spontaneous form of spirituality adopted by women. But clerics took up the idea of women as "brides of Christ," interpreted it in an individual sense, and set up rules for them about dress, living conditions, and behavior. In that way they again defined women in terms of marriage and locked them into gender roles. The consecrated virgins accepted that compromise as the price of official recognition by the clergy. They were thus deflected from calling themselves allegorical men, non-encumbered by the burdens of church-defined restrictions and dependence, as Perpetua had done. The notion of "spiritual motherhood," often affirmed by the present Pope, springs from this same mind-set. It is a position that retains the male as the normative human being, with the woman defined, not by the fullness of human nature, but by her female functions and roles. The choice of dedicated celibacy, then, in summary, represents from the beginning a move towards personal freedom and self-direction on the part of women. In its earliest roots it represents the influence of women on a wider society than that of the family, in fact, on the entire world.

The desert mothers, contemporary with the better-known desert fathers, also had to deal with the restrictions of gender stereotypes. Women ascetics, like their male contemporaries, rejected a self-indulgent culture not formed in faith and fled into the desert or took on an enclosed life in an anchorhold. Some of the desert mothers adopted the already-established expedient of dressing like men, in order to achieve the self-determination that was denied to women, or to protect themselves from predatory males. By this behavior, women did not challenge the prevailing ideology of the sexes but found a way of circumventing its effects on their lives. (Cited in King, Pilgrimage 353).

c) The Imposition of Obedience on Women:

With the exception of martyrdom, efforts by women to live the Gospel on the same plane as men met with rebuffs and derision, whether these efforts took the form of vowed virginity, desert solitude, or communal living. A quick review of the past brings to light that women started again and again to live the Gospel as they believed they were led to do. But these women were either coopted into the shelter of the institution or suppressed. Some who were willingly coopted saw in institutional protection a value that made it worthwhile to give up their fragile status of equality and come under the control and approval of clerics. True, some had worthwhile, if pragmatic, reasons to accept "recognition by Rome."(Thompson 38-78). But in most cases, the communities

were rewarded with little more than an honorary title, and a certain ease in attracting donations for their financial support. In return they accepted externally imposed rules and restraints. They leaned on the clerical shoulder, and in return were handcuffed.

One can trace this pattern of women's initiatives being suppressed or coopted by male authority in other well-known instances: These include the beguines in the Middle Ages (Bowie; MacDonnell), Mary Ward in the seventeenth century (Rapley), and new apostolic initiatives in the nineteenth (McNamara, Sisters in Arms).

A nineteenth-century instance has received attention recently in the case of Mary McKillop, founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart. McKillop was beatified on January 19, 1995, by Pope John Paul II, thus becoming the first Australian native to be so recognized. She, too, had been in conflict with church authority, which tried to thwart her apostolic aims. She had been excommunicated by Bishop Lawrence Sheil of Adelaide in 1871. She might have avoided this harsh censure if she had not chosen obedience to her conscience rather than to a church official. She refused to submit to the bishop's demands, which included giving up her order's work of education for Australians isolated in rural poverty. "Her triumph," a recent reviewer notes, "is a rare church admission that fidelity to conscience, not opportunistic obedience, is the ultimate test of any saint." (Hemmer 14).

These are only a few instances in church history which illustrate how imposing laws requiring obedience from women snuffed out, if only for a time, the brave initiatives by which women sought to be "church": to follow the leads of the Holy Spirit in living out, alone or with others, the message of the Gospel.

B. Theory: Woman Variouslly Defined:

This pattern of bringing women under controlling restrictions was based on a notion widespread within the hierarchy regarding what woman is (Carr 117-133).

A long-held view, of course, given permanence and prestige by Thomas Aquinas, was that woman is an inferior creature, not quite a complete human being, and hence subject in the divine order to being dominated by man.

We scarcely ever read now in official documents that woman is an inferior creature and hence for that reason subject to the domination of the male. But there is a substitute theory which is a thinly-veiled version of the old domination teaching. This version sets forth a two-nature description of humanity, describing male and female as half-persons, each part having special roles, functions, and activities. Human duality is used as the ordering principle for assigning particular and separate roles, activities, and functions to women. This two-nature theory leaves male domination almost intact. It is inserted into dogma by the claim that such a division is inherent in nature--in "the order of creation"--and part of an unalterable divine plan. Pope John Paul II builds on this concept when he speaks of the special nature of woman. The argument has been used as one of the reasons for denying ordination to women.

This two-nature view employs a central analogy between "nature" and the economy of salvation. This analogy is often expressed in the marriage symbolism of the relation of Christ to the church

(activity-passivity) as though it were the relation of husband to wife. This duality theory and its related analogy underlies the Pope's preference for describing nuns (but not usually monks) as brides of Christ). This view ignores new knowledge derived from the biological and human sciences and continues to consider the past as natural, as unalterable, as the order of nature, and therefore as revealed by God.

