

Sisters of Mercy
South Central Community

Discernment Guide



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Introduction

“Discernment is seen as a process whereby the individual strives to determine how their own personal good can be integrated with the goals and mission of a particular institute. Women religious have struggled to balance their respect for the Spirit working within the individual and their belief in the special role of elected leadership to mediate the needs of the whole community” (Schaefer 151).

“The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God’s will in fidelity to our mission. Responsible obedience requires that we inform our hearts for dialogue, share our insights and respect freedom of conscience. In this search we listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God’s will” (Constitutions 28).

Membership in the community involves commitment to one’s own personal development, being accountable to the other members, and accepting responsibility for the ongoing life of the whole.

When a sister desires to make a major change in ministry and/or in her living arrangements, to retire or to consider educational or renewal programs, she is expected to engage with her leadership contact in a mutual discernment process of prayer and reflection, conversation, and information sharing. This Discernment Guide is offered as a means of deepening our sense of mutual responsibility and accountability for community and mission. Other practical guidelines can be found in the *South Central Community Manual of Policies and Procedures*.

Recognizing our relationship as a newly formed South Central Community, we acknowledge an emerging desire among us for a deepened corporate sense of our call to ministry and community, and for individual and communal expression of our developing corporate identity. The following beliefs are the principles which underpin this discernment tool.

We believe that we are called:

- * to a lifelong response to a call from God to serve God’s people, appropriate to each stage of our lives;
- * to be rooted in the mission of Jesus through the Mercy charism;
- * to the realization of being sent in the name of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – South Central Community; and
- * to the realization that living in community is a ministry to one another.

We believe that discernment invites us:

- * to deepening our understanding of our vow of obedience;
- * to inner freedom;
- * to a way of living in which we consistently listen and respond to the Spirit acting within us and others;

- * to dialogue with leadership and others as appropriate in making significant decisions;
and
- * to making good decisions which will benefit the common good and foster right relationships in the community, the church, and the world.

Grace, the movement of God's Spirit in the individual, in leadership, and in the total community, provides support for risk-taking, interdependence for the common good, and freedom for creative initiatives. With prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, discernment will lead to a choice to continue or to enter a different form of communal / ministerial presence that is in harmony with our *Constitutions* and our Institute *Direction Statement*.

In the last section of this guide, for your convenience, we have provided the readings referenced in this guide from the *Constitutions*, the Institute *Direction Statement*, scripture, and *Morning & Evening Prayer*.

— *Community Leadership Team*
May 2010

Ministry Discernment

Ministry discernment involves the three-fold movement of discernment, selection, and confirmation. Ministry discernment each year can be a useful approach to reviewing one's commitments and making choices to renew those commitments or to make a change. Some suggested readings to integrate ministerial experience with your faith and the Mercy tradition are found in the last section of this booklet:

Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-11

Constitutions: Paragraphs 1-9

Morning & Evening Prayer: Apostolic Spirituality, pp. 955-956

Scripture: John 13:12-17

Constitutions: Paragraph 29

Morning & Evening Prayer:

Prayer and Contemplation as the Heart of the Apostolate, pp. 956-957

Scripture: Matthew 25:34-40

Constitutions: Paragraph 84

Morning & Evening Prayer: Action and Contemplation, p. 903

Reflection Questions

1. What in scripture and Mercy tradition informs my present ministry?
2. How does my current ministry reflect our Institute *Direction Statement*?
3. How does God speak to me, challenge me, in this ministry?
4. How do I make use of enrichment (personal, professional, spiritual) that will assist me in my ministry?
5. In my current ministry, when, where, with whom do I find life and energy?
6. What drains and tires me? Why?
7. Is this ministry too much for me at this time of my life? Why?
8. What are the consequences of continuing / not continuing in this ministry?
9. In what ways am I open to the call of the Spirit in me?
10. Are there fixed attitudes and mindsets that would limit my openness to respond to a new call?
11. Will the needs of God's people, the needs of our Community and Institute, and my own needs be served at this time of my life by:

Continuing my present ministry?

- * Why have I decided to recommit myself to this ministry?
- * What can I do to make the experience a more meaningful one?

