

CHALLENGE OF THE CHARISM IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY: PART I

Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill
December 13, 1986
Bette Moslander, CSJ

I have been invited by the members of your Commission for Justice to share a few reflections with you this morning and this afternoon on our charism of unity as Sisters of St. Joseph at this time when the world in which we live is so deeply divided. I have been invited to situate these reflections in the context of our call as Christian believers to respond to, to overcome, to reject the manifold expressions of discrimination and oppression, that constitute the reality of our times. It is a challenging task you have taken upon yourselves as Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill. I admire and respect your courage in addressing this very threatening and unpleasant reality. Indeed discrimination and oppression is a fact of our daily existence.

It is so close to us that we can live in it almost oblivious of its manifestations. As we open our minds and hearts and eyes to the reality of the divisions in our own lives and in the world, we discover, sometimes to our dismay, that we are ourselves both victims and oppressors in this disunity, in this complex divided world in which we live.

The purpose, as I understand it, of your decision to address this question of discrimination and divisiveness during this year is so that you might raise to the level of clearer consciousness the multiform ways in which you are caught up in, and in some cases entrapped by, forces within your own lives and in the larger society that create disorder, disunity, and discrimination. As you recognize and identify these areas within the ambience of your individual and corporate experience, you will better be able, if you choose to do so, to release the unifying, reconciling, healing force of our charism, the grace that is yours by virtue of your vocation as Sisters of St. Joseph.

We live now in a period of cultural transition, of transformation of consciousness. The threat, indeed even the probability, that we can unleash upon ourselves and our planet the horror of total self-annihilation and planetary destruction, forces us to lay aside our time worn prejudices and our narrow minded alienations, and open ourselves to a revolution of our thought and our behavior patterns so that the unitive, creative power of our God can be unblocked and released and we and this planet can be made whole again.

We live in a time when a global consciousness is aborning. This is a time of profound breakdown in culture and civilization that has nurtured us and shaped us both as individuals and as communities. All around the world, social scientists, physicists, anthropologists, ecologists are calling for a profound planetary revolution. We live, I believe, at the end time of the modern era and on the threshold of a new consciousness so comprehensive that it encompasses the entire planet.

In the midst of this monumental shift in consciousness we, as Sisters of St. Joseph, ask ourselves how our charism and our mission fit? How does the grace that is our particular charism respond to this global reality? Is there reason to believe that this grace we claim as our gift, our reason for being, this grace of unity and reconciliation, of healing and reconciliation, of healing and making one in the midst of diversity and even conflict is still alive in us? Is the charism, the grace of our vocation able to rise to the magnitude of the challenge inherent in this new global consciousness?

Are we free enough, resourceful enough, simple enough to let go of the alienations which our culture, our history, and our traditions have imposed upon us?

I believe that we are only at the threshold of a new consciousness which will require of us, as Sisters of St. Joseph, more radical, more revolutionary change than any of us have yet lived through. I believe this because as a congregation our charism always calls us, lures us into the heart of the human community. And it is precisely the human community that is involved in a critical paradigmatic shift of consciousness that will require of us continued change if we intend to remain ministerially present with and for the people.

Living, as we do, in the midst of massive and traumatic cultural change that contributes to human alienation on an unprecedented scale, we must ask ourselves honestly what our charism means in this kind of a world. As women religious empowered by a grace, a charism for engaging in communion and reconciliation do we recognize the kairos moment of our time in human history? Are we willing to undertake a new enterprise, to become co-creators and evangelizers of a new culture? Have we enough faith and confidence in one another and in the presence of God in our lives that we commit ourselves toward making contribution toward a more human, more just world society; a more peace filled, more equitably shared planet?

We have been saying to ourselves during these years of renewal that the Sisters of St. Joseph are women who live and work that all people may be united with God and with one another in and through Christ Jesus. The charism, which at times seems so elusive and undefinable, is nothing more and nothing nothing less, than the grace, the unmerited graciousness of God that empowers and enables us to live and work in such a manner that unity is enhanced and made perfect in respected diversity; that communion is possible between persons and races and religions and cultures; that separation from the "dear neighbor" is unthinkable and intolerable on any grounds.

During this past summer we celebrated the 150th anniversary of our coming to the North American continent. In the course of that Federation event, I was invited to-reflect on our charism and at that time I was deeply aware that we must be faithful to the journey we began over 150 years ago, a journey which has demanded of us that we integrate the original inspiration of our Medaillian heritage and the practical experience of our American tradition. I am convinced that this integration is one of a mystical spirituality of "aneantissement" which I prefer to call "self-emptied love for God and for humankind without distinction" with the pragmatism of apostolic action in the face of a pluralistic, multi-ethnic, racially diverse human community which must face up to the challenge of this "new age". In the union of these two realities, the mysticism of "aneantissement" and the pragmatism of apostolic action, something new is being created among us. I have referred to this "new thing" as a contemplative life stance issuing in compassion.

