

# Spirituality of the Sisters of Humility

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## Introduction

When a religious sister identifies her spirituality as, for example, Benedictine, Franciscan or Dominican, people take for granted that they understand what is meant. Nearly everyone has read or heard about the lives and teachings of Benedict, Francis and Dominic. On the other hand, questions arise about the spirituality of communities modeled on a facet of Mary's life, such as Sisters of the Humility of Mary, Sisters of Charity, BVM, Visitation Nuns, and Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Marian communities share a common model; however, each one reflects a special spirituality. There are also similarities, e.g. Franciscan poverty and CHM humility, as well as differences among apostolic communities.

In their book, Christian Spirituality, Cunningham and Egan list characteristics of a particular spirituality. These include:

1. Emphasis or constants regarding one or other aspects of the Christian faith or life in the Spirit
2. A way of praying
3. Specific understanding of mission
4. A shaping document or rule
5. Preferred Biblical texts
6. Spiritual experiences which help persons to become more authentic followers of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

From 1858 to about 1920, Humility spirituality was based on the original 1858 Rule. From 1920 to 1966 the struggle and eventual success of efforts to obtain papal approval, tied to 1917 Code of Canon Law, resulted in CHM similarity to other apostolic communities. Since Vatican II in the early 1960s, CHMs have endeavored to return to the charism of their founders and to adapt to changing times.

Hence, in the discussion of each characteristic I have divided our history into three periods, even though each blends into the next. For each period I looked at characteristics as lived by CHMs and tried to distinguish those which are essential and those which relate to culture or were imposed.

## Emphasis on Humility

One-hundred-forty years ago Gerard, vicar general for Bishop Alexis Menjaud of Nancy, France, said to our founders regarding the name of the new institute:

You propose to give it the name of the Assumption of Mary. Permit me to submit thereupon my thoughts. I should prefer a name less grandiose. I would propose to name these daughters the Daughters or Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary,<sup>2</sup>

We cannot know why he made this recommendation. Perhaps he was thinking of the small number of sisters working in a rural area. Perhaps he reflected the commonly held view that women should be humble and obedient. Whatever the reason, the recommendation was prophetic.

Humility is the thread continuously woven through CHM history. It is the virtue described in the 1858 Rules and Regulations:

The sisters should constantly endeavor to practice this precious virtue -- humility, of which their living society bears the name. Not only should each daughter be humble, but the society should also be. Thus if the Lord who began it gives it growth, if he will let the grain of seed become a tree, he intends that its branches extend only into poor despised localities without resources after the example of our divine Lord who chose by preference to converse with the lowly and humble.<sup>3</sup>

In her description of the spirituality of Father Begel and Mother Magdalen, Carolyn Capuano, HM, says:

The principles and sentiments in the original rule, i.e., gratitude, love, service, egalitarianism, reverence for God, for self and one another reveal an underlying humility. It is this genuine humility which can be claimed as the founding charism. It is a humility which is truth, which is obedience. It is the humility which characterized prophet(ess) and publican, Mary and Joseph. It is the humility of which Christ Jesus is the paradigm.<sup>4</sup>

According to Capuano:

Having origins, as it does, in the mid-nineteenth century, Humility of Mary spirituality was birthed in struggle. The struggle was that of its deepest values and visions to push through prevalent expressions of self abdication, flight from the world, and a somewhat saccharine piety. The struggle was to keep alive all in lifestyle and companionship and apostolate which had surrounded the experience of God in Eucharist and neighbor, while attempting to write a rule of life which would gain the congregation ecclesiastical approval.<sup>5</sup>

This struggle is even more apparent in the 1923 and 1931 documents.

The 1923 document, which was our rule until 1931 when it became the Directory and Book of Customs, says only briefly:

Humility and zeal for souls should be distinctive virtues of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary. Let them endeavor to acquire a high degree of these virtues according to the treatises found in Rodriguez's Christian Perfection, the fullness and completeness of which are in proportion to the great importance of these virtues.<sup>6</sup>

The section on humility and charity in this document deals only with obedience and lack of charity. This emphasis on obedience rather than humility illustrates the efforts of the community to fit into a mold necessary for the papal approval which the sisters were seeking. It also reflects the prevailing Catholic culture and the teaching of Jesuit retreat masters who belonged to a group founded by a soldier, St. Ignatius Loyola.

