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Women at the Podium

The Passage of Mercy Life into the Third Millennium
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Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

These are millennial times! You are asking yourselves: what is your mission at this moment of Institute history? The women you elect to regional leadership will be the ones whose particular task it is to cross the millennial threshold with you. What lies ahead for you, for us as Institute, for them as leaders?

This entire decade leading up to the turn of the century has already been filled with millennial anticipation. Religious have been capturing and writing the visions down. As reported in *Threads for the Loom,* we have elements of the new paradigm of religious life.[1] We are in the midst of a paradigm change of enormous magnitude. The stream of incremental changes has become a rushing river of deeper and unpredictable change. The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas was founded in the midst of these currents of change as we reordered our communal life, embraced clear and compelling directions, and deepened our communal and personal recognition of the conversion yet required to live into the future.

Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter, "As the Third Millennium Draws Near," reveals the advent of the third millennium to be the hermeneutical key through which to understand his papacy. From the moment of his election, he believed his mission was to lead the Church into the third millennium. He considers the Second Vatican Council the "advent" of this event, and programmatically describes his plans for sowing the seeds for "a new springtime of Christian life" through preparations for this jubilee. He reminds us this is a Trinitarian and Christological event. It is "the Great Jubilee," commemorating the incarnation and redemption of Jesus, offering reconciliation and salvation to the world.

As a Christian jubilee it is a time for joy and jubilation in the presence of God in our midst. It is a time for gratitude and a time for forgiveness and reconciliation. In the service of this mission, the pope has kept himself and the Church in the center of world history interacting with every region of the globe. He has attempted to determine the theological horizon within which he wants us to understand and implement the council, to shape the terms for

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Christian unity and interreligious dialogue, to influence the agenda for international conferences on social, economic, and moral issues, and to determine the models of Christian holiness for the future. He has also tried to prevent any notions borrowed from democracy from influencing the authentic reception of the council. His personal vision of his papacy is messianic, prophetic, patriarchal, and authoritarian. If the entire Church enters into an examination of conscience and renewal of life, the third millennium of Christianity will initiate a new age, bringing to an end the scandals within Christianity: schism and disunity among Christians, intolerance and use of violence in the service of truth, religious indifference, the loss of a transcendent and ethical sense, loss of respect for life and the family, violation of human rights, injustice, confusion in matters of faith due to erroneous theological views, and the crisis of obedience to the magisterium. With such repentance, the Church might enter an age of love and build "a civilization of love." We are to be mindful of the preferential option for the poor and reflect on the challenges of our times, "such as dialogue between different cultures and problems connected with respect for women's rights and the promotion of family and marriage." For him, the world is in a crisis of civilization of global proportions to which the Church and its message of redemption is the answer.

This is a grand vision which proposes a particular view of Christianity, the Church, and the

papacy within the Church. It is grounded in a firm hope and an almost absolute faith in the truth of Christianity and of a Christian solution to the problems of civilization worldwide. He boldly invites a radical jubilee gesture of the forgiveness of third world debt by the wealthier nations.[2]

There are, however, less optimistic millennial views beginning to appear. Pat Robertson recently published *The End of the Age*.[3] Rooted in a fundamentalist, apocalyptic interpretation of the book of Revelation, it focuses narrowly on cataclysmic natural disasters and identifies liberals in a United States setting and their agendas as the antichrist. One cannot enter a new age without leaving the former age. The end of any age is often marked by such pessimism and fundamentalism, now a worldwide phenomenon in most major religions. Robertson's proposals are not a vision for the future but a vision of the ultimate end. In apocalyptic views the agents of evil bring about such distress that the situation calls for direct intervention of Divine power to end the creation itself. The "true believers" are rendered as powerless as everyone else. They are not co-agents, co-creators with God, but ultimately victims awaiting rescue. "Apocalypticism gives people a sense of belonging to a history over which they have no control and of being secure in the thought that God, who is in control, will ultimately set things straight."[4]