For those of you who were present at the Federation Event in June, or who have, perhaps, listened to the video tape of my presentation there, some of what I wish to say about this may be repetitious. I ask you to bear with me if that is the case because I am convinced that coming to understand this contemplative life stance that lies at the heart of our vocation is essential if we are to address realistically the absolute imperative that we must be women freed of the shackles of personal prejudice and discriminatory thought or behavior, if we are to be true to who we are as Sisters of St. Joseph.

A contemplative life stance is both a transformed consciousness and a transforming one. It calls for complete self-opening and self-emptying; a total listening, a stillness, a solitude before God, the All Holy, who is in all things and in whom all things have their being. The outcome of such contemplation is a total abandonment to, and immersion in, the created reality to which one belongs. Such a contemplative life stance is the breathing-in and breathing-out experience of which Meister Eckhart speaks. That is, one becomes God's breath inhaled into the great heart of God where one is created, redeemed and made holy and whole; and exhaled into the heart of the world where one is immersed in and one with the human community. The in-and-out of our life keeps us utterly within God and among the people. Perhaps we may say even more truly that it keeps us utterly among God and within the people.

If it is true that the charism empowers us to live the mission of unity, then it is likewise true that the cost of that charism on our part is a self emptied love. Such self-emptiedness requires of us, not the self-discipline of a vigorous asceticism, but rather the total transcendence of the ego-self. What is required is the opening of self, listening to, communication with "the other", whether the other is God, "the dear neighbor", or the social, cultural or political environment which constitutes one's reality. Such transcendence of the ego-self requires a "letting go" and a "letting be" that makes possible authentic union. This "letting go" and a "letting be" is rooted in a profound respect for "the other" and a determination to promote understanding, reverence and acceptance across the barriers of strangeness, diversity and alienations. It is not our call to organize and create some grand design on the world or its social systems. It is our call, our vocation, as Sisters of St. Joseph to lose ourselves in God, to give over, to abandon, to submit to the discipline of great love which God lavishes on us. We are a people whose single purpose and mission is the meeting of the other to accomplish union.. And this is only possible if we are willing to let go of the ego-self, of our security, our certitudes and cross over the boundaries that separate us from one another. Authentic union, communion, reconciliation requires a dialogic stance. It is a dialogue of self-emptied love. We know that we cannot do it. We know that only God can do it in us, only God can enable us to cross the boundaries of self and allow the other to cross over our boundaries. Prejudice, subtle or overt; discrimination on the basis of age, or color, or religion, or race, or language; bigotry or intolerance leveled against any person or group of persons effectively seals shut our boundaries and blocks the charism of unity and reconciliation. God so "lets go" of any possession of us, so "lets-be" the freedom of our choices that we have within us the power to effectively block the fulfillment of Christ's own prayer ". . . that they may be one, as you God and I are one . .

If, on the other hand, we give ourselves over to that contemplative life stance that results in a life of compassion, there can be no dualism, no irrational suspicion or hatred of particular groups or races or religions. Contemplation, the welcoming of the other into the self-emptied heart expresses itself in the ministry of presence to all of creation. This ministry of presence, to the degree that it touches the inner depths of one's being, reforms a person by compassion, in compassion and for compassion. And compassion impels one into authentic solidarity with others and with the earth, with the planet and with the entire universe. Such compassion will call us into works of mercy and justice. In Sacred Scripture, in the ministry and in the person of Jesus Christ, compassion is never simply a speculative idea or a matter of "feeling". Rather, it is clear that God is present in the relationships we form with those who suffer. Perhaps a modern interpretation of the judgment scene of Matthew's gospel might read, "I was black and you respected me as your equal. I was Hispanic and Asian and you voted for me. I was a Guatemalan refugee and you gave me refuge from the law of your land which would drive me out. I was homosexual and you loved me with non-judgmental love. I was a murderer and you refused to

take my life. I was a Communist and you believed in my good will. I was a drug addict and you did not lose faith in me as a person. I suffered from Aids and you touched me."

The profound revelation of the Gospel is that God is present in all of created reality; that I am not only I, but that we are one another; that we are indeed also in and of God. As Christians we come to know that God suffers in our suffering; that God knows solace and mercy when we express mercy toward one another.

The connection between contemplation and compassion is inseparably intimate! The breathing-in and breathing-out of God's love in the entire creation is an irresistible impulse toward one-ness! toward unity! Is this not at the very heart of the mission and the purpose of the Congregation of St. Joseph, this Congregation which has been called the Congregation of the Great Love of God? But we cannot settle for mediocrity or banal complacency in the living of this mission. There can be no compromise with intolerance, or prejudicial judgments, or prudish and condescending do-goodism.

We dare not sentimentalize compassion. To do compassion is to do justice. The love to which we are called is the love that exists only in authentic, honest relationships or it is not love at all. Such love is a commitment, born out of the fecund emptiness of the welcoming heart, to give ourselves unreservedly, both personally and corporately, over to solidarity with and defense of the weak ones of our world, the aliens, the oppressed, the poor. They and we are one. They have the right to make a claim on us. For us love and justice are inseparable. There is no Christian charity unless there is first radical justice in all of our relationships. There can be no condescension, no patronizing. Charity cannot be called upon to cover up, to deny, or to pretend that justice is being done, when in fact we have drawn lines, erected barriers or closed doors on our brothers and sisters for whatever cause.

