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James J. Magee

College of New Rochelle, jmagee11@verizon.net

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Early Church Models of Some Elderly Ministries

For the past decade I have been facilitating reminiscence groups with women religious who are retired from their primary ministries. Reminiscing leads them to take responsibility for their life stories while taking note of those stories' historical and cultural contexts. It also alerts them to anticipate their needs and choose the best ways to meet them.

The sisters enhanced their memories and discussion by integrating scriptural themes into them. They improved their ability to manage their lives and respond creatively to the needs of others by infusing their memories with informed religious imagination. This article

James J. Magee writes his eleventh article for this journal. He is professor emeritus of gerontology in College of New Rochelle; New Rochelle, New York 10805.
describes, with members’ consent and with fictional names, how one group reflected upon scriptural themes in the social ethic of the Christian communities of the first three centuries.

The group of six members met for ten weekly sessions of ninety minutes. During the first three sessions, they read and discussed the sources for our knowledge of this social ethic, including bishops’ letters to their own and other communities; religious tracts, doctrinal instructions, and exhortations to virtue; and apologetic discourses addressed to both the pagan world and the Christian communities. The sources are all readily available in translation. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2008) provides online biographical entries about the sources’ authors. The group limited their reading to sources earlier than the Edict of Milan (312), which extended a tolerance toward Christianity and thereby altered the character of communities, enabling Christians to use their Christian affiliation for social, economic, and political aggrandizement.

The earlier social ethic we focused on is manifest in Christian accounts of famines and persecutions of the first three centuries. These accounts regularly have to do with the vulnerable: widows, orphans, travelers, the infirm, and the imprisoned. They tell of the practices and organization with which the early Christian communities reached out and extended relief to their own members in need and to other communities. The ethic particularly stressed that donors were not to judge the deservingness of those in need since all members of the community possessed an inherent dignity from their participation in the Whole Christ. By the beginning of the 2nd century, however, the integration of wealthy converts into the communities began to bring
enlightened self-interest into the social ethic to complement purely altruistic motives. At this point, the authors emphasize that generosity can forestall the risk of apostatizing to protect riches, has penitential value, and commends donors for eternal rewards.

This article highlights three themes of the social ethic that the group of sisters adapted to their own reminiscences and discussions. Then it shows how three members drew upon that adaptation to discern a ministry they could undertake. Finally, it presents the group’s tenth session, in which the three report about the fruition of their plans.

Theme One: Reaching Out to Those at Risk

The group focused first on the attention the Jewish Scriptures give to widows and orphans because of their obvious needs and continual presence in the community. Deuteronomy 10:18 emphasizes that “your God executes justice for the orphan and the widow,” and Psalm 68:6 echoes that “the father of orphans and the defender of widows is God.” Sirach 35:14 notes that God “is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint,” and Isaiah 1:23 indicts Israel and Judah because “the fatherless they defend not, and the widow’s plea does not reach them.”

Group members pointed out that the early Christians used “widows and orphans” to represent all those who were needy, marginal, or oppressed. The Epistle of James (1:27) baldly maintains that “looking after widows and orphans in their distress and keeping oneself unspotted by the world make for pure worship without stain before our God and Father.” Paul (1 Tm 5:9,10) asks the bishop of Ephesus to oversee the care of widows in that city. Around the turn of the century, one bishop
advised another about their support: “Do not neglect the widows; after God, it is you who must concern yourself with them.”

Similarly, about the year 150, Justin Martyr summarized the social charges of a bishop by noting: “He helps the orphans and widows, those who are needy because of sickness or any other reason, and the captives and strangers in our midst; in short, he takes care of all those in need.”

The group discussed how early Christian authors also emphasized this hospitality toward strangers and prisoners. The Christians were concerned about the discomforts of their comrades’ travels and about the risk of their staying at inns, which often were houses of prostitution. Thus, Hermas, who composed The Shepherd about 150, lauds bishops who are “friendly to strangers and who receive the servants of God into their homes gladly, without sham.”

The prisoners and captives mentioned refer to Christians arrested because of their beliefs. For such comrades Christian communities provided food and medication, and also bribed guards to collaborate in providing this help. The Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2-3), for instance, urges the Christians of Palestine to aid those in distress: “Do not neglect to show hospitality... Be as mindful of prisoners as if you were sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you may yet suffer as they do.”