The 1931 Constitution is more explicit:

As humility is the foundation of Christian virtues, the mark of a true disciple of Jesus Christ, and the support of the whole edifice of religious perfection, all the sisters from the moment of their entrance into the congregation shall labor unceasingly to acquire this virtue. ... They shall practice it interiorly by humble sentiments, despising themselves and considering the number of their sins, their weakness and their misery. It is not sufficient that they have this humility; even their hearts must embrace and practice these truths. Those who are really humble love to be humiliated, to be despised and to suffer all kinds of humiliations and contradictions. They shall practice it exteriorly by seeking or at least receiving with pleasure the most humble employments and most difficult burdens, showing great gentleness in their countenance and in their conversation and submitting humbly to the opinion and directions of others.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the writers of the Constitution added a paragraph distinctive to the Sisters of the Humility of Mary.

By constantly practicing humility, they will acquire an infinitely precious quality - - namely Christian simplicity which embodies straightforwardness, candor, and the absence of all affectation. This simplicity has always been -- and may the good God keep it always so -- the distinguishing characteristic of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>8</sup>

Through the years CHMs quoted this paragraph repeatedly as they assimilated its meaning into their lives; hence it is repeated in the 1990 Search and Service document:

The name of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary specifies Mary as the sisters' ideal. Her Magnificat is their model for loving and humble response to God's call. 'The sisters' distinguishing characteristic -- and may God keep it so -- is Christian simplicity, which embodies straightforwardness, candor, and the absence of all affectation.'<sup>9</sup>

The Magnificat, a Jewish prayer attributed to Mary by Luke as exemplifying her life in the Spirit, is a hymn of thanksgiving and praise to God, our supreme creator, who loves everyone no matter how insignificant. Its addition as the model for our response emphasizes incarnational theology. Mary's prayer was not turned toward herself. Mary was a free woman willing to do her part in the almost incredible message of salvation. I think our Lady of Guadalupe, Aztec though she is, represents the humility of Mary better than the picture of our Lady of Humility in the North American College Chapel in Rome.

### **Prayer**

Prayer, both liturgical and contemplative, is another characteristic of CHM spirituality. The early sisters attended mass when it was offered in the local parish. One of the main reasons they left Missouri was that even weekly mass was not available. Daily devotions of founding sisters consisted in morning and night prayer, noon examination of conscience, reading from scripture and the lives of the saints during noon and evening meals, fifteen minutes of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the hour prayer and the rosary. No particular time was set aside for the rosary, which was to be said in private while traveling, returning from work or during spare time.

Following the piety of the 19th century the sisters were devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Sisters were expected to make eight-day retreats, to confess sins and to take part in chapter of faults weekly.

Daily attendance at mass and multiple Sunday masses marked the second period, with emphasis on the sacrificial aspect. Sisters often received communion, had breakfast, then attended mass so they could begin teaching on time. Praying the rosary during the Latin mass was common in parishes. Devotional practices of the founding sisters continued until the 1960s, except that the rosary was prayed in common and a half hour of meditation in chapel and a variety of local prayers were added. The chapter of faults was held monthly.

After Vatican II, mass in the vernacular and recognition of the communal and Eucharistic meal aspects were means for greater appreciation and participation. Beginning in the early 1960s, CHMs began using the breviary for morning and evening prayer -- a practice which still continues as the only prayer in common besides the Eucharist. After the 1966 chapter, sisters became personally responsible for all personal prayer and spiritual reading. According to Search and Service:

Prayer is the loving expression of one's relationship to God. ... Both communal and private prayer are essential. Sisters are responsible for contributing to the vitality of communal prayer -- manifestation of the search dimension of their corporate vision. ... As she strives to make prayer permeate her whole day, each sister has the right to at least a half-hour of private prayer.<sup>10</sup>

Beside providing an annual retreat at Humility Center, the community has set aside a fund for individuals or groups to participate in retreats of their choice.