The vocation to unifying love is a vocation to justice-making. It is a call to the re-creation of societal structures, to a struggle with social evil, to confrontation with the forces of violence, of war-making, of fear and of alienation. Our charism enables us, empowers us to engage in the most unifying of all actions--identification and community with those who must struggle for justice. But we can block out our awareness of who our neighbor is who struggles for justice. We must train ourselves to be alert and awake to the world around us, to be sensitive to what is going on in our lives, in our neighborhood, in our city, in our county, in our state, in our country, in the world. We cannot hide in the comfortable environment of our convent homes closing our eyes and ears and hearts to those who experience personal and systemic oppression. We must make hard choices to stay alert to the ways in which various systems, both civil and ecclesiastical, violate women, the aged, the poor, people of color, people of the third world. We must even become more conscious of the ways in which our life style violates and rapes the very earth and space on which and in which we live. We will not experience within ourselves the compassion and the urgency that will move us to justice if we isolate and protect ourselves from the reality of the life of our people.

Authentic compassion flows out of a self-emptied heart, but it is an emptiedness we come by, not through asceticism or detachment nor abstract contemplation. It comes to us through the overwhelming presence of God in the under-privileged, the oppressed, the sick, the dying, the lonely, the abandoned, the suffering of our world.

Authentic compassion, which is the fruit of a contemplative life stance, will be effectively blocked by prejudicial and discriminatory mind sets, even when such mind sets are at the deeper than conscious level. This brings us directly to the question at hand. How are we to raise to the level of consciousness an awareness of those areas in which we are subject to distortions of perception that lead to behavior that is prejudicial and discriminatory?

It is probably true to say that all of us, without exception, have more than one prejudice or discriminatory perceptive field. Those prejudices of which we are aware we can do something about. It is those that are hidden under layers of denial, or projections, or self-deceit that control our behavior and prevent us from fully exercising the charism of unity that is ours by virtue of vocation. How do we get in touch with those dark forces within ourselves that blind us to truth and to love? As I ask myself that question, as I wrestle with identifying with my own shadow self in this matter, I am mindful of the Apostle Paul's struggle:

Sin, in order to be seen clearly as sin, uses what is good to bring about my death . . . I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate. When I act against my own will by that very fact, I agree that the law is good. This indicates that it is not I who do it but sin which resides in me. I know that . . . the desire to do right is there but not the power. What happens is that I do, not the good that I will to do, but the evil I do not intend. But if I do what is against my will, it is not I who do it, but the sin that dwells in me. This means that even though I want to do what is right, a law that leads to wrongdoing is always ready at hand. My inner self agrees with the law of God, but I see in my body's members another law at war with the law of my mind; this makes me the prisoner of the law of sin in my members. What a wretched person I am. Who can free me from this body under the power of death? All praise to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! So with my mind I serve the law of God, but with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:13... 25)

We all know that when Paul speaks of "the flesh" he is not speaking of sexual sin. He is speaking of that pull of our false self, the dark self, the ego self that can control our psyches and our behavior and of our need to become aware of the power that it holds over us.

If we apply this to the question at hand it becomes clear that the overcoming of prejudice, of misjudgment, of narrow-mindedness is a life long struggle. The more conscious we can become of the subtle and hidden movements of oppression within ourselves, the less likely we are to be trapped by our own dark shadow. But the truth is that none of us will probably ever be completely free of prejudice and discriminatory behavior. Hopefully, if we are in earnest about our desire to be freed from prejudice, we will, be willing to recognize within ourselves those ways in which we categorize, avoid, pre-judge, or condemn other persons, or groups of persons; races or religions; ages or sexes or physically or mentally deformed or retarded. Recognition of our inner prejudices is the first step toward freedom, that inner freedom which will then make it possible for us to pray in truth, with Jesus Christ ". . . I pray that they may be one in us that the world may believe that it is you that sent me." It is interesting to reflect 'on the implications of that prayer of Christ. It seems to be saying that faith in Jesus Christ hinges on whether or. not unity, true communion becomes a reality within the human race. What astounding implications that has for those of us who claim that the charism of our very vocation as Sisters of St., Joseph is Unity and Reconciliation.

Before I close my reflections for this morning, and you yourselves begin your own reflections on this important matter, I would like to share with you just a few thoughts about what I believe to be some of the principal causes of prejudice or bias or discrimination. I am not a social psychologist and so what I share here is based simply on my own observations of my own behavior and the behavior of others. You may have better insights on this matter than I have and if so perhaps we can discuss that when you return after the break. Briefly allow me to sketch out what I believe may be three of the major causes of this distortion in our thought and behavior.

