

Power, Paradox and Mercy

By

Dr. Mary-Paula Cancienne, RSM, Ph.D.

Conference for Mercy Higher Education

mpcancienne@sistersofmercy.org

Catherine McAuley knew the power of connections, education, financial resources, even the power of wise temperaments whom she chose to send to lead new convents in Ireland and England during her short decade as the leader of a new religious community of women, the Sisters of Mercy in the 19th century. To develop such a project and one which could endure, she had to know how to do some amazing workarounds and collaborations, considering she was a Catholic woman in Dublin, Ireland when power lay squarely in the hands of men.

Catherine was an intelligent, practical, good humored, and reflective woman who could assess situations and make judgements through a faith lens rooted in values. More so, she found a way to share the story of her journey and to invite and draw talented collaborators into the adventure of growing in love with God and others, which meant addressing the needs of the poor. She had people power, some financial power, intellectual power, and spiritual wisdom power. Paradoxically, they were nested within the grace and power of her humility. These talents, gifts, and graces increased her influence and then the community's influence beyond any individual contributor or collaborator.

As part of the Sisters of Mercy's return to their roots, a call from the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II in the 1960's, the sisters began exploring how they understand power and how they could be less hierarchical and more inclusive in making decisions, which meant encouraging greater dialogue and reflection in their discernment processes. You find evidence of this in their large Chapter meetings where leadership is elected and directions are set for the community of sisters and their ministries. Quaker influences on Catherine helped to validate these efforts and led to an openness to learn from Quaker practices, as well as many other sources.¹

Within these efforts you hear about horizontal models and consensus building steps. The way or means is just as important as the result. But utopia is never the goal. It is more about how we walk the journey, simultaneously attending to the need before us, with an alert eye to the next emerging need.

In the push-and-pull of coming to decisions, *racehorses* sometimes slow their pace to those of the *plodders*, whose ideas and insights may need more time, and plodders sometimes yield to the quicker pace of the group, allowing proposals and decisions to go forward without their own explicit affirmation or refutation of the will of the larger group. In the overall process of decision-making leadership and managers, empowered to act for the good of the whole, are respectful and attentive to the individual. In the process, a culture of dialogue, examination and contemplation can see itself mature in the personal and communal realm, but is always vulnerable to regression and distortion, thus the need for persistent vigilance and examination. If the compass point toward the common good is misaligned, or if the disposition of humility turns to arrogance, even a soft arrogance, the shadow side of power finds a home.

When things are working well, decisions are made at the level where it is most appropriate, what is called “subsidiarity” in Catholic Social Teaching, such that power does not continually accrue to the top and on the other extreme, direction and momentum do not falter because each one plays to her own tune in her own world, without a sense of membership and responsibility for the welfare of the community, in light of the mission of the community.

Of course, in any kind of community consensus building takes time, lots of time and effort. On occasion, a horizontal circle of inclusion, whose process is not well facilitated, can spiral into frustrating loops, with no direction emerging and without creative, responsible

decisions and actions achieved. In a worst-case scenario, decisions and actions slip into a place of lowest common knowledge and understanding, or territorialism, fragmentation and emotionalism, spiced with personal grudges and battles for control. Extreme ends of the spectrum can lead to grave difficulties for the community. Even worse is when members of the community lose their sense of belonging to a purpose greater than themselves and feel the effort to improve, resolve, and create together is not worth the trouble.

Yet, if we assume that power or Spirit supplies the force for life, even thought and influence, then Mercy as an organization, as well as the broader circle of Mercy, takes part in this life force. – Whether you attribute the life force to “God” or the powers of creation . . . nothing in life is static or mechanistic, but dynamic.

As such, power matters, which is why many of Mercy’s works are concerned with empowering people, such as students through education, the uninsured through healthcare, the unhoused through decent housing, the unrepresented through legal access, and so on. Even regarding Earth, however late, we are beginning to recognize and appreciate the power and importance of “other kinds” and subsequently how we need to advocate for legislation and policies that support life’s integrated systems, and work toward a more wholistic approach to living as Earth’s community.²

The awareness of “Who has power?” and “Who does not?” and how power is used was part of Mercy charism from the beginning and remains so today. -- Recall that Catherine chose not to name her successor, instead, trusting the sisters to choose who would be their next leader, following the course as it was set down in their new Constitutions.³

In human history we have placed tremendous weight on physical power. We can even chart our human path through different conflict options: big fist, big stick, big flying stone, big powder gun, big missile, but now we have other options, big disrupters, like malevolent financial manipulators or internet hacks, or biological/chemical agents.

Brute control and great wealth for a few, at almost any cost, have left us a scorched Earth, with many living in the grips of poverty and violent situations, with food and water insecurity, while we litter the space above us, as well. Just consider the number of firearms that are sold legally in the United States, not to mention the unreported and illegal sales, as well as those markets around the world.⁴ What are the power stories being played out every day around the world when hands hold guns, and when and how did those stories really begin, and where will those stories lead?