Some Christians at Corinth (in 95) even sold them-
selves into slavery and used the money to buy food for prisoners. A century later the apologist Tertullian noted that the community at Carthage used its donations for the relief of prisoners and others in need. The funds were spent “for the support and burial of the poor, for children who are without their parents and means of subsistence, for shipwrecked sailors, and for any in the mines, on islands, or in prisons.” So too in the 3rd century (ca. 250) Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, reiterated this concern. To his priests and deacons he writes: “Widows or those who are in prison ought to have someone to minister to them. Moreover, you may furnish to travelers, if any should be indigent, expenses from my own funds.”

Sister Beatrice

Sister Beatrice, the first member to reminisce, observed that she had endured a protracted “persecution” following a family loss. The elder of two children, eighteen years old when her mother died, she assumed care for her widowed father until his death seventeen years later. He was given to arbitrary decisions such as insisting, when there were guests, that she prepare him a meal different from what she was serving everyone else; demanding, as he was dying, that she carry him to the car so that he could eat at his favorite clam bar. She joined her community two years after his death and only then did she recognize how she had been too acquiescent to his demands.

Sister Beatrice had recently received an invitation to the wedding of her late brother’s granddaughter. Though her limited mobility prevented her from attending, reviewing the early social ethic suggested a gift that only she could give. Her brother, somewhat
patriarchal himself, was not given to sharing family lore. So her grandniece had only a dim awareness of the patterns that had roiled her family over generations and might repeat themselves in her upcoming marriage. Sister Beatrice planned to invite her grandniece and her fiancé to visit and tape-record her memories of the stories the grandniece had heard about her great-grandparents’, grandparents’, and parents’ lives. This would give her a long perspective on the family.

At our final session Sister Beatrice said she reminded the engaged couple that she was the last link to the family’s heritage and hoped that they in turn would preserve the family lore for generations to come. Avoiding moralizing and emotionally loaded terms, she told the stories that repeated in each generation the theme of one or another spouse making unilateral decisions. She began with her own great-grandmother’s response to her daughter’s ninth-grade failing report card, sending her, without consulting either husband or daughter, to a boarding academy. Then, when her daughter was graduating, she picked out a finishing school for her and even the courses she would take there. Sister Beatrice concluded that the young couple listened attentively because the focus was not upon them and because of the respect she showed them by describing, not prescribing, the themes of their shared family history.

Theme Two: Stewards of God’s Munificence

As the group reviewed the primary sources, the early communities’ providential design became apparent: donors and recipients provided mutual assistance. These early Christians, during liturgies preceding the distribution of offerings to the needy of the community, would, as agents of the divine, place their offerings upon
the altar. In return, the recipients prayed gratefully for their benefactors.

Paul was the first to press the point that God's example should prompt those with possessions to share them with those in distress. He wrote to the community at Corinth, asking that it assist the indigent members of the community at Jerusalem in the same manner that the Macedonian churches at Beroea, Philippi, and Thessalonica had done even though pressed themselves (2 Co 8:1-7):

We want you to know . . . about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part. For they gave according to their means . . . and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints . . . . Now as you excel in everything . . . see that you excel in this gracious work also.

Thus, for Paul, each community would have its opportunity to aid another and so emulate the "graciousness of our Lord."

Peter too expounded this theme, instructing his comrades (1 P 4:8-10): "Above all, let your love for one another be constant . . . put your gifts at the service of one another, each in the measure he has received."

For relationships among members of the community proceeded from the relationship existing between each member and God. The more comfortable provided assistance for the less comfortable because they regarded such conduct as fulfilling the role which God intended for them. Indeed, their solicitude for vulnerable members was the ordinary channel through which God sustained them.
The emphasis here is really upon stewardship, the use but not the ownership of possessions. For Peter, the practice of using resources “at the service of one another” proceeds from the relationship existing between the steward and the divine Owner of wealth to whom the steward is accountable. Shortly before the close of the 1st century, John too (1 Jn 4:19-21) added his own expression of mutual concern among members of the community: “Let us therefore love, because God first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar. . . . And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.”

The group discussed how throughout the 2nd century the early Christian authors continued to exhort their comrades to act like God, who “first loved us,” by assuming the initiative in seeking out the vulnerable in their midst. The anonymous document *The Teaching of Twelve Apostles* highlights stewardship quite explicitly: “Give to everyone who asks, and ask nothing in return; for the Father wishes that a share of his own gifts be given to all.” The same attitude appeared at this time (ca. 150) in the mystical tract that Hermas, an educated freed slave, composed at Rome. He counseled contributors to the community’s treasury: “Look after widows and orphans and do not neglect them. . . . It was for this that the Master bestowed wealth upon you, to perform this ministry for him.”
More than a century later this theme persisted. The anonymous author of the *Letter to Diognetus* (230) virtually paraphrases John’s Epistle:

Any man can be an imitator of God, if he takes on his own shoulders the burden of his neighbors, if he chooses to use his advantage to help another who is underprivileged, if he takes what he has received from God and gives it to those who are in need—for such a man becomes God to those who are helped.\(^9\)

Shortly thereafter Cyprian wrote his *Works and Almsgiving* to encourage a selfless response by his people to all victims of a devastating plague, whether they were Christian or pagan. He stressed the universal scope of God’s munificence, noting that in like manner people should reach out to all in need:

Whatever belongs to God, belongs to all by our appropriation of it, nor is anyone kept from his benefits. . . . Thus the day illuminates equally; the sun radiates, the rain moistens . . . and the splendor of the stars and the moon is common. With this example of equality, the possessor on the earth who shares his returns and fruits, while being fair and just with his gratuitous bounties, is an imitator of God the Father.\(^10\)

Benefactors, moreover, needed to be conscientiously alert that their aid did not omit anyone in distress. For them to discriminate between those upon whom they would and would not bestow assistance would have them appear as the owners of their treasures, rather than simply stewards. Hermas reiterates this point:

Blessed are those who possess such riches and understand that riches are from God. . . . Do good and from the fruit of your labors, God’s gift, give to all those in need, without distinction, not debating to whom you will and to whom you will not give. Since
it is God's will that we give to all from his bounties, give to all.\textsuperscript{11}

Around the turn of the 3rd century, Clement, bishop of Alexandria, chided those who wanted first to determine the worthiness of those whom they assisted: "By being niggardly and pretending to test who will deserve the benefit and who will not, you may possibly neglect some who are beloved of God."\textsuperscript{12} Clement's disciple, Origen, continued his mentor's social teaching, stressing the universal claim which the vulnerable have upon the community. Since individual concern and community support should include all the needy, he wrote (240): "Charity reckons all men as neighbors. By nature, indeed, we are all of us neighbors; but by the works of charity a man who has it in his power to do service to another who has not that power becomes his neighbor."\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Sister Clothilde}

Sister Clothilde pointed out the associations that her reminiscences evoked about this second theme. She explained how her parents epitomized the spirit of stewardship. Her mother prepared three meals for each evening. One was for her ailing parents who lived several blocks away, another was for herself and her children, and the third was for her husband, who returned from work two hours after the children had finished. She remembered how her father attended daily Mass and particularly his outreach to others: his readiness to assume the outdoor house work for his widowed sister and to extend his day's work by covering for his partner, who was recovering from a heart attack.

Sister Clothilde contrasted their "genuine" stewardship with her own self-serving efforts. She recalled a skein of memories about the challenges she faced in a
lifelong commitment to civil rights, in creating clinics for migrant workers, in mentoring voter-registration volunteers, and in staffing Head Start programs. In every case she saw her motivation arising more from a need to excel her parents than from carrying out a faithful stewardship.

When her colleagues protested that a complex of motives influences behavior, she agreed, but added that such knowledge did not relieve the distressing symptoms accompanying her self-criticism. The group's give-and-take exchanges and focus on the social ethic, however, moved her to modify her plans for a literature course she had scheduled at the local library. She considered how any number of its enrollees might be "stuck" on issues similar to her own. So she decided to incorporate paradox into the course, hoping that it would stimulate a creative tension of both-and answers to their either-or dilemmas—and hint at some resolution to these personal contradictions. With this new agenda, she intended to discuss Shakespearean plays and involve the class in addressing the paradoxes they found in them.

At our last session Sister Clothilde gave examples of the paradoxes that her class discovered:

- Every man has his fault, and honesty is his.  
  (Timon of Athens, Act 3, Scene 1)

- But when I tell him he hates flatterers, he says he does, being then most flattered.  
  (Julius Caesar; Act 2, Scene 1)

- Thou hast traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school.  
  (King Henry VI, Part II, Act 4, Scene 7)

She said that, during the class and afterwards privately, several students spoke candidly of the "freeing insights"
about their own lives that ruminating over the paradoxes elicited.

She was delighted too that she had found a paradox for herself. She was, in her own mind, “a trumpet of [her] own virtues” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act 5, Scene, 2). Though this paradox did not thwart the emotionally loaded words in her self-assessment, it blunted their power by implying that her “better” deeds made her no better than anyone else.