But emerging today is a one-nature or single anthropology. This view holds that: "there are no preordained roles or functions, beyond the biological, for either men or women since the appropriate activities of the individual are extrapolated from spiritual and personal characteristics" (Carr 125).

Yet another vision of humankind relating to the personhood of woman expands this position, and offers "a transformative, person-centered model." This model challenges us to transform, not only the old gender stereotypes, but the very world that has emerged under the influence of those stereotypes. This model strives for a society rooted in Christian faith and calls both the individual and institutions to likeness to the God of Jesus, manifested as love, compassion, mercy, peace, caring, serving, and community.

One looks in vain, however, in church documents for statements of this emerging view. True, the conciliar texts of Vatican II are in some ways supportive of women's equality with men, as in these examples from Gaudium et Spes:

[W]here they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact. (Abbott 207)...[Every] type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent (Abbott 227-228)

But, alas, another part of the same document falls back on the dual nature concept. While defending the right of women to be present in every area of life, the text restricts this right by saying: "It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature." (Abbott 267).

This position is consistent with the anthropology of John Paul II, as reaffirmed in his 1995 document addressed to women. He holds that a diversity of roles for men and women is not prejudicial to women if it is "an expression of what is specific to being male or female" (John Paul II 16). Unfortunately, what John Paul means by "woman" is not completely clear. But what he means by man seems to be "the human being": God intervenes in order to help man escape from his solitude: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18)." On this John Paul builds his theory of the complementarity of the sexes, as part of a divinely-willed order.

While citing Genesis, the Pope does not cite Galatians 3:28: in Christ there is no distinction between male and female. In Luke the Pontiff finds in Mary's call to be a handmaid an extended call to all women to be helpers and to serve.

Throughout the document, though it is called a dialogue, it is difficult to find the voice of women as part of that dialogue. The Church is urged to do things for women--as though women were not

an integral part of that same Church. And while the Pope laments the obstacles that prevent women from being "fully integrated into social, political, and economic life," he is less than explicit about what prevents their being integrated--even apart from priesthood--into ecclesial life.

There is also ambiguity in what the Pope says about human responsibility for transforming the earth. First, "as a rational and free being, man is called to transform the face of the earth." Then in a shift to the plural he says that man and woman share equally in this task. John Paul II's theory of "womanhood" partakes of the romantic symbolism of the "eternal woman": women "see persons with their hearts." They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. The "gift of womanhood" is revealed in women "placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives." The Pope repeats his earlier claim that by a free and sovereign choice Christ decided on men only to be priests. Men, he says, are chosen to be an "icon" of the face of Christ as shepherd and bridegroom, a mix of realism and allegory, with an appeal to an "economy of signs" as God's means of presence among us. This seems to signify that males as priests are stand-ins for Christ, the bridegroom; and women are stand-ins for the church, as brides. Women cannot reflect the face of Christ--the resurrected Christ whose body is the church.

This is a vague and confusing romantic anthropology built on marriage symbolism. It is especially irrelevant for those who do not choose to marry and who do not see humanity in "couples."

This essentially dualistic view of human beings finds no support in the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner. His work gives a basis for rejecting the old models of humanity in favor of the new. Rahner notes that the idea of nature as a static essence is false. The true guideline is the way the creativity of human freedom, decision, and practice give rise to a never-finished concept of human nature.

The chief flaw in the dualistic view, however, may be its neglect of women's experience and their legitimate aspirations. These certainly cannot be contrary to a woman's "nature." Rather, they are integral to what woman is.

Summing up what some women theologians think about these matters, Carr says: "Feminist perspectives suggest that friend and friendship are categories desperately needed on both the divine and human levels today" (Carr 213).

Carr refers to friendship directed not only among individuals but among nations and groups. Such friendship is experienced as joy, relationship (with an affirming of autonomy), communion, presence, inexhaustible mystery, surprise, comfort, a call to freedom. Friendship is experienced in an eminent degree in the interdependence of community and in turn helps create community (213). And in the SFCC perspective, that is what a transformed world would be like.

II. THE CHURCH

A. Views of the Church: The locus for efforts to transform society, withered by false gender roles and by a lust for lording it over others, should logically be the Church. But the Church itself

needs first to be transformed, if the seeds of the hoped-for realm of God are to fall on good ground. And as with the concept of woman, so the concept of the nature of the church can no longer be compacted into a definition such as that once taught to children in the Baltimore catechism.⁽⁴⁾

In Lumen Gentium, there is no single theology of the church throughout. Instead, at least two--and possibly three--are mentioned here and there.