1) One of the principal causes I believe is fear. But fear always has an object. We always fear something someone some loss some unpleasant situation Some prejudice or discrimination arises out of a fear of losing one's own position or status. We are all aware that social scientists attest to the fact that the "in group" in a society is often discriminatory toward the newest corners into the society because the new immigrants, aliens, refugees pose a threat to the economic status, or the political power of the status quo. The newcomer is "alien" in some way, outside of the known and therefore "fearful".

Or the fear may focus on a loss of security. Today in the Church there are a lot of signs of prejudicial and discriminatory behavior. Such behavior is widespread among certain groups of people and even in high ranking prelates. It touches our own lives when we, for example, refuse to consider difficult questions, refuse to allow certain questions to be raised, refuse to even consider the possibility that things might be different than they are now.

Fear can center in on a race of people. It can center on the gay community. It can center on the young or the aged. It can center on the color of a person's skin, or the texture of their hair, or the color of their eyes.

2) A second cause of prejudice and discrimination is I believe simple ignorance. Ignorance and fear are often closely related factors in producing discrimination. Much of the discrimination against Aids victims for example is based on pure ignorance. The recent flap over the comment of the Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone revealed the deep seated ignorance that the Prime Minister has of the multiracial culture of the U.S. and the implications of such a statement. Most of the current terror over the contagion of Aids is rooted in ignorance in spite of massive efforts to educate the public, and so we have people wanting to quarantine thousands of U.S. citizens who have the disease or the possibility of the disease.

3) A third cause of prejudice and discrimination is I think lack of personal self-knowledge which manifests itself in defensive strategies, projection and self denigration.

Unfortunately, we are all susceptible to this particular source of hidden prejudices. Self-knowledge is a life long process of growth. As we gradually come to know our own inner selves and to become aware of our hidden and devious motivations, we discover that what we most dislike in another, or which we find alienating and off-putting in another's behavior is really a projection of unwanted attitudes and emotions that really exist in ourselves. The psychological phenomenon of projection frequently results in our attributing to others the very characteristics which lie hidden in our own unconscious. Projected images are distorted, often exaggerated, and most likely fallacious. Sometimes discrimination against other individuals or groups of individuals arise out of our own deep feelings of inadequacy, inferiority and insignificance. In clouded self-knowledge we are frequently unaware of these negative feelings about ourselves

because we have idealized our own self image. We live in the mistaken conviction that the idealized self is more real than the real self and we bolster and reinforce the idealized self by finding the enemy without, rather than the enemy within.

In summary, then, for now I am suggesting that prejudice and the inclination toward discrimination, whether that is manifest in an individual person, or in a corporate group, is frequently caused by fear, or ignorance or lack of self-knowledge. None of us are exempt from these deeply rooted sources of our own behavior. No society, no group, whether it is a local community, a congregation, a state, or a church, is exempt from these sources of prejudice and discrimination.

For Reflection:

- Recall a time, situation, set of circumstances in which you experienced yourself as the victim of prejudice or discrimination. Be as concrete as possible in your recall of the circumstance. How did you feel about yourself in this situation? What did you do about it?
- Can you remember a time in your life when you consciously overcame some prejudice you had toward another person or group of persons? Be as concrete as possible in your recall of the change that took place in yourself. What caused you to change? How did your behavior change?
- Are you aware of any prejudice that you currently hold which you would like to be freed of? Can you identify the cause of your prejudice? Be as concrete as possible. What steps might you take to deal with this unfreedom in your life? Are you willing to take those steps?
- What three areas of discrimination do you think most seriously distort our nation today? What can be done about it?
- What three areas of discrimination do you think most seriously distort our Church today? What can be done about it?

CHALLENGE OF THE CHARISM IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY: PART II

Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill

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Introduction

This morning we spent some time reflecting on our charism of unity and reconciliation and the cost of that self-emptiedness which calls us to a total transcendence of self. We noted that such self-transcendence requires a "letting go" and a "letting be" that makes possible authentic union. We reflected, however briefly, on how the integration of the mystical "aneantissement" of the Medaillian documents jointed with the pragmatic activism of our U.S. cultural experience creates a "contemplative life stance" issuing in compassion".

If we enter into this 'contemplative life stance' in the face of the prevailing culture and power systems that are operative in our lives today, we come face to face with multiform expressions of discrimination, intolerance and prejudice. This afternoon I suggest that we consider some of those areas in our lives and in the life of our congregations which present special challenges to our charism of reconciliation and unity.

I will address five of the major forms of alienation that exist in our society at large, calling attention to the varied ways in which these alienations develop discriminatory mind sets which are often subtly incorporated into our personal lives and choices and into the corporate life of our congregations. There would be, I am sure, other major areas of alienation where discrimination and prejudice run rampant, but time and energy has its limits. Our exploration today will, perhaps, assist us to become more aware of other prevailing systemic evils which affect the lives of our people and contribute toward oppression and injustice toward individuals and groups within our society.