It took time for some sisters to rediscover their need for meditation and the Eucharist, possibly a reaction to earlier control and being taught methods of prayer which did not fit them. Pervasive patriarchy in the church is still a challenge. Like other late 20th century women, CHMs have become aware of sexism in interpretation of scripture and in the status of women in the church. This has resulted, on the one hand, in a healthier relationship to God. On the other hand, it is the source of struggle which is likely to continue for some time. According to Capuano the spirituality of CHM founders was feminist.

Marked as it is by the gospel vision of interdependence not domination, community not hierarchy, and inclusion not elitism, Humility of Mary spirituality is a striking example of a Christian spirituality which is also a feminist spirituality. ... Elements of (this) feminist spirituality ... have been present from the beginnings of Humility of Mary spirituality and can be found in the original rule and other early community documents.<sup>11</sup>

Many, but not all sisters, favor inclusive language.

According to the 1980 Sisters' Survey, CHMs placed higher priority on retreats, Bible study and meditation than on common prayer.<sup>12</sup> By and large, CHMs are reticent about sharing their spiritual journeys, probably due, in part, to training and culture. Except for the emphasis on the study of scripture in the original Rule -- which was unusual for the 19th century -- the private and common prayer of the Sisters of Humility has been and is similar to that of other sisterhoods.

## Mission

Use of the terms "mission" and "ministry" is comparatively recent. Ministry refers to work. Today, for us, the meaning of mission is broader, coming from "sending off" and related to the why of works.

The founding sisters "resolved, in return for (God's) love, to devote themselves to Him and His members ... their hearts, their minds, their work, their time, and their life."<sup>13</sup> Unlike many apostolic communities which were founded specifically for teaching, the founding CHMs were asked to devote themselves

... to all possible works of charity that they may find practicable, and by endeavoring to render themselves apt and disposed to all sorts of good works. ... yet they shall be perfectly willing to resign it (a work) whenever others better qualified to perform it shall present themselves.<sup>14</sup>

The specific works in the early days were instruction, prayer, and care and decoration of the parish church. The sisters also invited people to share their libraries. Each convent was expected to include a sister familiar with healing herbs.

CHMs have continued to minister in diverse ways through the years. Sisters who came to New Bedford, Pennsylvania, were adept in music, teaching and making lace. The orphans they brought with them gave evidence of their preferential love of the poor. Bishop Amadeus Rappe of Cleveland asked the New Bedford sisters to shelter orphan boys as well as girls. Beside doing the heavy work to drain their swampy farm the sisters, after receiving lessons in English, began teaching in nearby schools. During a smallpox epidemic, as well as on a regular basis, they nursed patients in their own homes and in their convent. Mother Anna Tabourat, the musician and first superior in the USA, and Mother Mary of the Angels Maujean, an artist with needle and thread and first superior in Missouri, were the models for a consistent history of sharing musical and artistic talents.

In Missouri the sisters concentrated on teaching, including music, in poor parishes. They also taught religion every Sunday, even when mass was offered only once or twice a month.

According to the 1931 Rule, the purpose of the community was "salvation of souls through the instruction of children and youth and the care of sick in hospitals."<sup>15</sup> In 1959, social service works were added. In Iowa and in Montana the sisters' ministry included education at elementary, high school and college levels; weekend and summer religious education; health care; housekeeping; and care of orphans.

The CHM mission statement adopted in 1990 states in part:

Like our founders, we strive to be attentive to the call of the spirit in the signs of our times, especially the needs of the poor and the powerless.

