



## INFORMATION

Vol. 19 | Iss. 3 | Fall 2010

### Religious Formation Conference

8820 Cameron Street  
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4152

301.588.4938 phone  
301.585.7649 fax

rfc@relforcon.org  
www.relforcon.org

### Editor: Violet Grennan, mfc

INFORMATION is published four times a year by the Religious Formation Conference, expressly for RFC members. For information about membership in the Conference, contact the National Office.

© 2010 Religious Formation Conference

### PERMISSION TO REPRINT

For permission to reprint articles from INFORMATION please contact the Editor at [vgrennan@relforcon.org](mailto:vgrennan@relforcon.org). When permission is granted, you will be asked to provide information on the circulation of the article and give "credit" to RFC. Permission is for a one time use only. RFC asks its member congregations to defer to the copyright of this publication.

TRANSFORMATION, the one-page bulletin provided by RFC as an ongoing formation resource, is created to be reproduced and sent to members of RFC member congregations.

### Design and layout:

Beth Ponticello, CEDC  
[www.cedc.org](http://www.cedc.org)

[www.relforcon.org](http://www.relforcon.org)

Please make note of the new member password for the website: transformation2010

# Congregational Documents: Resources and Tools for Formation

Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, PhD

**Editorial note:** *This article was originally written for use by the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Upon careful reading and consideration, RFC found its content holds value for congregations in general and can be applied to the design and implementation of their respective formation and/or communal reflection processes. May it be enjoyable and helpful reading for you.*

Our founders and foundresses were "social mystics"<sup>1</sup> — women and men deeply rooted in God and sent on mission. Their lives testify that our relationship with Jesus has direct social implications for God's people.

Religious congregations the world over open with inspiring narratives recalling the spirit, words and deeds of these social mystics. The constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas put it this way:

*Responsive in faith to God's mercy  
Catherine McAuley heeded the call of Jesus  
to reach out with courage and love  
to the needy of her time.  
She founded the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy,  
to involve women as religious  
in the mission of the church and the world.<sup>2</sup>*

Like Religious worldwide, the Sisters of Mercy, freely respond "to a call to serve the needy of our time."<sup>3</sup> Through our religious profession "we choose a life-long direction that unites us to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus"<sup>4</sup> thus becoming in our own day, in our own way, social mystics — women deeply rooted in God and sent on mission.

In the beginning months and years of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine McAuley, like all founders and foundresses, set about managing a spreading institute and devoting much of her time to those she was forming in the spirit and tradition of the new congregation.<sup>5</sup> Similarly today, congregations everywhere follow the lead of their own founding members and invest significant time, attention, and resources to the renewal of vocational discernment processes and the incorporation of new members... with the intention and hope of forming new social mystics!

In 2007, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas published *For the Love of Mercy*. Flowing from the wisdom of many, for example women in the formation process, their ministers, leadership and those who have accompanied new members in a variety of ways, this document outlines the normative process through which a woman in the United States journeys from initial contact and vocational discernment to incorporation leading to perpetual profession.

The leadership's cover letter accompanying *For the Love of Mercy* encouraged the membership, to engage in a lively exploration of this document. The hope was that this document would become for the Sisters of Mercy "living words filled with meaning, purpose, and inspiration."<sup>6</sup> This article suggests various ways the membership of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas might explore *For the Love of Mercy*, allowing it to re-energize their own lives as they welcome and accompany new members. Other congregations are invited to adapt the ideas suggested in this article as they design their own ways of engaging membership in animated discussions regarding the process of incorporating new members.

## A Way Forward: Play and Reflective Leisure

Lively conversations about *For the Love of Mercy* are enriched by the presence of both play and reflective leisure. Play — re-creative, re-energizing play is a most cherished human quality.<sup>7</sup>

Whether creative and spontaneous, or intense and serious, play is the natural way we humans learn what cannot be taught formally. In play we engage our whole selves, not just our thinking-selves. Through play we not only find self-expression easier but we experience our very selves in a deeper, more vibrant manner.

Catherine McAuley was fond of play. Her letters, especially "her playful letter to a Tullamore postulant in which she plots a future 'Nonsensical Club'"<sup>8</sup> demonstrates Catherine's own appreciation of play and humor in the life of the young congregation. Play makes its appearance once again in

Catherine's letter to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore in 1838:

*Don't let crosses vex or tease  
Try to meet all with peace & ease  
notice the faults of every Day  
but often in a playful way.<sup>9</sup>*

Catherine McAuley grasped intuitively that play ushers in a sense of lightness in otherwise difficult moments. Through play even the most serious topics and situations can be approached with a humor that liberates one's imagination and ways of relating. Ponder some of the early narratives of your own founder or foundress. Where do you note the presence of play in the service of encouraging and forming the early members of your congregation?