For over half a century preceding the Vatican Council, the church was generally defined in the same terms as are nations and states. The primary tenets of this view were that Christ founded the church as a visible society. That society, like other states, had powers to make laws, to rule, and to coerce its subjects. By divine right, it was held, that church was divided sharply into the governing and the governed (Kilmartin 95).

But another definition of the church, which has gained importance in recent decades, is that the church is a communion. In this view the church is a community of the baptized, who share a common faith and a common life in Christ and who have spiritual gifts given to them for the service of one another (Kilmartin 99).

Chapters II and III of Lumen Gentium "point in this direction" More specifically, (as in Chap. 5, 40-42), the document "speaks of our communion with God and with one another as grounded on our union with the Risen Lord"⁽⁵⁾. Such an explanation of church, drawn in part from patristic teachings, offers a spirituality distinct from that of the kind of obedience expected in a juridical system. But living a common life in Christ, and sharing our spiritual gifts with one another, is harder to do, harder to measure, because it is an act of freedom. Church here means essentially "the people of God." The marginal references to the Holy Spirit do not modify this concept significantly (Kilmartin 99).

The third way of describing the church has been called Trinitarian. Trinitarian ecclesiology is a communion ecclesiology which claims that in the Trinity we have the source of our communion, and our communion is an icon of the Trinity. The current rebirth of Trinitarian theology has been called "one of the most exciting developments in modern theology"⁽⁶⁾ In this view "the unity of the Trinity is both the source and the model of the unity of the Church."

Here is a description of the church with emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit:

The church is gathered to God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a sign and an instrument of the kingdom [realm] of God. That kingdom is preached by and established in Jesus Christ, but, in the grace of the Spirit, is still growing toward its fullness (Winter 172).

Working with Divine freedom "the Spirit initiates changes which correspond to the new needs of the Church." (Kilmartin 109) "Through the gift of faith and their particular charisms the members of the Church are enabled to mediate, to one another and those called to the Church, the Holy Spirit who acts through their faithful witness to the gospel" (Kilmartin 112).

Lumen Gentium, without fully developing this point, nevertheless includes it:

Rising from the dead (cf. Rom. 6:9) he [Jesus Christ] sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through this Spirit has established His body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation.... [T]he promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit, and through Him continues in the Church" (48 Abbott 79).

And in another place:

Just as the assumed nature inseparably united to the divine Word serves Him as a living instrument of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the communal structure of the Church serve Christ's Spirit, who vivifies it by way of building up the Body (cf. Eph. 4:16) (8 Abbott 22).

This view of the Church provides an insight into the hope that "all may be one." ". . .the unity of the divine Trinity brings into being the unity of the People of God" (Kilmartin 112). Such a view also offers a different angle on the structure of the church from that still commonly held. It is less important to think of the church as divided into the states of clergy and laity and more crucial to see the church as made up of ministries and services within a community (Congar 17).

A feminist theologian describes forcefully the practical effects of women making their own the centrality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. It allows women to take as a starting point the primary understanding of the church as "the community of God's people journeying in history towards ultimate fulfillment in the realm of God" (Hines 163).

This dynamic and historical understanding of church captured the imagination of Catholic people following the council. The laity, and particularly women, began to believe and act on the conviction that "we are the church." This belief, joined with the reawakening of feminism in the 1960s, has led women to expect and demand full participation in all aspects of the Church's life.... The critical voices of women and other marginalized groups have begun to transform the Church "from below" (Hines 163).

This "pilgrim Church" sees itself as a discipleship of equals. No one person on the journey is "anything but a follower and a learner in relation to Jesus Christ....The concept of discipleship undercuts the illusion that some in the Church are lords and masters" (Dulles 12 qtd. in Hines 175).

An historical understanding of the church, of course, plunges the pilgrims into the very world that earlier spiritualities urged religious to shun. We must ask, then, what it means to be a spiritual person in this world of space and time.

The great German theologian, Karl Rahner, confronts this problem. It is his teaching that a finite being such as we are "is unable to find what is needed for its fulfillment solely within itself. Spiritual growth is impossible without the finite world" (McKean 69).

The spiritual life for Rahner is...dependent on involvement with this world. Personal becoming is not only dependent upon "something within" oneself, but also upon "something outside" oneself, for the human person does not happen to be in the world as one might reside at a particular

address, rather the world is the very continuation of the person (cited from Spirit in the World 408 McKean 69).

And again: God's word, if the human person is to hear it, must "encounter us where we already and always are, in an earthly place, at an earthly hour" (Spirit in the World 409, qtd. in McKean 72).

But this world is different from that in which spiritualities of the past took shape. It is this difference that Elizabeth Johnson recognizes when she calls us to hope in an absent God.:

[T]he sacred comes to us in the form of promise mediated through everyday, small fragments of healing, beauty, liberation, justice, and love. This does not remove the darkness, but it allows us to keep on walking. The ice melts but will freeze again: in history there are only relative victories. . . . Here there are no easy assurances, no props. We know God through hope, and, in the face of starkness, even hope against hope, nourished by remembrance and the circle of community" ("Between the Times" 22).