This variety of approaches to "end times" made me wonder about the Jewish roots of these views. Jesus himself lived during such a time. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism were both forged in the crucible of the dramatic discontinuities that occurred at the end of an age. Judaism lost its temple, kingship, and autonomous power, not once, but twice. Under such pressures, a group either dies or goes through a much deeper renewal. At that time, there were five basic responses to the cataclysmic events that led up to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. Four of these were apocalyptic in some way. The Essenes and the Christians responded to the impending situation in similar ways and before the actual physical destruction of the temple. Both groups abandoned the temple cult which they replaced with a new community and its rites. The Essenes replaced the temple worship with their monastic, ascetic community. This was a separatist, sectarian solution. The Christians accepted Jesus as Messiah. But his messianism was built upon the crucified and risen one whose community became the new temple. Their expulsion from the synagogue after the Council of Jamnia separated them from Judaism, creating a new religious tradition. This answer was unacceptable for Jews who were expecting a different kind of Messiah. The Pharisees saw the destruction of the temple as a calamity and sought the means in both social forms and religious expression of providing a new way to atonement and a new form of divine service to constitute an interim temple. Apocalyptic visionaries were more negative. All they had to say was that God is just; Israel has sinned, in the end of time there will be redemption. But what to do in the meantime? Merely wait. In contrast, the rabbis began to teach that selfless compassion would be the new sacrifice replacing the temple sacrifice. Theirs was a more interior and worldly response, fueled by the expectant hope of the Messiah yet to come. From this spectrum of responses, Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism have lasted for two millennia while the other solutions periodically emerge and disappear.[5]

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These responses indirectly indicate some of the tasks during times of transition. There is an interpretation of events. Much of the present reflection about religious life is an attempt to interpret the experience of dramatic change, initiated not by us but by the Second Vatican Council, in dialogue with the various cultures within which religious life has been evolving. I think there is even a conflict of interpretations about both religious life and this era of ecclesial renewal and reform. Our transition

continues within an institution which is still in the midst of an uncompleted transition. We are living through and witnessing the death of a particular form of Catholicism into which many of us were born and which is no longer our vision of the future church. One could name this the death of an imperial Roman Catholicism. Karl Rahner suggested that the real significance of Vatican II was the shift from a Roman, Eurocentric church to a genuine world church.[6] If that is the case, the patriarchal, centralizing, Roman bureaucracy would have to go through the greatest change in its history since its elaboration in the late middle ages. We are in the midst of an even greater paradigm change than that. We are living through the end of the modern era, the collapse of a worldview created from enlightenment philosophical and scientific traditions which gave rise to a variety of emancipatory movements. These emancipatory movements include the call for the end of racism in all of its forms and the end of patriarchy, the worldwide subjugation of women to men. All societal systems, including the churches, must change dramatically in order to end this domination and exploitation of women and to enter into partnerships of women and men together. The myth of progress through technological manipulation has failed. United States society is negotiating its own crisis of all public institutions. Finally, our entire cosmology has changed under the influence of the new science and the new story of the earth. We search the scriptures, history, and science for new metaphors and myths to interpret our experience in ways which can shape our future. In order to discover meaning within the context of Christian faith and tradition, entirely new forms of theological mediation are required. Feminist, liberationist, and creationist theologies are all such attempts, but none has yet achieved a widespread consensual acceptance beyond the groups within which they have emerged.

Because the larger story or interpretive frame in which we explained our lives to ourselves and to others has been fractured, we, like others who have lived through the end of some particular world, search for meaning and coherence in our present experience. The early Christian movement went through three such shocks—the death of Jesus as a criminal, the subsequent experience of his living in the community, and the expulsion of this community from the synagogue which left them vulnerable to martyrdom. It is not without significance that the resurrection narratives and reflections are beginning to appeal to us in new ways at the present moment. We constantly discover we may be seeking "the living one among the dead."