Like play, reflective leisure is re-creative and re-energizing. Hidden in plain view in the Constitutions of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas we read:

*The vocation to mercy calls each of us  
to daily personal prayer,  
to annual retreat and to times of  
solitude and reflective leisure.<sup>10</sup>*

Reflective leisure is a type of Sabbath-time.<sup>11</sup> Measured not in minutes but in moments, reflective leisure invites us to cultivate receptivity to God's presence with a light-grasp. Prior to reading your own congregational document on formation, find a few moments for reflective leisure and embark on a brief trip

at that moment, only the reader, only the contemplative. Since reading *Walking a Literary Labyrinth*, I have nicknamed reading and meditation "the siblings"!

Engaging in lively conversations around any congregational document begins with "the siblings". Invite "the siblings" for a visit. Experience, as if for the first time, how reading and meditation are one! Then, proceed with caution as you explore your own congregational documents where "scary words" abound!

## Scary Words

Kathleen Norris defines "scary words" as those words for which we hold inadequate understandings; that is, words which we radically *under*-understand! Scary words have that uncanny ability to stir within each person memories and emotions of which one may be often unaware. In turn, we often unknowingly reject certain words or phrases, keeping them at arm's length thereby failing to appreciate the in-depth meanings they hold for our lives.<sup>14</sup>

The following example is found in *For the Love of Mercy*. Be assured that your own congregational documents contain their own "scary words"! In *For the Love of Mercy* the word "study" appears 39 times. Now, as Sisters of Mercy, a congregation of apostolic women fully engaged *in* and passionately dedicated to the works of mercy, that is, the works of God, the document's emphasis on study may be scary to some. Sisters of Mercy may begin to wonder if they have missed a communiqué that we've become Dominicans!

## Engage in a bit of story-telling and discover how perhaps your own scary words create a bit of "holy disturbance" within – that uncomfortable feeling that often accompanies invitations to growth and development.

down memory lane. Recalling Catherine's or your founders fondness for play, allow memories of your own early years in the congregation to float into awareness. Attend not only to the narratives or stories that surface but your emotions as well. Whether we are aware of it or not our memories (both cognitive and affective) will significantly influence how we approach any congregational document, as well as our energy and interest in exploring these materials with others.

Keeping in mind the importance of play and reflective leisure, let's meet "the siblings" and discover how they may accompany us in a lively exploration of any congregational document.

### Meet "The Siblings"

*Several years ago while hurrying through a favorite bookstore I stopped dead in my tracks as I eyed the book *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading*.<sup>12</sup> Taking this thin volume in my hands I kept repeating its subtitle: A Spirituality of Reading. Immediately I knew I had found a kindred soul!*

Throughout the book the author reminds the reader of the numerous ways in which reading and meditation resemble one another. To start, both are usually done alone and in silence. The attention is focused; the whole self – body, mind and heart – engaged. One is centered; the energy is concentrated with no purpose other than the act itself (no multi-tasking here!). One is,

Many are surprised when they discover that one of the earliest definitions of "study" is "an act of contemplation."<sup>15</sup> The word "student" perhaps scarier still was defined early on as "an attentive observer."<sup>16</sup> As Sisters of Mercy, are we not called to study and to contemplate how to follow Jesus most authentically in his compassion for suffering peoples? Do we not wish to be attentive observers, as Catherine McAuley was, to the critical concerns of our own times?

Timothy Radcliffe, OP writes passionately about the importance of study for members of religious congregations today (of course, he is a Dominican). Radcliffe believes that study "is a way to holiness, which opens our hearts and minds to each other, builds community and forms us as those who confidently proclaim the coming of the [Kingdom]."<sup>17</sup> Echoing Simone Weil, he reminds us that study is not learning to be clever but learning how to listen<sup>18</sup> — how to listen attentively to God's presence and activity in ourselves, others, and the cosmos. Ultimately, the test of our study is this: does it bring Christ to birth; is the Incarnation, the Christ-event prolonged in our day through our own lives and ministries?

This brief survey of the word "study" illustrates how the reading, praying, and lively exploration of *For the Love of Mercy* or your own congregational document might be stifled if we fail to recognize our own "scary words" – words we have radically *under* understood. Take another trip down memory lane. With

continued on next page

“the siblings” at your side ask yourself: how have I experienced study in my own life? What stories and emotions surface as I recall my experience of study during my early years in Religious Life? Did my studies awaken deep wonder and curiosity about this way of life, or did I find them disconnected from my heart’s desire?