Amid our turmoil, that includes great need and great possibilities, humans are scrambling for new ways to hold and use power, searching for how to live well with each other (almost 8 billion people on Earth), with other creatures, and all of Earth's natural systems, which human actions are affecting, and dangerously so. One might say, we are searching for how to collaborate as humans and for how to come to a healthy "consensus" with Earth.

The late economist Milton Friedman's gospel is crumbling, if only in lip service by Wall Street power brokers. Friedman's gospel preached that a corporation's responsibility rest in making as much profit as it can for its stockholders, and that's about the breadth of its moral responsibility. Just do what is legally necessary to stay out of jail. – This obliterated any moral call to work, even a tiny bit, for the common good, and sounded the horn for the running of the bulls, giving free reign to those with resources to amass even greater resources and power,

with no compunction. Unbridled capitalism with no siderails, can leave communities to clean up byproduct toxins when corporations do not take full responsibility for the products and services they provide from the beginning to the end of the life of their product or service, like polluting rivers that taxpayers then pay to clean up. Unbridled socialism can be just as bad. The difference lay in who pays the cost, who takes the risks, and who collects the benefits. It's all about the details.

Right power requires being honest about reality, which is hard moral work. It is an ongoing, never completed task engaged with *what is* and *what is happening*, and how did it come to be so. This work requires some degree of vulnerability and openness to see, hear, understand, feel, dialogue, and evaluate reality, and then to freely enter that reality, perhaps a bit more conscious and aware of its complexity. How we understand a situation or choose to look at a situation has consequences. To perceive reality as honestly as one can at any particular time, as well as collectively, requires some surrendering of what we traditionally think of as power. It summons forth a degree of vulnerability when I leave room to listen openly to other perspectives, or to acknowledge that I may not have the whole truth, or that I could be wrong.

By refusing to inflate or distort our own sense of importance, as individuals and as particular groups, we are more likely to keep our own capacity for unruly power in check and to work toward an understanding that reflects a more nuanced, layered and dynamically inter-related reality. Simply being aware of where and how we focus our attention can reveal elemental sides of power at play.

This is not easy in the game of life when it seems like we must sell and promote ourselves at every turn, even soliciting “friends” and “likes” online. Even when we focus on changing behaviors and attitudes like bullying, sexism, racism, and narrow gender definitions, we can fall into misusing power. Pulling someone from their pedestal takes some justification and righteous indignation, dangerous territory for the journey of a soul. However, some of the best healers are those who have themselves known the illness. -- When they come to respect the foe (not the illness of the deed), they remember their own weaknesses, limitations, and downfalls, and so go into the process of being agents for healing with some humility, for they have lived into some degree of maturity through blood, sweat, tears, failure, and reflection.

If we do not recognize and understand the dynamic of power and have some sense of what we aim for, hope for, or what motivates us, then how can we address abusive, unjust, intimidating power or ineffectual power structures, which usually serve the status quo, such as lame legal justice systems where those in privileged power often do not want things to change? Akin to various kinds of justice, power is tendered by mercy. However, mercy rest in paradox, sometimes the long, slow-playing hand of paradox. We see this time and again in religious parables, in folklore, and in stories past and present.⁵

For example, in the Book of Genesis, Joseph, the dreamer kid is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. He then rises to leadership in a foreign land, eventually saving his estranged family from starvation. Power is flipped and the oppressive cycle of power is broken, at least for a while, when Joseph, who now has great power, uses power not as his brothers used power on him, but instead bestows mercy-power on the brothers who wronged him.

Or, consider the undersized, musical David who takes down the giant Goliath, or the itinerant preacher/teacher/healer Jesus who claims that the meek shall inherit the Earth, or the imprisoned liberation fighter who restrains from vengeance and becomes president of South Africa, or women's collective efforts and how they increasingly swell toward greater consciousness, asserting that women's integrity is not to be violated on a dark street, in the home or at work, by physical or emotionally intimidating ill formed, deformed plays of power. Or consider the simple beauty of a newborn child and their power to melt even giants.

More so, focus on the institution of slavery in the U.S. and the oppressive saga that takes place over centuries. Consider the subjugation of a people and the long freedom journey by so many, and many who remain nameless. Consider the rising up, the claim of dignity and for full place and roles in society, as well as the right to be leaders in shaping that society. In this crucible of time, once-a-slave people, kept down by any means, the arch of history flips that story. Though the long shadow of evil hangs like a pall over us, paradoxical markings are vibrantly visible. You cannot keep goodness and right and beauty down, it will erupt.