**Theme Three: The Mystical Body**

Our group discovered that Paul’s analogy of the body—showing the rationale for helping all in need without preference—was made most use of during the 3rd century. The members, for instance, appreciated the Pauline roots of Origen’s description (in 240) of the spirit which ought to characterize relationships among members of the community:

> I think we ought to have towards our neighbors the sort of attitude that makes us love them, not as alien bodies, but as our own limbs. This fact of our being members one of another demands, therefore, that we shall have a similar and equal love for all.\(^{14}\)

Cyprian, his contemporary, similarly argued that even family ties should not prevent people from giving assistance to anyone in distress: “He sins in the world who, placing himself and his children before Christ, preserves his wealth, and does not share his plentiful patrimony with the indigent.”\(^ {15}\)

Cyprian also recorded a particular occasion on which his own congregation at Carthage, motivated by the ideal of unity, relieved the distress of its Christian neighbors. In 253 the Carthaginians contributed to the ransom of members of a Numidian congregation who
had been captured by barbarian raiders. In a letter to the bishops of Numidia, Cyprian conveyed the sentiments of his own people toward the sufferings of their neighbors:

Who would not consider the sorrow of his brother as his own since the Apostle Paul speaks and says, "If one member suffers, the other members also suffer"? . . . Wherefore now also the captivity of our brethren must be thought of as our own captivity, and the sorrow of those in danger must be accounted as our sorrow since, you may be sure, there is one body of our unity.16

Unity within the mystical body includes both members within each community and all communities together. Third-century authors also amplified Matthew's account of Christ's words at the Last Judgment to emphasize that recipients of care were members of his body. Hippolytus, a priest of Rome and later a martyr, interpolated his own remarks into Matthew's account so that the passage accentuates even more the condition of the vulnerable and Christ's identification with them. Summarizing the social teachings of his predecessors, he said (in 230), as if in Christ's own words:

Come, friends of the poor and the stranger, you who esteemed not riches, you who had compassion on the poor, who aided the orphans, who helped the widows, who gave drink to the thirsty, who fed the hungry,
who received strangers, who clothed the naked, who visited the sick, who comforted those in prison, who helped the blind. . . . Inasmuch as you have received those of whom I have already spoken to you, I mean the poor who are my members, you have done it unto me.\textsuperscript{17}

**Sister Rose**

Sister Rose’s reminiscences included much about her tightly woven extended family. Every story embedded her in some situation where kin were admonishing her, warning her, wringing their hands over her, or otherwise telling her what was in her best interest. On the other hand, she basked in the applause that came from entire rows of them at her school plays and recitals.

During the years when Sister Rose was in the missions, a “great break” occurred in her family. When a cousin announced that she was marrying a Nigerian, the family boycotted the wedding en masse. The exception was another cousin, who sent a searing letter to her relatives condemning their intolerance. When Sister Rose returned, she kept amicable ties with her entire family, even though the alienated parties thereafter avoided contact with each other. Moved by our group’s reflections, she hoped to heal this wound.

She reached out to her cousins, now the adult children of the originally embattled parties, to help her organize a reception for her sixty-fifth anniversary as a woman religious. At this planning meeting, she spoke candidly of the family rift, noting how those present had nothing to do with it, yet were being deprived of one another’s camaraderie. She asked, as their gift to her, that they urge their parents to attend the reception.

During our final session, Sister Rose described the event. She greeted all relatives by name and had them
choose their own tables. Then she thanked her cousins for their generous teamwork. She recalled humorous memories about members of the oldest generation present. She asked them to share reminiscences of her, observing that this could be one of the few remaining opportunities she would have to hear them. She closed by speaking of her regret that she was inaccessible during “our great break” and could not help them repair its consequences.

The first relative she called to speak was the cousin who wrote the strongly critical letter. This woman apologized for the letter’s self-righteous tone even before she said anything else. Sister Rose asked for another speaker, and one of the boycott leaders volunteered. He said he had had many second thoughts over the decades but, like others, had not reopened the matter during family social occasions. After several other reparatory—and humorous—speakers, the now elderly groom broke up the party by announcing, “I only wanted to marry in because I heard you all had lots of money!”

Ministries Afresh

The ministries that older women religious choose may be circumscribed by age-related limitations, but the creativity and ingenuity they bring to them is ever fresh. This article shows how members of one reminiscence group used the early church’s social ethic to get a better understanding of themselves, their past and their present, and thus were better able to discern worthy ministries they could still undertake.

Notes


7 The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, 1:5, in Apostolic Fathers.

8 Hermas, The Shepherd, Parables 1:8-9, in Apostolic Fathers.

9 Letter to Diognetus, Chapter 10, in Apostolic Fathers.


11 Hermas, The Shepherd, Parables, 2:10, in Apostolic Fathers.