We commit ourselves as individuals and as a congregation to work for justice within the human family and to care for the earth itself.<sup>16</sup>

Since the late '60's the sisters have broadened their ministry to include a variety of works meeting the needs of the times. The Search and Service document says:

Although work alone does not define one's life and mission, the sisters' commitment to education, health, social issues, and pastoral concerns continues to include diverse and changing works to accommodate the needs of people, the signs of the times, and the mission of the local and universal church. The role of sisters includes both direct service and empowerment of others.<sup>17</sup>

According to the 1980 survey, more CHMs than the national average were ready and willing to participate with others in calling church and society to accountability for failing in justice. An earlier survey in 1967 had suggested the sisters were aware of social issues then, but by 1980 they had found work for justice is "not an easy role to play; it does not win friends immediately, though it is appreciated with gratitude in the long run. It calls for a strong community solidarity and group support."<sup>18</sup>

The shelter ministry, established as a community work in 1990, has grown by leaps and bounds. The associate program begun in 1971 and the Seeds of Hope volunteer program begun in 1981 have expanded the ministry of CHMs.

Prayer has always been a CHM ministry. From 1968 to 1994, CHMs have directed at least one house of prayer, usually sponsored by the community. In 1997, Marycrest International University established a spirituality center.

Preparation for their life and work has been evident from the beginning of the community. The original rule called upon the sisters to advance in solid knowledge of scripture, church history, as well as general education including music, arts, and crafts. Teachers were expected to obtain certificates, even though they were not required for sisters. The sisters in Missouri had scant opportunity for education; yet, Bishop John Joseph Hogan urged Mother Mary to impress the sisters about the need for continued study. He also arranged for competent retreat masters. It appears that education of sisters was not a priority beginning the last quarter of the 19th century until about 1905.

Although teaching certificates were not required for Iowa parochial school teachers, in 1915 St. Joseph Academy in Ottumwa provided the first private normal school to prepare both sisters and lay teachers to take examinations for teacher certification. Over 80 years ago some sisters received their B.A. degrees from Creighton University, usually through summer, correspondence and evening courses. Ottumwa Heights Junior College, founded in 1925, and Marycrest College, in 1939, were valuable resources for the education of sisters. Mother Mary Francis Mangan was untiring in her determination that Montana sisters be educated. Decades before the Sister Formation Conference called for the education of the whole person, CHMs studied liberal arts as well as professional courses and educators were invited to Ottumwa on weekends and during the summer to provide theology and philosophy courses. During the past 30 years a community fund has made education -- undergraduate, graduate, workshops, as well as retreats available.

In 1980, sisters were not familiar with Latin American and Black Theology.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the community emphasis on multicultures both in theory and practice has corrected this lack. Current multicultural awareness is demonstrated by sisters learning from and working with

people of varied cultures, support of sisters in non-traditional ministries, and outreach to those who speak languages other than standard English. During the past 30 years, when they served continuously in the diocese of San Cristobal, Chiapas, Mexico, sisters have served on a temporary basis in Panama, Mexico, Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil, Haiti, Congo, Ghana, Tunisia, Taiwan, and New Guinea.

The Sisters of the Humility of Mary were never wealthy and many struggled to find time for evening, Saturday and summer courses. Yet, they "are a highly trained and competent group of women, deeply involved in the activities associated with their work and ministry."<sup>20</sup>

### **Shaping Documents**

Rules and Regulations of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary approved in Nancy, France, in 1858 was the shaping document until about 1923 for the Iowa sisters and until 1944 for the Montana branch. In 1876 Bishop John Joseph Hogan, bishop of the St. Joseph, Missouri, diocese, corrected the sisters' translation from French into English at Mother Mary's request. It appears that around 1890 Bishop Henry Cosgrove of the newly established Davenport, Iowa, diocese of which Ottumwa was a part, approved a set of rules. A hand-written copy was given to sisters in each community house. These were probably based on the 1858 Rules and Regulations.