A second task during a time of major transition is the process of muddling through. It means living with the questions even if we don't yet "love them" as Rilke advocated. It means enduring the losses, helplessness, and inability to imagine the next step. But this enduring, this particular kind of experiencing, needs to be conscious. The end of an age is exactly that—a real ending. Some endings such as the change of a leadership team or an educational program occur as scheduled. But these timed, anticipated, scheduled transitions are only a part of the picture. Some changes we can choose. There are some changes for which we can anticipate and plan. Still, others happen unpredictably. These are not chosen; we only get to cope with them. During an end of an age, the changes are deep and pervasive. Every institution and system is affected in significant ways. A radical element of unpredictability becomes a fact of life for a considerable period of time. The end of this millennium is like that. Jean Houston describes it as "whole system transition."

American culture and society is itself in a major transition. Many long for a simpler time. The wealthiest country in the world cannot imagine it has enough to care for its most vulnerable citizens, children, the ill, the mentally disturbed, and the frail elderly. We are haunted with images of scarcity without the ability to recognize our abundance. We are becoming fearful of strangers, of the alien, those who are not like us. The divide between rich and poor continues to increase. Fear and insecurity are increasing in our land because of unpredictable and continual downsizing of almost every sector in our economy. The majority of the workforce feels threatened in its capacity to maintain the present standard of living while corporate profits soar. Maintaining this wealth and the privileges and power which accompany it requires endless spending on defensive armaments to be used against unspecified enemies. The truly privileged can remain so only by controlling government and by

violently imposing their will through punitive systems and economic sanctions. The injustice we are willing to support increases as the needs of others begin to threaten us.

All of us have varying ways of coping with this kind of radical discontinuity. We become immobilized by our fears. We project our fears outward in various forms of hatred or attack against those who appear to threaten us. We narrow our world and go into denial pretending everything is really satisfactory. We seal ourselves off from the larger culture of society and church to avoid conflict and cognitive dissonance. We may become overwhelmed with our feelings of helplessness. We attempt to find security in something... our skills, jobs, ministries, education, and our way of living. Regardless of the response, there simply remains the "meantime," the time in between. Gradually or spontaneously in the seeming emptiness, nothingness, or deadness, new form begins to take shape. Images in our unconscious begin to create new forms out the chaos. Symbolic images of regeneration, rebirth, and creativity begin to emerge. What appeared to be nothing but death, deadness, or decline changes form sufficiently to reveal an unexpected new order, new life, a new beginning of possibility.

The cycles of change which take place at the end of an age and the beginning of a new one take place over relatively long periods of time. These are difficult times. We can adopt an apocalyptic view assigning blame, interpreting conflict as a sign of evil, and the end of the world. We can thus wait pessimistically for God to rescue us into the next life. We can take a more inward view and withdraw from engagement with a changed and changing society. We can attempt to substitute a spiritualized illusion for real conversion and transformation. Or we can continue through a deeper, organic evolution to the kind of creativity and renaissance that eventually emerges from the seeming chaos.

This deeper evolutionary change is the kind which I believe religious life and the life of our Institute is challenged to respond, although we might temporarily adopt any of the others. Are we willing to go through the deeper transformation as the contours of the coming age gradually come into focus?

We are challenged, I believe, to imagine a future in which the very best of life in mercy might be yet to come.

This third task is to fully embrace the new age. We are challenged, I believe, to imagine a future in which the very best of life in Mercy might be yet to come. Our task is to begin to shift our hearts and imaginations away from the past and toward the future—to begin to take our bearings in relationship to the dawning future. This requires something wilder and more passionate than we have yet dared. This requires going up into the gaps. This requires the abandonment of comfort, achievement, and of a heroic form of consciousness. Instead, it requires an entire shift in our consciousness, in our activity, and in our contemplation. Our direction statement and the initiatives from which it flows point the direction quite clearly.

What is it like to "go up into the gaps"? Annie Dillard, in *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek* gives us some idea:

> There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage. I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright. . . .