Through the flux and mystery of paradox as it relates to power and mercy, is there a way to remember that we do not control the world? No matter how many authoritarian monsters we elevate to podiums, or how many times we think we have the fullness of understanding about how life works, or how many great answers we have to our "why" questions, eventually we are all brought to the same end, made vulnerable by death and the infinite but converging paths to it. Even our Russian doll like, cascading, endless, why, what, and how questions point to a horizon beyond our grasping, which begs us to find some humility within our vanities.

In some way, depowering can feel like a kind of death, maybe a small death, maybe it is diabolical as when financial systems fail or when nations collapse into chaos or war. Yet, some depowering experiences, even diabolical ones, can lead to heroic new struggles for healthy, justice-oriented change, for conversion toward a more truthful, compassionate, and beautiful way of being in the world.

To experience a “depowering” is to lose something, to have something taken away, some aspect of ourselves that we considered vital and core to who we are, thus we struggle to hold on to it, to not change, to not transition, and to fight like hell against powers we perceive as bringing this strife upon us, upon me. -- No surrender. Rather break than to bend. Just age in place and pollute the minds of the young, generation upon incestuously closed-minded generation to generation. Righteousness and hate breed an evil power, and righteousness alone is blind to the house of hate in which it lives.

More so, when power shifts between and among groups, ethnicities, religions or sects, political parties, nation states, corporate factions, or neighborhoods, such that there is destruction, oppression, “moral evil,” or what religious traditions’ name as “sin,” where better for the practice of mercy to be than in the struggle. Mercy, not as a placating presence who fogs up a coming to grips with reality and change, but like a witness-observer who sees and helps to name the inflation of false power, helping to bring it into consciousness. Mercy is a way of non-violently enacting power through diligent ongoing examination of reality, that includes self, community, and society, and then acting to name what is, what has been, and what could be. Under this habit, abuse and distortions of power are more regularly recognized before they become an ill-formed norm.

However, first we must come to face the nature of our own power, our own beliefs about power, our own culture of power, and to find ways to use power more justly and creatively. Here we often set off on the wrong foot because we do not know when we have entered into a power dynamic or situation, or how force is played in subtle ways, or enough about our own history of power, personal and collective power, as in caste, class, race, gender, education, voice, health abilities, national status or general views about who should have power, how much, and what kinds. Our deeply religious views and practices carry within them dictates about power and its structures. Our favorite daydreams, too, can implicate us in a power scheme.

In some cases, we are afraid of power, our own as well as others, or we pedestal as well as degrade some people based on their power or what we consider as their power, never fully knowing why. We also do not ask how other people understand power, manifest, and use power, sometimes very differently than ourselves or the clans in which we live and work. Make no mistake, power should not be treated lightly, for misuse of power can mess up lives and kill people, including our own.

Yet, power well grown, with open hands, needs merciful hands and well-trained, contemplative minds. Together, we must diligently pursue ways to share power, nurture collective power, and use it for the collective good, while choosing to set aside crude implements of power. While good and just laws are vitally important, no number of laws alone can hold forth the power, mercy and vision needed to bind whole communities of individuals together in life-giving, respectful, and beautiful ways. No number of rules and policies will yield love, hope, ideals, or a story worthy of living or dying for. – Time is a gift and can certainly be a

privilege. The crunch of time in terms of needing to make some exceedingly tough decisions as an Earth community will inevitably raise new questions for Mercy and Mercy institutions regarding power and the common good.

As further reflection on power and mercy, consider the following questions.

1. Recognize and evaluate the stage and quality of power that you have personally, collectively, and corporately? Do so in dialogue with others. Examples?
2. Where and how is power moving, shifting, receding and manifesting anew? Examples?
3. What are some of the challenges and needs that require greater attention in the midst of shifting power? Examples?
4. What power do your religious beliefs hold for you? Have you attributed metaphysical or superpowers to some of your beliefs? Explain.
5. Why are good and evil forms of power vulnerable, touched with paradox, and always in flux, yet intractable in some circumstances? Examples?
6. How are humility and mercy related to power?
7. Where and how do I/we squander God's gift of potential power in search and service of truth, beauty and the greater common good? Examples?
8. How could a growing awareness of the dynamics of power be helpful to enhance cooperation for the good? Examples?
9. What are some of the customs, rules, narratives, laws, and habits that guide how we hold and use power, personally and collectively, and what are they based upon in terms of a nesting of beliefs?
10. What is the power of silence . . . stillness, nature, friendship, love, beauty, truth, goodness, and mercy?

¹ See: *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*. By Michael J. Sheeran, 1983.

² See: Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund. < <https://celdf.org/> >

³ Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2012), 362.

⁴ Guns sold in U.S. < <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/13/three-million-more-guns-the-spring-2020-spike-in-firearm-sales/> > Accessed 2 February 2021.

⁵ Consider some of the stories of women in leadership. See: “Women’s History Month: Celebrating Female Leaders,” Washington Post Staff. < <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/women-history-month-leaders-2021/> > Accessed 3 March 2021.