The 1923 rule was a step in preparation for papal approval. It consists of reflections supporting Vatican I theology. The effort to gain approval from the Vatican began around 1918. When the 1931 rule, copied from the Code of Canon Law, was approved, the 1923 rule became the Directory and Book of Customs. Approval from the Sacred Congregation of Religious was a priority at that time. It enabled the sisters to extend their ministry to more dioceses and was a mark of international church approbation. It took 13 years for the temporary approval to become "definitive" in 1944. Mother Mary Geraldine Upham told us that the sisters were informed the process would be shortened considerably if they offered money to the appropriate official. They refused because, she said, "That would not be honest." This is just one example of the common temptation to fail in honesty. Although the 1931 Rule was restrictive, the Humility spirit was irrepressible.

Search and Service, the current shaping document, was a result of study, prayer, community-wide discussion, and lived experience from 1971 to 1990, when it was approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

### **Scripture**

The 1858 rule is generously sprinkled with quotations from both Jewish and Christian Testaments. Most of them relate to love of God, neighbor, and one another in community. Several relate to talking too much, for example, the quotation from James that one who does not sin by speech is perfect.

In the 1923 Rule, quotations come chiefly from saints and spiritual writers of the day. The few quotations from scripture contained therein relate to Jesus' words at the last supper, common

effort, and good example to children. As might be expected in a document derived directly from church law rather than from theology or scripture, the 1931 Rule is without quotations from scripture.

Quotations from the 1990 Search and Service emphasize the priority of love of God and neighbor and point to the early Christian community as described in Acts of the Apostles as a model. The psalms are an integral part of sisters' common prayers. During my novitiate we studied the psalms and each one was expected to memorize one psalm of her choice.

### **Experiences**

Within 10 years after 1854, headquarters of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary moved from one continent to another. The community emigrated from Dommartin, France, to New Bedford, Pennsylvania, in the United States. From there a group went to Easton, Missouri, then to Ottumwa, Iowa, where the headquarters remained for more than 100 years. In 1912 a group established a motherhouse in Great Falls, Montana. Thirty-five years later the Ottumwa and Great Falls communities were amalgamated. In 1982 the community center was established in Davenport, Iowa. Each of these moves has been a spiritual experience shaping the sisters. Rather than being evidence of rootlessness, the moves were responses of followers of Christ to needs of people and, at times, needs of the sisters. They moved four times in Ottumwa as their numbers grew. The community is rooted in God's providence. The repeated trips into the unknown and fewer sponsored institutions on the part of the CHMs are two differences between the western and eastern branches of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary.

The 1957 total destruction by fire of the motherhouse, academy, and college in Ottumwa was also a shaping spiritual experience. Although no lives were lost, sisters and students escaped with almost nothing except the clothes they were wearing -- a dramatic lesson about dependence on God. The community had never been rich or large; now it was homeless.

Our current logo was designed to symbolize the pillar of fire which led the Israelites through the desert on their way to the promised land. Some sisters interpret it as representative of the Ottumwa fire -- and symbolically, of the fire of love for God and people, resulting in action or service. The flame also signifies the Spirit of God at Pentecost. Others see praying hands representing the contemplative or search aspect of our lives. Perhaps all interpretations are correct for a pilgrim community.

### **Conclusion**

Spirituality is one's internalizing of a religious tradition that is at once true to that tradition and also uniquely true to the individual. Spirituality lives from the inside out. It is primarily a personal relationship with the Holy One. ... Truly spiritual people treat others ... with honor and respect.<sup>21</sup>

In "A New Spirituality: Living the Charism of Humility," Carolyn Capuano, HM, said, "Genuine humility is truth."<sup>22</sup> Gretchen McKean, CHM, expanded this statement to say, "We can trace in



our original ... rule this truthful assessment of self which is the gift of humility possessed in great degree by Mother Magdalen and urged by her on her daughters."<sup>23</sup>

Already 450 years ago, St. Teresa of Avila had defined humility as truth. During informal discussions with sisters about the meaning of humility, not one defined it in terms of the 1923 or 1931 documents or, as dictionaries often do, "a feeling of inferiority and subservience." Instead, these statements were common: "humility is honesty"; "humility means what you see on the outside is what is really on the inside"; "the humble person is real, not a facade"; "humility combines vision with practicality"; "humility implies approachability and identification with all God's children"; "the humble person recognizes both her virtues and her vices"; "humility means openness, showing reverence and respect for others, gracious listening"; "the humble person has a sense of humor, is hospitable and sees things in perspective"; "it implies say what you mean and mean what you say"; and "along with charity, humility is basic for all followers of Christ."