Nationalism

By nationalism I refer to that mind set that assumes that the special interests, the well being, the culture, the language, the policies and the rights of one's own nation are superior to, and take precedence over, all other national entities. It is manifest in the urge and the drive to be Number One in terms of economic power, military supremacy, and international dominance. It is expressed in jingoistic slogans like "My country right or wrong", or "If you don't like it leave it", or the "Manifest Destiny" syndrome. It tends toward self protectionism in the international market place, ideological self-righteousness before the world courts, preoccupation with national security at the expense of citizens rights, limitations on the freedom of the press, and disregard for the rights of individuals. It can lead to a kind of nationalistic idolatry which goes far beyond that natural and authentic love for one's country and homeland.

We are, I believe, at this time in our country's history, caught up in a kind of nationalistic idolatry which seeks to place the nation beside God (if not above God) as the standard by which the world, other peoples, other nations, indeed even space itself is measured. The prevailing mind set assumes that if a thing detracts from the power or prestige of our country or challenges the moral justification of our national and international policies and actions, it is suspect. Closely

aligned with this spirit of extreme nationalism is a rigid religious fundamentalism expressed by some sects which assumes an all-knowing judgment of all that does not fit the narrow categories of their own preconceived interpretation of reality.

The extreme nationalism, to which I refer, refuses to see the policies, principles and institutions of our nation from the viewpoint of the victims in the third world and in the developing countries, and certainly not in the lives of our so called "enemies" behind the Iron Curtain.

Nationalism, as we are experiencing it today, has in recent months expressed itself in infiltration and harassment of church groups engaged in sanctuary or in the peace movement. The law of the land, for example immigration law, is interpreted in favor of those countries in which our own nation holds a vested economic interest and in which we have made a military investment. We support military dictatorships which protect the economic investments of our large corporations even at the expense of hundreds of thousands of their own citizens seeking land reform and more equal distribution of wealth.

The mind set of extreme nationalism renders suspect every person who fails to render uncritical allegiance and unconditional obedience to the policies and principles of the nation. There are numerous indications that the last few years have generated a national climate that moves dangerously close to a kind of cult of nationalism.

Such a development is divisive and separative. It generates the potential for renewed McCarthyism, witch hunts and domestic surveillance. It creates a situation in which blacks, hispanics and asians (people of color) and those who stand in solidarity with these groups are suspect. The emergence of survivalist groups - the Klu Klux Klan, Posse Comitatus and vigilanti border patrols - are the logical outcome of this mentality carried to its absurd extreme.

In the midst of such forces, how are those of us who are graced to be bearers of God's reconciling love to respond? Surely it is imperative for us to be fully aware of this drift in national consciousness. Surely our charism requires of us that we do not allow our own lives or the corporate life of our congregation and its membership to be swept along in this national idolatry. Faced with such divisive, discriminatory, separate forces we are called, I believe, to question without compromise, to challenge the status quo, to engage in the political process in an effort to change the direction of our nation. Further, we must become keenly aware of the ways in which our own personal and corporate lifestyles contribute to the consumer society which undergirds and supports this development in our country. Otherwise we become co-participants in creating a society which is divided and separated, a society in which discrimination and prejudice are nurtured by greed, self interest, and rampant individualism. We may find ourselves distressed because it seems too large an order; we feel powerless in the face of the overwhelming power and complexity of corporate structures, political institutions, legal systems, military blocks, technological advances, and competing ideologies. The fact remains, however, that while the systems we have built are often beyond our control, we are all implicated in the guilt if we remain silent and if we allow our own personal and corporate lives to be co-opted by such powers.

Sexism

By the term sexism I refer to that world view or mind set which assumes in theory or in practice, overtly or subtly, that women are by nature and by social conditioning inferior to men. Sexism manifests itself in economic, social, political and cultural structures and systems which deny, diminish and distort the full humanity of women. It manifests itself in complex ways in the attitudes and mind sets of both women and men.

There is no question that both the Church and, the larger society have been shaped and structured by an unchallenged patriarchalism. Slowly, painfully we are becoming aware of the injustices and inequities built into both civil and ecclesiastical systems. Some significant steps have been taken in this century to eradicate the most obvious oppressive inequalities in employment, education and political access in the civil structures.

The struggle to break through the mind set of sexism is difficult for it requires of us a radical conversion. The recognition of sexism as sinful will bring about the total collapse of the patriarchal system both in civil and ecclesiastical institutions. The magnitude of such a conversion is greater than the conversion of the Christian conscience regarding the sinfulness of slavery, That conversion brought about the collapse of an economic and political system built on the ownership of black human beings by the dominant white class.

This conversion is difficult for some women, perhaps most of all for some Church women. It requires that all of the ways in which we have been taught to be pleasing and acceptable to men and socialized to fit into male-created structures must be recognized. 'We must recognize the ways in which these culturally entrenched modes of behavior contribute to our own seduction and self-denigration. We must become aware of the' many ways in which we live off of the patriarchal structures of our society and our Church. Metanoia or conversion for women involves a breakthrough in consciousness in which we discover' ourselves as persons, as centers of our own being upon which we stand and build our own identity. It involves our gaining of authentic self-esteem as women. We often fear and avoid such conversion because we are fearful of the deep anger and alienation we experience within ourselves when we begin to get in touch with the ways in which the systems have tended to negate our very being. It is a fearful and terrifying journey. Too often we back away from the radically transforming experience of self-identification and self-authentication. But the fact remains that only if we are willing to risk the challenge, journey through the anger and alienation and rejections that we experience, can we come to a new way of perceiving reality. The new reality will be one of integrity, of knowing our brothers as our equals and peers, of conceiving the human community in alternative political, economic, social and religious structures that express the unifying, creative power of a God who transcends gender.