- * What in my prayer is consistent with the call to remain in this ministry?
- * How does God wait for me in this ministry?

Changing my place of ministry?

- * What sacrifices will I need to make to begin in a new place of ministry?
- * What values, skills, and gifts will I bring to this new ministry?
- * Have I clearly identified the working conditions that I desire?
- * What in my prayer is consistent with a call to change my place of ministry?
- * How does God wait for me in this ministry?

Changing to another field of ministry?

- * Can I enter into a new field of ministry without retraining or further education?
- * If I need further education, what is it?
- * Will my skills and abilities transfer to the ministry I choose, and/or must I develop new skills?
- * What in my prayer is consistent with a call to change to another field of ministry?
- * How does God wait for me in this ministry?

Changing to a part-time or a volunteer ministry?

- * Have I looked at alternate possibilities at my current ministry site?
- * What are the values, skills, and gifts that I would bring to this ministry?
- * How will I pace myself, allowing more time for life development?
- * What in my prayer is consistent with a call to move to a part-time or a volunteer ministry?
- * How does God wait for me in this ministry?

Reflection Questions

1. How will my proposed decision affect my development as a woman, as a member of our Institute and my Community?
2. What implications does my response to continue in or change my ministry have on the quality of my life in community? How will my life in community empower me for the mission of Mercy?
3. With whom should I discuss this?
 - * my leadership contact?
 - * my spiritual director?
 - * a friend who will affirm yet challenge me, both personally and as a member of the community?

- * my local community or prayer group?
- * persons who can add other perspectives to my discernment?

If a sister and her leadership contact agree to a change, the president missions the sister to her new ministry.

Discernment for Living Situation

Each year it serves us well to reflect on our current living situations, whether or not we are considering a change in ministry. Questions similar to those above for ministry could be used for reflection. Recognizing Catherine's call to live well with one another and the challenges to us in our *Constitutions*, as well as the call in Acts 2:44-47 (see last section for full quotes), we do well to purposely recommit to our present living situations or to make a change.

1. How has my living situation helped me to express the core of (a) who I am, (b) who I am as a Sister of Mercy, (c) who I am in the process of becoming?
2. What do I perceive to be the blessings and struggles related to my living situation?
3. Why have I stayed in this situation?
4. What questions have stirred in me as I reflected on the suggested readings?
5. If living in a group, have we talked about our life together? Are there ways we can improve our community life?
6. If living singly, with whom should I discuss my living situation? Are there ways I can improve my community life?
7. How will my proposed decision affect my development as a woman, as a member of my Community and our Institute?
8. What implications does my response to continue in or change my living arrangements have on the quality of my life in community? How will my life in community empower me for mission?
9. With whom should I discuss this:
 - * my leadership contact?
 - * my spiritual director?
 - * a friend who will affirm yet challenge me, both personally and as a member of the community?
 - * my local community or prayer group?
 - * persons who can add other perspectives to my discernment?

Optional: Theological Reflection Process

The process of theological reflection can be very helpful in considering particular situations about which you need to make a decision. There are a variety of approaches to theological reflection. We have included one suggested book, *The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O'Connell Killen and John DeBeer, in the references at the end of this booklet. You can adapt the situations described in the book to your own particular situation.

Communal Discernment Prayer Service

In the Quaker tradition, with which Catherine McAuley was familiar and for which she held great respect, a group of supportive individuals are invited to be part of a “Clearness Committee” when a member or members of the group are discerning an important decision. You may wish to use the process described below or a similar one.

Call to Prayer

Leader: Let us pray together...

All: God of light, from whom all good gifts come, descend upon us with life-giving fire. Send your Spirit into our hearts with the power of a mighty wind. By the flame of your wisdom, open the horizons of our minds. Empower us to call forth the depth of commitment and love which is the legacy of our Institute.

Leader: God of fire, Dios de vida, you have given us the flame of Mercy to kindle and rekindle throughout our journey together.

Hymn: “Come, Lord Jesus, send us your Spirit; renew the face of the earth.” (2 times)

Leader: (Invite each person to come forward and light a small candle from the large candle.) Say:
“(Person’s name), stir into flame the gift of God that you have been given.”
(Continue until each person has come forward and lit a candle.)