B. A Search for Meaning in a Prophetic Church:

Because Vatican Council II was so liberating for us, making possible within the church itself the launching of SFCC, we may fail to note the inner tensions in the Council's teachings on religious life.

On the one hand Perfectae Caritatis affirms that the fundamental norm and the supreme law of all communities is "the following of Christ as proposed by the gospel"(2 Abbott 468).

As was noted with regard to the structure of the church, Perfectae Caritatis took a step forward in reducing the number of "states" in the church from three to two. In this scheme, religious are lay, though the clerical and lay divisions still remain. Some have said that religious are not a structure of the church, as bishops are, but a structure in the church. The admission of religious into the consecrated life comes, not from a bestowal of rank by a ritual from the church, but from the initiative of their self-dedication. "They have handed over their entire lives to God's service in an act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration [a sacrament conferred by the church] and which provides an ampler manifestation of it" (5 Abbott 470).

With regard to secular institutes, with which SFCC is at times confused, the text says: "Their profession confers a consecration on men and women, laity and clergy, who reside in the world" (11 Abbott 473). This definition still seems to imply that cloister or at least some form of separation from "the world" are the ordinary requirements for religious life. The essential difference between secular institutes and other forms of consecrated life would then be that secular institutes need not establish any place of residence shared in common. But more fundamentally, this attempt to distinguish one form from the other assumes a dualism of secular and sacred. But Sisters for Christian Community, in naming themselves "consecrated women in ecclesial community," assume that the world is already sacred, indwelt by a creative, compassionate God, that it is the very locus of the sacred. "The world" is where we all live, and there is no other domain.⁽⁷⁾ Sisters for Christian Community consecrate themselves to the task of transforming that world so that, finally transfigured, it will be free of divisions that darken it in its present state.

This transfigured Church will be seen as the Church radiant. There is not a question here, of course, of that romantic notion wherein the woman religious is a bride; rather, as in the Scriptures, the radiant bride (Rev. 21:2) signifies God's people, entering into a covenant relationship with their God (Perfectae Caritatis 1 Abbott 467).

The SFCC Profile uses the symbolism in this sense, in speaking of the "Church radiant." Combining the image of a holy covenant with the call to nurture "the growth of Christian community," the Profile refers implicitly to the metaphor of the body of Christ, which grows, not so much by the addition of members, but by an increase in maturity. Other related images are that of the Church as a building, or a city, or, above all, of a life-giving loaf dependent on the yeast of Christian living. The spirituality which such imagery shapes is that of being life and savor within community, wherever it can be created or found.

But on the other hand, Perfectae Caritatis builds on some of the old dualities: secular and sacred, active and contemplative, the world and the cloister, apostolate and prayer, cleric and lay, the mission of religious and the lay apostolate, male and female natures. Feminist theologians have shown us the falsity of such dualities. In order "that all may be one," Sisters for Christian

Community are called to live so as to negate what is destructive in such divisions, without denying the need for common-sense boundaries. This means taking on the most dangerous of tasks: upsetting the order of things, especially when those in power see such dichotomies as decreed by God and authorized by the hierarchy of the Church. As a reviewer of Dorothy Solle's books concludes: "We are called not to maintain established orders but to see new possibilities, challenge laws and systems that ignore human need and work like dogs for a new creation" (Ashe 18).

Our spirituality, then, is to see ourselves as "called to prophetic ministry embedded in a contemplative relationship to God" ("Between the Times" 12). It is this prophetic note which makes SFCC highly valuable in the larger community which is the church. It is the prophetic dimension which answers the question: why make vows or commitments since all are called in baptism to the same holiness.

As one member of another self-directed community puts it:

Some people I know in the peace organization Pax Christi make an annual vow of non-violence. I've never seen them suggest that they have a unique call, or are better at living it out--only that it is so important to them that they feel the need to symbolize and celebrate it in some way. I know I am no less called to live non-violently than they, but I don't feel the need to desire to ritualize that part of my baptismal commitment via a vow. But in seeing their passion around this commitment as they celebrate it publicly, they help me form my own conscience and re-awaken my desire to live the Gospel more fully.

The writer then makes a connection between vowed commitment and charism:

Maybe that is the gift vowed people can bring to the Church community--a passion made public in ritual that helps us all to keep deepening our dedication to the Gospel, in this case of consecrating the energies of money, sex, and power to furthering the reign of God (Jane O'Brien, Sister-L July 7, 1885).