Failure to address the inequities and stereotypical prejudices rooted in sexism only contributes to discrimination and separateness in our society and in the Church. Civilization is based. on a paradigm of dominant/subservient relationships, the most pervasive of which is the relationship between women and men. We must recognize that any system based on the fundamental assumption that one group/race/class or gender is "above and over" another group/race/class or gender which is "below" is unjust and inhuman in its very core. Such a worldview generates and sustains multiple social pathologies which reveal themselves in prejudice, bias, stereotyping, violence, torture, slavery, war and other forms of exploitation.

It seems evident to me that as Sisters of St. Joseph, as women who are graced with the charism of reconciliation and unity, we must stand in the forefront of resistance to the continuance of this most fundamental and exploitative form of prejudice. But I suggest that we will only be able to do this if we can experience that conversion, both personally and corporately, to an authentic Christian feminism which will empower us to become agents of change in the creation of alternative systems in which women and men together, as brothers and sisters, collaborate in the development of human communities of justice and love.

Clericalism

What is clericalism? And why must we address it as we consider discrimination and disunity in the human society? Clericalism is a way of perceiving reality which manifests itself in a conscious or unconscious concern to promote and perpetuate the privilege and power of the clergy over and above all others in the worshipping community. It is not restricted to the Roman Catholic Church, nor even to other religious indigenous to western civilization. It seems to have universal ramifications.

Clericalism is a deep and complex set of attitudes based on the assumption that the priestly ministry is sacred, separate from, and superior to, the vocation and the ministries of all other members of the church. It is characterized by an authoritarian style of ordained ministerial leadership, a rigidly hierarchical world view and a tendency to identify the grace and holiness of the church solely with the priestly office.

Clericalism is not to be confused with the sacramental priesthood nor with the episcopal power and function in the Church. Rather, it is a distortion of that authentic recognition of and respect for the distinctive role and function of the ordained minister in the Christian community. It is, therefore, a disservice and a destructive force within the Church both for priests and for the people of God.

Clericalism is an occupational hazard for the ordained minister, for he most of all, is the beneficiary of the perquisites and prerogatives of the clerical state. Nevertheless, the priest is likewise most often the victim of clericalism as is evident in the unreal expectations imposed upon him by the clerical mind set of women and men within the Church.

Clericalism promotes a class society within the Christian community and as such makes for divisive, separative and discriminatory behavior and structures. Unrecognized and unchallenged, clericalism creates a pyramidal structure with ordained clerics on the pinnacle of the pyramid, the baptized laity on the bottom and religious women and men existing in some ambiguous in between. There can be little doubt that such a paradigm is reinforced in many of the provisions of canon law. It is further enhanced by the socialization process of priestly formation which tends to isolate the clergy from the people and contributes to confused and unrealistic expectations on the part of the laity and religious.

When any system of relationships is built on the presumed superiority of one class or group over another, there is the built-in danger of disunity and division. Clericalism assumes that all decision making power rests in the mind and in the hands of the ordained cleric, irrespective of his own competence, professional expertise and dedication or that of other members of the Christian community.

In its various manifestations at all levels of the Church, clericalism is proving increasingly meaningless and dysfunctional in these post Vatican II days. In that Council, the Church defined itself in terms of interdependence, subsidiarity, collegiality. It recognized the universal call to holiness of all the baptized and affirmed and insisted upon the mission of the laity in the Church. However, clericalism, as an evil within the Christian community, becomes more virulent and entrenched as clerical superiority is threatened and the clerical identity is less easily defined.

What has this divisive and separatist situation to do with our charism of unity and reconciliation? Surely the charism can become an operative healing agent for the entire Church, but only if it is honest and open about the inherent inconsistency of a pyramidal Church in which a priestly caste system is perpetuated to the exclusion of the fully recognized ministry of the laity and of religious brothers and sisters.

As Sisters of St. Joseph we have always desired and claimed to be women of the Church. We are often found ministering to the people of the Church and the society which seem to be excluded, or at least marginalized by existing Church structures. We have a long history that confirms our loyalty and dedication to the Church. Because of that tradition, we may be in an excellent position to work effectively toward breaking down the barriers of clericalism. But we must be honest about ourselves. We have also been trapped consciously and unconsciously by the prevailing climate of clericalism. It has all too often created subservient and obsequious behavior patterns in us and until we become fully aware of how those patterns influence our thoughts and our behaviors, we will not be able to effect change. Such change is essential for the entire Church because clericalism in all of its forms militates against the vision of the Church announced by Vatican II.! It separates and divides the people of God, a people for whom Jesus prayed "that they may be one".