Reading

The spirit of obedience impels us to search together for God’s will in fidelity to our mission. Responsible obedience requires that we inform our minds and prepare our hearts for dialogue, share our insights and respect freedom of conscience. In this search, we listen to one another in love and accept conversion to God’s will. When the Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and courage to live this way, we are able to embrace the cross in whatever shape it presents itself in our lives (*Constitutions* 28).

Quiet Reflection

“...a communal setting counters the notion of rugged individualism. We don’t need to act as though all our personal decisions have to be made by ourselves, without the benefit of other people’s wisdom, support, and questioning. It also recognizes that our behavior and attitudes affect others. Especially, those of us living in community find it important to consider the effects our decisions have on others around us” (Woodrow 4).

Individual Sharing

After reflection, invite each member of the circle to share her story. That sharing might include:

- * What have I done? Where have I been? How did I get to my present ministry/living situation? How have my ministries/living situation formed me?
- * How do I live out our Institute *Direction Statement*?
- * How have I met God's love, care, and challenge in my choices of ministry/living situation?
- * What have I learned about God? About myself?

Group Sharing

Invite members of the circle to reflect on what was shared individually. That reflection might include:

- * What common values or experiences did I hear?
- * What surprised me in what I heard?
- * What didn't I hear that I expected to hear?
- * What did I hear that I need to fold into my own discernment process?
- * How did I hear the Spirit of God moving in the group?

Closing Prayer

Leader: Who will feed the fire?

All: We shall be kindling and allow the spark of God that lives within us to burst into flames.

Leader: Who will feed the fire? Who will tend the flame?

All: We shall be kindling and have a passion for life that radiates into the lives of others.

Suscipe of Catherine McAuley

My God, I am yours for time and eternity. Teach me to cast myself entirely into the arms of your loving providence with the most lively, unlimited confidence in your compassionate, tender pity. Grant me, O most merciful Redeemer, that whatever you ordain or permit may be acceptable to me. Take from my heart all painful anxiety; suffer nothing to sadden me but sin; nothing to delight me but the hope of coming to the possession of you, my God and my all, in your everlasting kingdom. Amen.

Reflection Materials

Ministry Discernment

Constitutions 3, 4, 7, 29, 31, 84

3. Recalling the word of Jesus that he is one with his suffering members, we respond to the cry of the poor. The interdependence of peoples and Christ's mandate to proclaim the gospel to all nations challenge us to develop a global perspective on the works of mercy. Through direct service and through our influence we seek to relieve misery, to address its causes and to support all persons who struggle for full dignity.
4. To this end we serve God's people through education, healthcare and other ministries that further social, political, economic and spiritual well-being. Through the special ministry of prayer and patient suffering, we witness to union with the crucified Christ, encouraging those engaged in other works of mercy and interceding for the whole church.
7. We carry out our mission of mercy guided by prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, Catherine McAuley's preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women, the pastoral priorities of the universal and local church and our talents, resources and limitations.
29. By the vow of service we commit ourselves to exercise the spiritual and corporal works of mercy revealed to us through the life of Jesus. Enriched by his love, healed by his mercy and taught by his word, we serve the poor, sick and ignorant.
31. It is the responsibility of each sister to serve in a ministry compatible with our mission in the church and approved by her Community president; to participate in a continuing formative process toward growth in holiness; to contribute to the life of the Institute and to commit herself wholeheartedly to the ideals of the Sisters of Mercy expressed in these *Constitutions*.
84. To celebrate our corporate word in a discordant society requires the courage of a deep faith and interior joy. We believe that God is faithful and that our struggle to follow Christ will extend God's reign of love over human hearts. We rejoice in the continued invitation to seek justice, to be compassionate and to reflect mercy to the world.

Institute Direction Statement (revised June 2005)

Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with:

- * the economically poor of the world, especially women and children;
- * women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society;
- * one another as we embrace our multi-cultural and international reality.

This commitment will impel us to:

- * develop and act from a multicultural, international perspective;
- * speak with a corporate voice;
- * practice non-violence;
- * work for systemic change;
- * act in harmony and interdependence with all creation; and
- * call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyles and ministries.