SFCC, of course, does not require what is generally considered a public act of commitment though others must witness to their promise. But even if that public is limited to other members of the community, the commitment ritual fulfills the function of confirming gospel values in the lives of other believers, in particular those who have chosen to be celibate. Essentially, then, in bonding with one another in search of the same goal, Sisters for Christian Community try to deepen in themselves and others their passion to be light and leaven for the people of God.

III. COMMUNITY

From the third model of church--the church as icon and instrument of the Trinity--there flows naturally the ground for community, as SFCC aspires to live it. Here is how one writer puts this connection:

Through the gift of faith and their particular charisms the members of the Church are enabled to mediate, to one another and to those called to the Church, the Holy Spirit who acts through their faithful witness to the gospel (Kilmartin 112).

This notion of church grounds the SFCC goal, in Christ and the Spirit, "that all may be one." At the same time it also grounds the practical day-by day living out of community. "In the Trinity unity and multiplicity are bound together in the dynamic union of divine life. Likewise the members of the Church, in the power of the Spirit, are enabled to live in communion with Christ and with one another"(Kilmartin 122).

But we must get down to living these ideals in practice. What does this require? Given the fluidity of its living arrangements, how can SFCC embody any form of a common life? Following the example of the first Christians, religious orders have often either chosen, or more frequently had imposed on them, some rigid version of the common life, often including enclosure. At present the "common life" among religious orders is far from a general practice. In SFCC, it seems, we are called, not to any prescribed way of living together, but rather to working out the meaning of our common life given to us in baptism. This entails really seeing others as equals and dealing with them in mutuality. It may also call for us to assert ourselves as women in claiming our right to mutuality with others in the church.

Though we do not pledge ourselves to lead a "common life," the notion of the "common good" is explicitly called for in the Profile. Religious orders have traditionally applied themselves to achieving the "common good." This generally means that each one contributes, at whatever personal expense, to a good or a mission that resides in the group as a whole. The model for such a concept is the army with its military goals. Individual talents are put to use for these goals under a single director. Each soldier is cared for and trained so as to bring about the success of the army. The individual is cared for so as to contribute a maximum good to the whole.

At one extreme, it follows from this view of the common good that all members of the orders should organize their lives in the same way. Canon Law and other prescriptions for religious assume this: the same kind of life style has been expected of all apostolic orders, no matter what

their differences in group charisms or institutional works. Differences from this one pattern are only allowed by way of exception.

But a broader view of the common good underlies the shared life of SFCC members. It is set forth in Mater et Magistra and Pacem in Terris: The common good "embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby [women and men] are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily" (Encyclicals Mater et Magistra 63, 147; Pacem in Terris 58,254).

Furthermore, community is not something to be brought about by law: it is something that happens, though not by chance. When two or more do the same deed together, or pour out their gifts towards the same goal, moved by the same Spirit: that is community. Community is a plurality of persons doing one deed in loving awareness of one another, conscious that there are many gifts but one Spirit.

We still need to work out how the dignity of each woman and the call to community fit together. For this we find help from Rahner again, by adapting a text in which he explores the dignity and freedom of the human being (Rahner Dignity and Freedom 238-246).

First, what is the dignity of woman? It is not founded on a "feminine nature" but on her human nature. Yet, the woman lives within a sexually-differentiated community, existing in space and time. She must know who she is, she must name herself, and open herself through love, in Jesus Christ, towards non-mediated personal communion with the mystery that is God. Her dignity is both a capacity, given by God, and a task to be carried out with the help of grace and the human community. This leads to fulfillment, that is, the gaining and preserving of the dignity bestowed upon her by God. This dignity is not defined by her body functions. Rather, it lies within her innermost being and beyond that being, reaching to the very namelessness of God. This is an enormous task for woman, because she has inherited a history in which this personal task has been hindered and usurped by patriarchy.

If woman continues to see herself as "bride," representing the church, then she is not really the church, but a symbol of it. Similarly, when the hierarchy speaks to women and about women, they all too often assume this stance: we, the church, need you, the women. You were created to serve the church. But women too are the church. Again, if woman is bride, then the counterpart of the metaphor is "spouse," signifying Christ. If only the male can represent "Christ, the spouse," then only the male can be a channel of grace, and woman only a recipient. Hence, the persistent dualism of bride and spouse radically restricts woman.

Woman is a unique person, but also one who builds community. Person and community are not opposites, but intertwining, interdependent realities. No person can withdraw from all relations to others, and a community consists of persons. Person consists in being in relation, thereby enriching distinction and not limiting it. Community is a way to find meaning in constellations or contexts. A word, as we well know, without losing its uniqueness, gains its meaning from a context: a "rare" day in June suggests one meaning, quite different from that in "the rare atmosphere of the mountains" or "rare" as in a lightly-cooked entree. Similarly, the group

contextualizes the individual: an individual is a genuine word, not apart, but within the context that is community.