Racism

Racism is that world view or mind set which assumes that one's own ethnic stock is inherently superior to other ethnic or racial groups and by that very fact endows the dominant group with power and privilege over the so-called inferior groups of peoples whom they encounter.

During this century we have experienced many violent expressions of racism. It occurs globally, even within our own U.S. situation, in ways that startle us with their violence and brutality.

In the 1940's as the war came to an end, the allied troops opened up the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. We discovered there a ghoulish nightmare of racism gone mad. To our horror we tried to grasp what had happened there in the few years during which Europe had been caught up in World War II. We were shocked into an awareness of the sinfulness of racism as we realized that over six million Jews had been exterminated. It was genocide in an unprecedented scale.

Today genocide is still going on. The less well told tale of the Vietnam situation and the massive genocide of the Cambodian people was in itself and continues to be the absurd outcome of prejudice and discrimination on the part of a dominant people over a less powerful group.

Genocide of indigenous populations in the northeast of Brazil is quietly concealed from us, though occasionally stories leak through. Indigenous populations in Guatemala, El Salvador and other Latin American countries are being systematically exterminated. And in our own country,

our own native American people are only slowly becoming sufficiently mobilized to claim their rights guaranteed by treaty and by U.S. law. As a nation we have our own "concentration camps". We call them by a kinder name: "reservations".

In the 1960's the civil rights movement initiated by the Blacks of this country raised the consciousness of many Americans to the reality of the inequities and injustices that were endemic in our own social, economic and legal systems. The struggle for the human and civil rights of the Blacks in this country which began with the freeing of the slaves following the Civil War, was slowly mobilized into a dynamic movement that brought a new sense of dignity and self-esteem to many Blacks. It is a journey still in progress, with goals not yet achieved as Blacks today continue to suffer from prejudice in our country that results in massive unemployment, sub-standard housing and overt discrimination within courts of law and in the penal system.

If we are perfectly honest, we must admit that in our nation, rooted in a tradition that all human beings are created equal before God, some citizens are more than equal than others. White U.S. Society remains largely impervious to people of color, whether their skins are black, or brown, or yellow, or red. Prejudice and discrimination arising out of racism are in-built in our society. These patterns of racism and the discriminatory patterns of behavior on the part of white U.S. have created an under belly of permanent poverty and deprivation in our nation.

We like to think of ourselves as a classless society. We pride ourselves on the false assumption that "anyone can make it in America if they only have enough drive and desire to make it". The fact is that a ruling elite of one percent controls over 30 percent of the wealth in the United States. The fact is that since the 1950's, the misery of the poor has increased in massive proportions. And it is true that most of the poor under-class are people of color, held there by bonds that are every bit as constraining and restrictive as were the bonds of the slave system of the 19th century. Blacks constitute a visible and easily identifiable group against which the stereotypes of prejudice and discrimination are directed. But Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans suffer from those same patterns of separation and division as do Blacks. In some ways these later immigrant groups suffer even more acutely for they have not yet mobilized themselves, nor come to a clear sense of their own identity in this pluriform society to which they have come.

As we look upon this situation, Sisters, most of us probably feel a certain repugnance for prejudice leveled against people who are not like ourselves white, middle class, American women. Our vocation as women whose special grace and charism is one of reconciliation and unity makes us aware that prejudice and discrimination are not compatible with that vocation. We do not want to think of ourselves as prejudiced. It doesn't seem right somehow. It doesn't seem right.

But I would suggest that if we were to scratch the surface of our psyches and get in touch with the deeper unconscious that moves within us, we would all recognize certain attitudes and perhaps even actions which are expressive of a subtle and even hidden racism. It is important to test that out in ourselves and to dare to be honest, at least with ourselves, about the ways in which we personally and congregationally draw boundaries around our lives that keep the poor, the underprivileged and the racially different peoples at arms length.

I suspect that many of us find it difficult if we are asked to serve in a school or parish that is composed of ethnically different groups of people; say Black parishes, or Asian parishes, or Hispanic parishes.

I wonder if we really do perceive those who are different from ourselves as our equals? As fully capable of caring for their own lives? As beautiful, lovable persons? I wonder if our patterns of being with and among them still carry vestiges of a certain "maternalism" creating patterns of dependency. In our relationship with ethnically diverse people do we tend to do for them rather than do with them as equals and peers? Do we engage in ministry with them as sisters? I do not mean as Sisters of St. Joseph necessarily, but as sisters, as women who share their hopes and dreams for themselves?

Our charism as Sisters of St. Joseph is meant to move us toward authentic union with our brothers and sisters. The total double union of Medaille admits of no "second class relationships".

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism places the human race at the center of all created reality and establishes it as the exclusive norm of values. It perceives humanity as possessing the right and the might to dominate the planet and the universe. This attitude toward nature submits all natural resources to indiscriminate human use and justifies the exploitation of all other forms of animate and inanimate creation. It represents a radical separation or disunity in the universe.