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go

up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. *Spend* the afternoon. You can't take it with you.[7]

We are, I believe, to be women who know the wildness of these gaps intimately. Some of us do; some of us don't. Some of us want to; some of us won't. Some of us are experiencing "change fatigue"; some of us look for more. Some of us have been all ready changed by the terror and mystery in the gaps; some of us are just beginning to notice.

"Hints and guesses" about an entirely new experience of God are emerging within religious life and within the more radical movements in the Church which have embraced a preferential option for the poor. I discover it in the writings of pacifists, missionaries, and almost anyone who has begun to walk with people who are poor without insulation.[8] This experience of God for first world men and women is the disclosure of God's mysterious presence in and with the poor. This is part of the paradigm shift, the radical conversion which would eventually change everything about us and about the Church, if whole communities embarked on this particular journey. This new experience of God is characterized by a painful contemplation of a world still in need of God's redeeming grace and presence. Sobrino describes it as "taking the crucified people from the cross."[9] It is the recognition that redemption has not been completed until poor people in every culture of the world have at least the minimum required for dignified living. God's reign will not have fully arrived until we, human beings, have learned to live with one another in all of our diversity. We are all deeply ambivalent about this invitation. The Church itself wants it both ways. Liberation theology is more than involvement in politics or marxist analysis. As long as people remain oppressed: women, persons of color, homosexuals, the elderly, physically disabled persons, some form of liberation theology will rise up from and within communities of solidarity.

Bill Reiser recognizes this shift in religious experience in Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*. Although she says little about the explicit effect walking with prisoners awaiting execution had on her prayer, Prejean writes this much:

> I am reading people like Gandhi, Alice Walker, Albert Camus, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, and even the way I pray is changing. Before, I had asked God to right the wrongs and comfort the suffering. Now I know—I really know—that God entrusts those tasks to us.

Reiser comments:

> The men she writes about were hardly pious; they had nothing to teach her about prayer. Yet the situation in which she found herself became every bit as contemplative as an Indian ashram or a monastery in Kentucky. She made it contemplative by relating to the world of men on death row in a mode of faith. That world drew something new from her. Before, she prayed as an observer: moved by such human desperation and brokenness, she beheld the prison world from outside. Once inside the world of those men, however, her interior landscape became reconfigured: "Now I know—I really know—that God entrusts those tasks to us." God walks alongside of us animating our imaginations and emboldening our hearts, so that together with God we might remake our society. God, she had learned, places the responsibility to do something about human misery and poverty in our hands. Clearly she already knew that God was among the poor; otherwise, she would not have made the option to live and work among them. What she had realized in the beginning was that the Christian contemplative must learn how to pray with her hands: "God entrusts those tasks to us."[10]

I would like to place the opening of your chapter in this larger spiritual landscape. God entrusts us with the task to do something about human misery and poverty. You elect a new leadership team to help you do this. You organize your group-life, your structures of self-governance so that you can journey into the gaps hollowed out by human misery and met by God's spirit. You do this in the face of unprecedented paradigm change. These paradigm shifts include moving: from mechanistic modes of thought to the new science and holistic thought, and mythic thought; from repression of spirit to the emergence of spirit in individuals and in communities; from ecological devastation to sustainable development; from ethnocentrism to

multiculturalism; from the nuclear family to the societal changes needed to make a new way of being family work; from patriarchy and its embeded sexism and hierarchies to the emancipation of women into full equality and partnership with men; from individualism to new forms of communitarianism; from dominative power to a renewed understanding of what power is and how it is to be exercised.

The life of our Institute is being affected by all of these shifts. We have even managed to name most of them. We are not yet necessarily able to live them. Much more needs to happen among us and in the systems and cultures in which we live and with which we interact, including the Church.