This process of creating community is open to success or failure. Joan Chittister reminds us that our life within an organization can warp our creativity or else open us to new wonders:

It is surely true that...child like docility to organizational pettiness cannot possibly forge the new ways of being where the needs are... (Chittister "Religious Orders" 17).

Even if we live apart, and come together infrequently, we are not free of the threat of being taken up more with the kind of community we are rather than with the Spirit that is still forming and leading us. In order to focus on our goal of unity in diversity, we need to hear one another's stories. We need to take time to tell one another how we have each tried to extend community in the environs where we live and work.

One way I have found to do this in the past few years is by becoming an active co-owner of an electronic discussion group, named Sister-l. It is dedicated to the history and contemporary concerns of Catholic women religious. But it is open to all--except to those who might come to scorn or to ridicule. There is discussion of prayer, of community itself, of the forming of new communities. Significantly, often there is expressed a longing for the lived experience of community:

One such thread centered on the isolated feeling of being at Eucharist in a setting which is not inclusive, not friendly. One person wrote in response to another: "I am touched by your description of being at Eucharist `by myself! I too have a profound sense of `drowning' when in a service that is non-inclusive. For me, it is as if a huge steel wall comes down between me and God. And, as you describe `shutting down," I too must consciously shut down emotionally. . .and, often, then go away feeling dis-connected not only from the `community' but also from God. It is somehow comforting to see someone put those feelings into words" (Sister-L June 30, 1995).

What we know from this and from other sources is that people expect community to flow from the Eucharist. If it does not, what can we do? Our own spirit-filled creativity will point the way. If we are led by that one Spirit, we find a deep desire to pray and we find time for it. If our souls become dehydrated by too much outpouring of our energies, we are driven by thirst to seek God. We help one another when we think about who we are, as we are doing here today. We do not hanker after the security we have given up when we chose to earn our own way, as most people must. We accept our fears of facing an uncertain future. We share with others in the very experience of such uncertainty:

Who knows how much of anything oppressive or evil will be changed by all the hours of work. That is unimportant. What is important is only that, impelled by the gospel, imbued with the Scriptures, alive with the fire of justice, we go on (Chittister "Religious Orders" 17).

But we shape our lives as community by goals, and not by fear. Oppression and evil may persist. I know no Aramaic alas, but on Sister-l I read that the original, concrete Aramaic word which we translate in the "Our Father" as "evil" means rootlessness. This helps in understanding evil: evil is all that is contrary to goodness and it is all that seems to be real but is not real: that is, evil is

not alive because it lacks roots in the ground of being, which is God. I connected this insight with what Jesus says about roots in the Gospels. Jesus was patient with weeds: with strong growth which was out of order and not immediately useful. But Jesus decried rootlessness--a show of growth without grounding. He had little time for seed that fell on bad ground, or was taken off by the wind.

What, then, are the evils which the traditional vows were designed to supplant? Or more positively what do these vows empower us to do with baptismal grace? Let us first look at the symbolism of the sacrament of baptism: it is threefold, including water, light, and voice. We might more easily remember these symbols as water, warmth, and word. What do they effect in the baptized?

Water gives the power of washing away the grit of greed which darkens what is created and what is constructed, so that we fail to see or find joy in the divine energy within. By one vow, long called poverty, we reaffirm and open ourselves to this grace by pledging the right use of created goods, in a spirit of freedom and joy.

Warmth, bathing us in light, gives the power to see ourselves and all others in the Christ body, and to embrace that body in a dedicated love. Long called celibacy, this commitment enables us to expand our baptismal power to be open to Christ's love as one who is essentially alone, and to love that same Christ in others. It enables us to be light for the Christ community and in turn to be enlightened by that same people of God. It enables us to find a center of solitude in intimacy, and a connectedness in God and creation through solitude.

Lastly, the word, spoken and heard, effects in us a faith that listens to others and, in silence, hears the hidden voice of God within our own hearts. In its root meaning, obedience has included this notion of speaking and listening, of voice and word.

Water, word, and warmth: symbols of the power, the wisdom, and love that are one in the Trinity. That unity and trinity can be imaged for us concretely in the dynamism of the sea, wherein the water is inseparable from the wave and from the sound and light that interplay with it. The Spirit hovered over empty chaos to bring forth earth and sea in the first creation. That same Spirit hovers over the unformed child or adult presented for baptism, to bring forth, in a second creation, new life in Christ.

This is what the lavation with water, the lighting of the candle, and the listening to the many voices of the community in baptism initiate and effect. Our dedication takes the form of living out those baptismal powers in a viable, visible and diverse community. In such a community there are indeed many gifts but one Spirit.