When gathering to explore your congregational documents don’t forget Catherine McAuley’s fondness for play. Whether you are a Mercy, Franciscan, Dominican, or Benedictine begin by sharing some of your own “scary words.” At times, words such as holiness, faith-sharing, even the word mercy can strike us as scary! Engage in a bit of story-telling and discover how perhaps your own scary words create a bit of “holy disturbance” within – that uncomfortable feeling that often accompanies invitations to growth and development.

As membership, our capacity to support and promote the vocation and incorporation processes as detailed in our congregational documents, will be strengthened to the extent that we name and claim our “scary words,” recognizing how they hinder creative and fruitful conversations with self and others.

## Talking to Yourself

Probability has it that you just talked to yourself as you eyed the title of this section. Perhaps it went something like this. “Talking to yourself? What does she mean? I do it all the time. Tell me others do too! Hmmm...maybe I’ll read just a bit further.”

Truth is people talk to themselves all the time! It is the way we humans interact with the universe around us as well as the universe that lies within. Through our questions large and small we enter ever more deeply into this adventure we call Religious Life.

To jump-start conversations with oneself and others about any congregational document, consider utilizing an adult method of learning known as “Horizon Analysis.”<sup>21</sup> The questions employed in Horizon Analysis are highly adaptable. Here the questions have been adapted for use with *For the Love of Mercy*. Members of other congregations are encouraged to adapt the questions to fit their own explorations.

- What attracts me, gives me energy as I ponder *For the Love of Mercy*? Why?
- What do I find myself resisting? Any connection to my own “scary words”?
- What challenged me beyond my current thinking and understanding regarding our vocation and incorporation program?
- What further questions arise for me as a result of pondering this document?
- What action step(s) would I need to take in order to embrace my congregation’s current vocation and incorporation program?

Notice the “inside-out” progression of the questions. First, all growth and development whether physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or spiritual, requires energy. So, what in the document attracts your heart and gifts you with renewed energy for the charism? Likewise, all development encounters resistance. Resistance is a natural component of life and has a right to exist. Don’t be surprised that moving beyond current thinking and understanding about vocation and incorporation programs encounters some resistance. Name and claim what you resist.

How does your resistance, in light of your own experience, make sense? Finally, what further questions arise and what concrete action steps are you willing to take in order to embrace the current process with renewed energy and enthusiasm?

Horizon Analysis questions help us to talk our way through our congregational documents, not mindlessly, but precisely by placing our current vocation and incorporation processes in conversation with our own lived experiences. Yet, don’t be surprised if further questions arise for consideration. Long have we known that asking the deeper questions is a most human act;<sup>22</sup> an act capable of leading us, like all of our founders and foundresses, deeper into the heart of God.

## Questions Deeper Still

Many are familiar with the work of Parker J. Palmer. For decades he has been inspiring teachers at every level, encouraging them to realize that the more familiar they are with their own “inner terrain,” the more surefooted their teaching and living will become!<sup>23</sup> For the past several years I have drawn on Palmer’s work in my own ministry with initial and ongoing formation. In particular, I have found his book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* to speak passionately to the concerns and hopes of those who accompany new members.

Early in *The Courage to Teach* Palmer raises several questions about what constitutes effective and not merely efficient models of education. Palmer suggests that our conversations about educational reform are only as good as the questions they generate.

Similarly, over the past several years, the leadership of many congregations, those ministering in vocation and incorporation, as well as general membership, has been generating questions about the processes of vocation discernment and incorporation. For the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the document *For the Love of Mercy* is the fruit of these conversations about what constitutes *effective* and not merely *efficient*, ways of accompanying those discerning a call to Mercy.

Congregations recognize that “while some perpetually professed sisters are charged with the primary responsibility for the incorporation process, *all of us* are called to share our life experiences with new members.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Palmer’s questions, adapted to our own inquiry, will lead us even further along the road of authentic renewal and revitalization, not only of our processes of discernment and incorporation, but our very selves.

Once again, with a touch of play and reflective leisure, explore with others the following questions. Notice how they lead us into our own “inner terrain,” the heart of our own charism.

### What?

The question most commonly asked is the “what” question – **what** are the important elements and experiences to include within vocation discernment and incorporation processes?

### How?

When the conversation goes a bit deeper, the “**how**” question is asked – which “methods” are most useful when accompanying an individual through the process of discernment and incorporation?

## Why?

Occasionally, when individual and communal reflections go a bit deeper still, the “why” question presents itself – for what purpose and to what ends are we “doing what we do” in vocation discernment and incorporation?