Within this millennial context, we are challenged to govern ourselves in ways that enable the empowerment of our feminine selves not simply for the sake of our comfort but for the sake of our mission. All of us carry within us, the archetypes of patriarchal power. All of us have been colonized in our consciousness by the myths of patriarchy. We are only at the beginning of discovering what the full empowerment of women might look like. After thirty years of feminism, women continue to struggle even here for survival of their feminine selves. The recent bestseller, *Reviving Ophelia* catalogues the truly horrific threats to the developing selves of adolescent girls in our society.[11] Feminism has succeeded so well that we now know much more clearly what women are up against. Now that the taboo of secrecy has been broken about the abuse women and girls suffer at the hands of male violence, we begin to glimpse just how hostile patriarchy is to women. We discover the price all of us pay in order to accommodate to societal norms which keep women in an inferior position eroding both our sense of self and agency. How we form ourselves as community will either further release the whole of our feminine selves and spirits or it will continue to hold us in bondage. It is no wonder we fear acknowledging we might be feminists. Feminists are the ultimate enemy of patriarchy. There is a price to pay for contesting the rule of "the fathers" in every social and religious institution. There is a price to pay in our own psyches as we contest the rule of the "fathers" already internalized in our consciousness.[12]

Within this millennial context, we are challenged to confront and welcome diversity in entirely new ways. This diversity will mean becoming thoroughly multicultural which implies a willingness to expand our communal ways of being with the gifts women from diverse ethnic cultures will bring. As we continue our journey as Institute, this diversity means the cultural diversity present in each of our regional communities in North America as well as the increasing ability of our sisters beyond the United States to influence our ways of being, thinking, and feeling.

We are also challenged to welcome generational diversity wherever younger women attempt to join us. If we really care about the future, we will recognize this as an invitation to generativity. If we think we have a future, we will nurture it in any way we can. Merely because the present number of younger members is so small does not mean it will be that way significantly into the future. But we need to be willing to be changed and inconvenienced by them. We need to offer mentoring, sisterhood, and friendship whenever and to whoever is in the incorporation process. To do so, we must be able to take the long view.

We are challenged to do all of this in the larger context of our newly formed and reforming Institute. At the chapter this last summer, the theological synthesizers presented the chapter participants with four very powerful images which attempted to capture in a nonlinear way, in an imagistic form of thinking, the present reality of our Institute. I want to recall them now as a way of opening our minds and hearts to the passage of Mercy and the passage of religious life itself into the third millennium.

From the United States we worked with the images of the blue baby and the river:

> Four years ago we conceived together a new entity called the Institute. It was conceived in love and passion, in struggle and in hope. From 1991 through 1995 the contractions began, the birth canal readied to receive new life. Now we feel that the push toward life must come quickly before the yearning and energy of this vision dissipates and we give birth to a blue baby.
>
> I am standing by a river. I notice the calm surface before me and the rapids upstream. I hear the roar of a waterfall downstream. The banks

are rich with life and I know there is life and energy deep within the river. Will it flow to the fullness of the ocean or die in the dryness of the wilderness?

Both of these are liminal images. The blue baby represents a fear of the Institute becoming stuck so long in the birth canal, the passageway to life, that it might die in the process. At the same time, it is an image that expresses urgency, energy, and life. The need to "push" suggests active cooperation with the life process. Both passion and compassion. For us to give birth to the new reality and life requires the leadership of accurate and sensitive midwifing. Leadership functions here as a coach. The birthing coach is so attuned to the organic processes of life that she knows when the mother should push and when she should relax, when she needs to go through the pain and when she needs to recover without losing touch with the living being itself coming to birth in its own way on its own schedule.

The River is also an image rooted in natural life processes. It, too, is a liminal image, an image of a difficult passage. The riverbanks are the passageway, the water, the lifeforce, is rushing toward a waterfall. There is life dependent on the river both on the banks and in the depths. Will this water reach the ocean or dry up? This image, too, from North America, carries an undercurrent of fear. Both of these images fear some form of death.