Scripture

Isaiah 58:6-11

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the need, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

John 13:12-17

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are the messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Morning & Evening Prayer

Apostolic Spirituality (page 955)

The faith-vision of Catherine McAuley's apostolic spirituality was that Christ would consider as done to Himself whatever should be done to others (Matthew 25:40). This, in turn, convinced her that she should be herself a sign of His presence among His people, just as she expected to encounter Him in the many areas encompassed by her ministry of Mercy. In a very real sense her Apostolic Spirituality was part of her search for a personal union with God, for the ability to converse with Him at any time and place, for a contemplative consciousness. . . .

Mother Catherine's apostolic spirituality was marked by her ability to create and maintain inner spiritual space, to be constantly aware of the mystery of God and to be able to find His touch everywhere in the world of people, of their occupations and of their miseries, as she strove to live the life and holiness of the Church according to the radicalness of the Gospel. Jesus' criterion of concern and compassion was the standard of her apostolic spirituality which taught her how to encounter God in her world and to make that encounter efficacious through her ministry to Him in others. . . . Her apostolic spirituality may be said to have effectively translated the Gospel into the idiom of her time and to have conveyed this ideal to others (Bolster 830-31).

Prayer and Contemplation as the Heart of the Apostolate (page 956)

From her earliest years Catherine McAuley's life was seamed with prayer and was centered on Christ, outside of whom she declared she sought *nothing* (McAuley *Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley* 36). As she understood it, putting on Christ meant that she should be 'gentle, patient, hard-working, humble, obedient, charitable and, above all, simple and joyous' (*Familiar Instructions*, passim). Her

own life-style and subsequent structure of religious life were based on a deep level of prayer as the very heart of the apostolate, while her guiding principles were faith in a triune God (McAuley *Thoughts from the Spiritual Conferences of Mother M. Catherine McAuley* 21), confidence in His promises, an all-embracing love and a joyful heart that was constantly open to the Spirit. She incorporated in her own life and in her recommended way of life for her Sisters the most basic and universal of Christ's teachings, His Gospel of Love. The main pillars supporting her prayer life were solitude, contemplation of the mysteries of salvation and her understanding of her apostolate as prayer.

She was uncompromising in upholding prayer and contemplation as the very heart of the apostolate. She was acutely aware that the deepest human need is the need for God and she was convinced that the primary apostolate of the Sister of Mercy was to portray Christ. Her idealism led her to try and alleviate human need of every kind; her realism convinced her that the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy are a means of closer union with God. Hence prayer and service were to flow together reciprocally in the life of the Sister of Mercy. By conscientiously following this life-style in all its details, Catherine McAuley became a Lumen Christi, lighting up the darkness of ignorance and squalor which circumscribed the lives of the poor in her day (Bolster 835-36).

Action and Contemplation (page 903)

The habit of reflection that Catherine McAuley achieved was not simply a practice of guarding exterior senses, cultivating the mind to think above and beyond present duties. This view appraised human tasks as necessary but secondary. As such they were understood to interfere with the primary or spiritual obligation or exercises. Catherine had learned how to utilize the activities of each hour to be the matter of her reflection, and never accepted a contemplative/apostolic dichotomy. She insisted that active works must be done without losing awareness of the presence of God, convinced that the Sister of Mercy must make mission the ambience of her recollection, as she makes charity the ambience and quality of her service (Regan and Keiss 109-10).

Discernment for Living Situation

Constitutions 18, 19

18. By our life in community and by sharing our faith and mission, we come to know ourselves as sisters and to form bonds of union and charity. . . .
19. Community strengthens us for mission when we listen openly to one another, seek the common good and promote mutual trust. A sign of our union and charity is our personal and corporate willingness to share our lives and resources with the poor and afflicted.

Scripture

Acts 2:44-47

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Familiar Instructions of Catherine McAuley

Our Holy Rule then reminds us that we are to help and assist one another on all occasions, that we are to bear with patience each other's defects, weaknesses, and imperfections (McAuley *Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley, Foundress of the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, Dublin, Ireland* 109).

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