CONSEQUENCES FOR SFCC

We are grounded in a model of Church that requires loving others, without standing over and above them in a spirit of being better than those others, or of being in control of them. We cannot therefore think we have done enough by bringing bread to the soup kitchen or even by changing

the unjust laws that prevent people from earning their own bread. We must love those who suffer, in a mature relationship:

Of course love includes willing the good of the beloved. . . . But as actually lived, and paradigmatically so in the light of women's experience, love includes an openness to the ones loved, a vulnerability to their experience, a solidarity with their well-being, so that one rejoices with their joys and grieves with their sorrows. This is not a dispensable aspect of love but belongs to love's very essence (Johnson She Who Is 266).

On the other hand does this way of loving, then, take away the need to lighten the sufferings of others? Rather, it makes it happen:

. . . [A] chief source of the energy that generates "willing the good" and relieving misery lies precisely in this experience of compassionate solidarity with the suffering of those we love (She Who Is 266).

So we do not separate action and contemplation, no more than we divide the wind and the wave. We keep in mind that when our souls become dehydrated, a spiritual thirst will drive us to seek the water of life. We do not try to "practice the vows" in separate compartments in our lives, but try to live them in all that we do.

Are We Free-Wheeling Mavericks? In earlier times religious were taught to listen unreflectively and to do what they were commanded. Human ingenuity, though, often managed to elicit a command the person wanted to carry out. In a free-form community it is likewise possible to find subversive ways to give commands in the very name of practicing consensus.

In a free-form community it is also possible to ignore others and to cut our own path, being community only in name. How can we witness to others that SFCC is not merely a free-wheeling group of undirected mavericks, who find a way to do what they please, to follow their own whims, perhaps even to impose their own will on others? It is a matter of how we assume responsibility. We have taken on the insecurity which goes with being a woman alone, neither married nor dependent on a canonical community that cares first for its own. In such a stance we affirm the value of human freedom without denying the need for seeking for the practical necessities of life, and for helping others to attain them. As Rahner says:

The freedom of the personal decision for which we are responsible ourselves and the consequences of which we must bear ourselves is a higher value (because more personal) than material security of physical existence as such. The flight from freedom into the enclosure of a merely secure life is, therefore, immoral. Wherever (and in so far as) a certain freedom and security of the material conditions of life belong to the necessary practical prerequisites of personal freedom, they are sanctioned by the dignity of human freedom and must be demanded in the name of this freedom--they must, therefore, be fashioned in such a way that the freedom of [woman herself] is not sacrificed to the desire of possessing these material good (italics added) (Dignity and Freedom 249-250).

In simpler words, poverty (or freedom) means we cannot be bought; we do not have a price. But our challenge is to make visible the fact that our freedom is a means to unity, not an escape from it.

True, many of the old-time practices of asceticism are not required. But a new kind of asceticism--perhaps even more difficult--must come to the fore. "This is the asceticism of trust, mutuality and love" which treasures uniqueness and yet searches for unity (Byrne 87-88).

It is only in community that this goal can be realized. As Boff says:

Where is the mystery of the Trinity most visible today? In that community of faith, hope and love that tries conscientiously to live the ideal of unity put forth by Jesus to his disciples: 'May they all be one, Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you (John 17:21).' The unity of the Church does not consist in bureaucratic uniformity, but in a perichoresis [interpenetration] among all the faithful, in the service of others (mission) (106).

To help us understand community in this sense, Boff further reflects on the word perichoresis: The relationships of communion between the three Persons, one totally within the other. . . allow contemplation of the full interpenetration of one Person by another. This reality is expressed by the Greek word perichoresis or the Latin terms circuminsessio or circumincessio. As the structure of these terms suggests, they mean: cohabitation, co-existence, interpenetration of the divine Persons by one another. There is a complete circulation of life and a perfect equality between the Persons, without any anteriority or superiority of one over another, except what cannot be communicated: what distinguishes one from the others. The Father is fully in the Son and in the Holy Spirit; the Son is fully in the Father and the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is fully in the Father and the Son (93).

The Trinity, then, "is the source of the utopia of equality--with due respect for differences--[of] full community and just relationships in society and in history" (Boff 93).

How can this relation between the foundations of faith and a community such as SFCC become real to ourselves and others? Boff reminds us that this requires continual effort:

This symbolism...can be built up organically only in a community which is continually renewing itself, overcoming the hardening of its institutional arteries (107).

Byrne has also reflected on how we are called to image the Trinity in creating community: [The] source of all our human aspirations for unity in Christ is the life of the very Godhead, the Blessed Trinity itself (87).

Byrne cites the inscriptions of this mystery in art and imagery through the ages: "captured now by medieval stonemasons, now by Ruben's icon, now by the images of uncharted universes which dance the dance of space-time through our evolving universe, which we glimpse at from giant telescopes or from the tracks of tiny invisible particles" (87).