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Life and death are one process. Every dangerous passage, every time of major transition can issue either in a new breakthrough to more life or in death. The birth process is always susceptible of claiming the lives of either the mother, or the child, or even more tragically both. Sometimes these outcomes are unavoidable; sometimes the skills of midwives or medical technicians make all the difference.

I would like to reflect briefly on the theme of dying. I am convinced that the next few years in our regional communities and in our Institute are going to feel as much or even more like dying than like new birth. We need to be prepared for this psychologically and spiritually. The end of the age means much actually dies through change. In nature this is an organic process, the seed "dies" so that the life from within might germinate. Much that looks like death actually is hidden life. All elements of the creation continually contribute to both the living and the dying processes of other organisms.

For us, however, the dying will have a very personal tone to it. Because of the present demographics of our regional communities, members and leaders will experience far more funerals than entrances or professions. Younger members, who are now clearly middle-aged, are losing through death both their parents and their elders and mentors in community. It may become very painful to confront this very personal face of death.

In addition to the actual loss of members through death, without the reassurance of newer members to take their places, we will also experience a death to the collective sense of ourselves. We will simply exert less power within society and the Church because of our decreased numerical strength. For some, the assumption that religious women in this country are no longer a force to be reckoned with will happen in subtle or blatant ways in our relationships with clergy, laity, and even within our own institutions. So there will be a death to our heroic self-images.

Within the Institute, we chose in 1991 to form a new structure and to cultivate an entirely new relationship with one another well ahead of this certain dying. So the Institute was born out of our strength, energy, and resources without supposedly affecting the identity and day-to-day reality of the regional communities. At chapter, it was most evident to the participants, that maintaining this organizational status quo could not continue. What was unclear was whose task it is to initiate the conversations, processes, and deliberations which would either merge regional communities with one another or share leadership, administrative, and incorporation personnel so that the pain and disruption of merging could be avoided.

I think we can expect that as the flow of information among us and as relationships among us in all kinds of networks and leadership groups increase, we will make decisions about reordering ourselves in significant and hopefully organic ways that respect life-energies, relationships, history, and resources, both personal and financial.

The images now emerging in reflection on religious life are frequently shifting from organizational and structural ones to organic ones which are rooted in both the life sciences and the new science which recognizes an inherent implicate ordering in apparent chaos. Within this framework, change happens through the free flow of information which generates energy and allows organismic adaptation, evolution, and change. Within this new theory, a holographic consciousness suggests that what is happening in one sister, one regional community, is happening somewhere else. It is important to begin to think of ourselves as not just part of the whole, but as whole in ourselves. Where I am, the Institute is. What I am or what we are experiencing is happening elsewhere. This phenomenon was very clear at chapter. What many of us thought were experiences unique to ourselves or our regional communities turned out to be experiences and needs bubbling up from the entire group. In this context, the role of leadership is to notice where something new and promising is happening and to move in harmony with it, to relate it to other events so that the interconnections among the information can be made and the structural obstacles to action and change can be overcome. I cannot yet guess how this will feel to us. At chapter, it released an incredible collective energy which seemed to melt initial resistance. But as these changes, these awarenesses and insights about the genuine interconnectedness of our reality are felt in the regional communities, it may feel more like death and loss than like the new life trying to emerge and reform itself into a viable new organism.[13]

The images which came from Latin America and from the Pacific had more of this feeling about them. Theirs were images in which persons and nature live in interactive and interconnective relationships one with another. From the Pacific and Caribbean:

Ocean vast, wonderfully, magnificently created,
strength and power and depth and mystery —
hint of God.

Pounding waves, unrelenting
nudging the heart unbending.
"Change, rebirth, not pretending,
listen, your ear bending."

Discover a world the deep can give.
New goggles you need,
old habits to weed,
make good your creed.

Separating the lands,
Genesis describes.
Pondering still,
the ocean connects
shore to shore,
lands to tribes.

Ebb and tide,
as surely change,
again and again
with us will remain.
Ebb and tide,
as constant as Love,
washes our shores and calls us beyond.