Anthropocentrism makes humans the crown of creation in such a way that it diminishes all other creatures in the community of creation.

Today there is a growing ecological consciousness arising out of an awareness of the multiform ways in which modern science and technology exploit, exhaust and taint the natural environment. The poisoning of the air, the seas and the earth with pesticides and toxic wastes; the razing of the rainforests all around the earth for the sake of multinational corporation profit; the plague of acid rain without regard for the vegetation of the earth; the destruction of the ozone layer that protects all life on the planet; and, ultimately, the impending threat of nuclear holocaust which could render the entire planet uninhabitable: these and other exploitative, destructive forces in the world today pose a deep and agonizing threat to the fundamental wholeness, and unity of God's creation.

Perhaps we have not yet given thought to this question of the integrity and unity of all nature as one of the most pressing spiritual problems in our time. I suggest that we must address this question if we are to be faithful to the charism of unity and reconciliation as Sisters of St. Joseph.

Today our lives are dominated by a technocratic-industrial world view which regards the human race as separate from and superior to and in charge of all the rest of creation. Western civilization and culture is built on a paradigm of dominance – the dominance of humans over non-humans; of north over south; of west over east; of masculine over feminine; of rich over poor; of white over black or brown or red or yellow. I submit that wherever a dynamic of dominance, of "power-over", of "better-than" provides the driving energy for the human society, there is bound to be a correlative degree of discrimination in favor of the dominant element and a prejudice

against the other elements. Unity, reconciliation, healing is impossible in the context of such a world view.

I suggest that the most fundamental, radical division or separateness lying at the root of all other forms of discontinuity and disunity is anthropocentrism. This world view sets the human race at the pinnacle of created reality, rather than understanding that we human beings are parts of the interrelated whole of God's creation. It establishes an illusion that is both erroneous and dangerous to the very existence of the planet and the universe itself.

Today some philosophers, physicists and theologians are recognizing the need to explore the principle of biocentric equality in our universe. We are coming to recognize to our horror that if we harm the rest of nature, we are indeed harming the human race itself. All of created reality is interrelated. There are no boundaries. We must learn to live on this planet in harmony and unity with the whole thing or we ultimately destroy the whole thing. We, as human beings, are simply equal citizens in a biotic community and we dare not separate ourselves from the whole of created reality.

This calls us to a profound reevaluation of the depths of our charism of reconciliation and unity. To begin with it requires of us "letting go" of deeply embedded mind sets and prejudices against other races of human beings and other species of animal and vegetative life. It forces us to become conscious of our exploitative patterns of behavior toward the earth, the air, the seas and lakes and rivers, the mountains and plains and valleys of our planet.

It further requires of us the acquiring of a new way of looking at our universe, our planet and our lives in the context of a biocentric world view. We must engage in an honest analysis of our patterns of consumption which we take so much for granted. As human beings we are late comers to this universe.

Unfortunately in our short history we have too often been aggressors and oppressors of all other forms of life and of inanimate creation. As part of the whole we human beings have within ourselves the unique capacity for regenerating the planet or for further degenerating it.

As women, graced with the God-given vocation for unity and healing, we must give ourselves to a deeply contemplative biocentric stance. We must have the courage and the commitment to change our current life styles and direct our ministerial energies in favor of the whole of God's creation. As women graced to be reconcilers, we can promote a life style and a world view that moves beyond a shallow approach to environmental problems and make a contribution toward articulating a comprehensive spiritual and philosophical world view that will express itself in a new awareness of the real and abiding presence of God in all creation, the God in whom all things exist in unity and harmony.

Conclusion

This morning we said that our charism as Sisters of St. Joseph calls us to a contemplative life stance that issues in compassion. We said that fidelity to this charism of unity will requires of us a self-emptied love, a letting go and a letting be that makes authentic unity possible.

I would close now by suggesting that this contemplative life stance that issues in compassion will lead us beyond a simple knowing about the suffering and pain and joy of the world. It will

lead us into the very heart of that suffering and pain and joy. It will lead us into the very heart of the world, the heart of the universe that in Paul's words, "groans and is in agony even until now as it eagerly awaits" its fulfillment in the design and plan of the loving creator God. The contemplative life stance will awaken in us a "prophetic imagination" which will enable us to perceive and to act out of new ways of being present to the world. It will transform us. It will transform the way we relate to every other person and to our planet. It will profoundly affect the-way we come to know and relate to and touch God. It will lead us to know in our hearts, to know beyond reason or abstraction, the passionate Creator God. It will bring us to a new humility, a new simplicity, a new justice that empowers us to embrace all of created reality, all members of the human race, the earth itself with its rivers and forests, its birds and its beasts, its power and its fragility for we are one with it as we are one in God. The New Creation which in Paul's words is wholly God's work (II Cor. 5:17) must take place first in our own consciousness and that demands nothing less than total self-emptiedness.

NOTES (from Webster)

Reconciliation: the act of restoring to friendship, harmony or communion.
Conciliate: to gain (as goodwill) by pleasing acts; to make compatible.
Unity: the act accomplished.