Our sense of what woman is can also help to make community a true mirror of faith, hope, and love. Basically, whether from their sex or from their cultural history, women have a sense of connectedness. They move into circles rather than into graded levels. They have been keepers of tables that people gather around face-to-face at meals. They have clothed generations within sewing circles, before assembly lines replaced them. In a world that fawns and faints over superstars, divided off from lesser beings, women are able to see the stellar patterns that people the heavens and are named for their likeness to living beings. Much as rational thought has

contributed to progress and extension of knowledge, it is not sufficient. Perhaps because through the ages women have been shut out from the team work of rational thought and indeed declared incapable of such thought, they have inherited from their foremothers a way of thinking that has much in common with that of the mystics.

In the midst of the extremes of rational thought, the women mystics in particular have kept alive the way of relatedness and insight. In order to experience the depths within us and the unmeasurable realities beyond us, we learn from them or in their way. We learn by our way of life, by compassionate love, by inspiration from we know not where. And thereby we become one in our own being. This sense of relatedness disrupts the patriarchal order; and at the same time it gives the basis for community.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

Therefore, as a community, we are called to a love breathed upon us by the Spirit: a dynamic love that leads us to stand with one another, and to stand by one another, and to do for one another because we are one with all others in Christ.

ENDNOTES

1. Considerable discussion has surfaced lately as to the meaning of "the consecrated life." In pre-Vatican II theories "consecrated" meant that all deeds performed by the religious in accord with the vows became acts of the virtue of religion. These acts were seen as giving additional glory to God and as gaining double merit. The religious was "set apart" like sacred buildings or vessels.

While fundamentally rooting religious life in Baptism, the documents of Vatican II still contain some ambivalent statements on "consecration." In Apostolicum Actuositatem (On the Apostolate of the Laity), this is said: "The laity "are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-10) in order that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything that they do, and may witness to Christ throughout the world." (AA 3; Abbott 492). In Perfectae Caritatis the Council says: "A life consecrated by a profession of the counsels is of surpassing value." (PC 1; Abbott.467). And elsewhere in the same document: "Since they are signs of a consecrated life, religious habits should be simple and modest, at once poor and becoming: (PC 17; Abbott 478). And finally: Religious "have handed over their entire lives to God's service in an act of special consecration which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and which provides an ampler manifestation of it" (PC 5; Abbott 470). It is significant in this latter statement that the "consecration" is an act taken by the religious herself, not an effect conferred upon her.

For a short theological study of the subject see Karl Rahner, "Consecration in the Life and Reflection of the Church" in Theological Investigations XIX (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983) 57-72.

Rahner makes several fundamental points:

1. Because of God's self-communication, the human being is never in a purely profane sphere. He/she "simply cannot escape from [the] ultimate sacral sphere of his existence, even though he has either not yet reacted at all in freedom to this definitive state or exists freely in opposition to this existential state established by grace" (58).
2. Baptism comes after this fundamental sacredness and is based on it.
3. But baptism, while not conferring the first ontological, existential sacredness, nonetheless produces those effects "which by their very nature belong as historical and sociological factors to the visibly sociological dimension of the church" (59).
4. Even priestly consecration is not a call to a task supplemental to being a Christian but is for him "the way of being a Christian" (68).
5. Questions in theology which deal with consecration "have a considerable importance for the self-understanding and the spirituality" of those who hold pastoral ministries in the church (72).
6. There is "certainly a real if secondary distinction between lay people and a clergy with a special consecratedness in the dimension of the sacramental sign and of a definite commission for an office which does not belong to everyone in the Church" (72). But where the dividing line is or ought to be are "questions to which the answer is far

from clear in every respect" (72).

For SFCC this question is also important and unclear.

2. The proper and particular character of Secular Institutes is "a secular one." "This profession confers a consecration on men and women, laity and clergy, who reside in the world." (PC 8; Abbott 472). It is implied that such persons are not called to work within the church-world. The SFCC goal is focused both on the world which is the church (an ecclesial community) and on the non-church world: in both entities we try to promote "the growth of Christian community."

It is also implied that secular institutes are defined by the fact that they do not live and work in monastic or conventual settings. SFCC members are defined as "permeating the world," wherever there is need for love and community witness. It is quite clear that the church-world itself also needs such witness, perhaps preeminently so.

3. "Disordered" here does not mean that these drives are in themselves lacking in goodness. It means that the pursuit of money, sex, and power can become disordered.

4. For a helpful overview of the meaning of church see Dulles, Models of the Church.

5. In this sense the church is Christocentric along the lines of the teaching of Paul (Kilmartin 99).

6. Review in Theological Perspectives (Herndon, Va.: T & T Clark Publishing USA, Summer, 1995): 2.

7. Vatican Council II addresses this question in Gaudium et Spes "[This] community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind [sic] and its history" (1 Abbott 200); Again: Christ died "so that this world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment" (2 Abbott 200).

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