This image invites us to take a different stance toward our reality—to respect and enter the ebb and tide of change, to put on the new goggles of contemplative vision, to trust the Love, and to respond to the call of the beyond. There is no fear encoded here but an at-home-ness in the great cycles of life and of change. The ocean as metaphor holds together both change and constancy, depth and surface, new land forms rising from the original chaos, and mystery.

I want to end my reflections with the image from Latin America because it most captures the millennial imagery with which I began these reflections. It is *El Camino*, the road.

> As we journey these years in preparation for our Founding Event and as we go on journeying after it, we image el camino, a road that opens up through obstacles, a road that crosses rocky lands, rich valleys, deserts. This path crosses rivers and climbs hills. It has The Land and the Banquet as its goal. And as we walk this road, we are creating it along with our sisters and brothers who are poor and marginalized. As we acquire the patience of walking, we dream dreams and

we share our hopes and efforts with them. And the profile of The Land (Institute) takes form as we prepare our hearts for the Banquet where we will be *one* in the multiculturality of our countries and regions.

This image acknowledges the obstacles and challenges of the constantly changing terrain which the passage of our Mercy life together traverses. But the life is shared all along the way. The image recognizes that our present reality is a provisional one. There is a goal beyond ourselves—The Land and the Banquet. These images are messianic, eschatological ones, not apocalyptic. These images of the land and the banquet return us to jubilee, gratitude, hope, and promise. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the year of jubilee was the time when all land which had been alienated through debt had to be returned to the original owners. There was healing and restoration of the community through this forgiveness of debt, through this redistribution of the land, the resources necessary for life in a more just way within the community. Anyone who had entered servitude through poverty was freed. Within the community, situations of injustice were abolished so that everyone was restored to their full human dignity with the necessary resources to sustain life. Although the women in this community did not fully share in this emancipation, there was always the concern that the widows, the aliens, and the orphans, those with no one to provide for them, were the responsibility of the entire community. When this jubilee was celebrated, it was a time of celebration, of joy, because at this sacred time, right relations were fully restored in the community and all participated in the promise of the eventual messianic banquet when this situation would be a permanent reality. Jesus appropriated these images of the jubilee. When he inaugurated his mission, he did so within the framework of jubilee. He comes to set the oppressed free, announce liberation, and bring the reality of life lived in harmony with God to its full realization for everyone.

The passage of Mercy life into the third millennium is profoundly rooted in these gospel promises, hopes, and yes joy. Our Institute Direction Statement and our chapter initiatives originate in both the good news of Jesus in our midst and in the pressing needs of our times which shape our millennial hopes, tasks, and desires. As a regional community, you might want to ask yourselves, what emancipations, reconciliations, liberations, and redistributions need to happen among you to restore to everyone a sense of full participation in the banquet and possession of the land of Mercy. What wounds need to be tended? What has died that needs to be reverently buried? In order to live in this promise of life to the full, what contemplative experience, what experiences in "the gaps" need to be brought into these deliberations so that your choices emerge from where God's wild spirit walks with you and God's tender compassion sustains you in Love's constancy? What kind of leaders do you need to help you continue to acquire the patience for walking the road ahead, to dream dreams and to share hopes with our sisters and brothers who are poor and marginalized?

Notes

1. Anne Munley, *Threads for the Loom: LCWR Planning and Ministry Studies* (Silver Spring: Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 1992),3.

2. "Tertio Millennio Adveniente: Apostolic Letter for the Jubilee of the Year 2000," in *Origins* 24 (November 24, 1994).

3. Pat Robertson, *The End of the Age* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996).

4. Dianne Bergant, "Apocalypticism" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: Glazier, 1993),51.

5. Jacob Neusner, "Varieties of Judaism in the Formative Age" in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green, Vol. 13 of *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

6. Karl Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," in *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations*, Vol. 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

7. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 276-277.

(Notes continued on page 51.)