## Who?

Equally important, but perhaps not asked often enough is the “who” question. Who are we as Religious women and men who invite individuals to recognize the spirit of our founders or foundresses as their own? How does the quality of our own lives, our own living of the charism, encourage others to join us in extending “God’s reign of love over human hearts.”<sup>25</sup>

Frances Warde, an early associate of Catherine McAuley’s, was keenly aware of the importance of the “who” question. Her own attraction to Mercy was mediated through the person of Catherine McAuley herself! In a letter dated 1879 she wrote:

You never knew her. I knew her better than I have known anybody in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it meant to be a Sister of Mercy, to see the world and its people in terms of God’s love; to love everybody who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on. It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.<sup>26</sup>

This letter written a full 38 years after Catherine’s death, poignantly reveals the life-long influence that Catherine’s very person had on Frances Warde. Perhaps less readily recognized, though of equal importance, was Frances Warde’s own capacity to internalize Catherine’s vision, and consequently, as a Sister of Mercy herself, be instrumental in bringing the Mercy vision to generations that came after her.<sup>27</sup>

Reflect upon your own congregational narratives. You will surely find individuals who, like Frances Warde, recognize the importance of the “who” question in mediating the charism of the congregation.

Today, we stand on the shoulders of Catherine McAuley, Frances Warde and all early members of our congregations. As in every age, we are now responsible for mediating the vision of the founder to a new generation of membership. Through playful exploration and conversation around *For the Love of Mercy*, or your own congregational documents, we will strengthen our capacity to support our Sisters and Brothers who work directly in the area of vocation and incorporation. Likewise, it will assist all of us as we welcome new members into our congregation.

Congregational documents are never composed in order to be filed away in some binder or file cabinet. Rather, these documents are meant to capture in a moment what we hold dear and wish to enfold in our daily living as Religious. Let us commit ourselves to engaging in lively discussions around our congregational documents. With “the siblings” at our side let us place our own experience of formation in conversation with our congregation’s present process. Though at first glance the current process may appear quite different from our own don’t be deceived. Like Catherine and all founders of Religious congregations we have all been called to be social mystics – women and men deeply rooted in God and sent on mission!

## Endnotes

- 1 Susan Rakoczy, IHM. *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), p. 38.
- 2 Constitutions, Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, §1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, §2
- 4 *Ibid.*, §21.
- 5 M. Joanna Regan, RSM and Isabelle Keiss, RSM. *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, First Sister of Mercy* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), p.43.
- 6 *For the Love of Mercy: Institute Vocation and Formation Program for the United States. Opening Letter from Institute Leadership Team* (August 1, 2007).
- 7 Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2000) and Franco Imoda, SJ, *Human Development: Psychology and Mystery* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press).
- 8 Mary C. Sullivan, RSM (Ed.). *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841* (Baltimore, MD: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), p. 65.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 10 Constitutions, §16.
- 11 Josef Pieper. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952) and Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee! A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).
- 12 Nancy Malone, OSU, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).
- 13 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).
- 14 Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, “The Vow of Consecrated Poverty and Other Scary Words,” in *Horizon: The Journal of the National Religious Vocation Conference*, 28:4 (Summer, 003), p. 13-16.
- 15 *Oxford English Dictionary*, John Simpson and Edmund Weiner (Eds). (Oxford University Press 1989).
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Timothy Radcliffe, *OP Sing A New Song The Christian Vocation* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publisher, 1999), p. 55.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 56
- 19 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 20 Scary words abound in our every day vocabulary! Do we notice them and the way they influence us on an affective level? Keenan defines ‘mercy’ as our willingness to enter into the chaos of another O’Malley understands ‘holiness’ as a synonym for successful, fulfilled, well-rounded. See James F Keenan, SJ, *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), p. xiii and William J. O’Malley, SJ “Accessible Holiness” in *America*, 197/3, p. 20-23.
- 21 *Religious Formation Conference Resource Manual, Volume II*, (Silver Spring, MD: Religious Formation Conference, 2004), p. 16.
- 22 See Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 31-35.
- 23 Parker J. Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 5.
- 24 Constitutions, §45 (emphasis added).
- 25 *Ibid.*, §84.
- 26 Frances Warde, Letter written to Sr. Mary Gonzaga O’Brien Newcastle upon Tyne, England 1879. This letter was reproduced in the 150th Anniversary booklet of the Institute of Our Lady Mercy, Great Britain.
- 27 Brenda Dolphin, RSM, Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, Cait O’Dwyer, RSM, ‘Leadership in Consecrated Life Today’ (Chapter 14) in *Formation and the Person: Essays on Theory and Practice*. (Eds.) Alessandro Manenti, Stefano Guarinelli and Hans Zollner. (Paris: Peeters Press, 2007), p. 257-280.

---

Mary Pat Garvin, RSM, Ph.D. is a psychologist working with religious congregations in the areas of initial and on-going formation, facilitation and consultation.