Barbara Cooper, a Canadian sister, said:

Now, I think 'humility' is truth telling ... allowing myself to be aware of who I am in relationship to my Creator. ... Perhaps humility is the freedom to interact cooperatively with others instead of being competitive, because I know that each of us has our own special gifts for the Kingdom of God. ... Maybe it's the acceptance of the emptiness between goals, when one has been achieved and the next one isn't yet born ... or some of the other 'emptinesses' we experience in being human.<sup>24</sup>

The word "humble" comes from "humus" derived from the Latin meaning "earth" or "ground." Humus is matter essential for fertility of the soil. Humus is integral to the cycle of life. Plants need it for growth; humus comes from dead plants and animals. According to Mary Daniel Turner, SND de N, "Ash Wednesday's ritual of ashes and the accompanying prayer remind us our bodies are dust, "part of God's mysterious and wonderful creation."<sup>25</sup> Thus it is appropriate that in our mission statement we commit ourselves to care for the earth itself. "If anything is going to transform us in the 20th century, it is care for the earth."<sup>26</sup>

Like many Catholics, CHMs are only learning what care of the earth means. Along with other religious communities, we are emphasizing care of the earth through one or more actions such as recycling, responsible use of resources, alternative energy installation, restoration of forest and prairie, simplicity of life style, prayer, organic gardening, education and advocacy.

In the years since 1991, when our mission statement was approved, CHMs have begun to realize that we cannot resolve our environmental crisis without rediscovering its spiritual significance. Our habitual pragmatic approach needs to be undergirded by a change in attitude.

The spirituality of the western Christian churches concentrates on redemption. Along with the story of Christ's redeeming love, however, we need to pay attention to the lesson of the first chapter of Genesis: God created all things and pronounced them good.

Lack of humility is the original sin. The Genesis story of Eve and Adam tells us that they refused to accept their status as created beings. Today both church and society appear to favor a

model of control, based, in part, on the belief that God gave humans the right to exploit the earth and one another. On the other hand, the Spirit of God is calling us to reverence for our expanding universe, joyful appreciation for being part of God's creation, making connections, especially with the poor and those in need, and seeing all creation as sacred, not to be abused and misused.

This creation spirituality relates to both search and service. Obedience to our mission statement means prayer, learning more about God's beautiful and mysterious universe, and spreading the good news. Our work and way of protecting our environment --our service-- can be placed in the context of humility, reverence and passion for justice.

Our charism statement says, in part:

We, members of the Humility of Mary Community, are called to listen to the Spirit in our *changing world* and, like *Mary*, to live the Gospel message in *simplicity, humility and joy*.<sup>27</sup>

Without humility life is stunted; with humility "my spirit finds its joy in God, the living God."<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

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- 3 Rules and Regulations of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary (Nancy, France, 1858), VI Humility and Obedience.
- 4 Carolyn Capuano, HM, Humility of Mary Spirituality: An Articulation of Beginnings (Cambridge, MA. Weston School of Theology, 1988), 30.
- 5 Ibid., 35.
- 6 Directory and Book of Customs of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Ottumwa IA, 1923), 12.
- 7 The Constitution of the Sisters of the Holy Humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary (English translation of the official French) (Ottumwa, IA, 1948), 49.
- 8 Ibid., 50, 51.
- 9 Search and Service: Congregation of the Humility of Mary (Davenport, IA, 1990), 10.
- 10 Ibid., 37, 38.
- 11 Carolyn Capuano, HM, 35.
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- 13 Rules and Regulations, 1858, Introduction.
- 14 Ibid., Introduction.
- 15 Constitution, 1.
- 16 Search and Service, vii.
- 17 Ibid., 43.
- 18 Neal, 7.
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