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THE MAGNIFICAT

A HERMENEUTICAL STUDY OF LUKE 1:45-55

*Mary Catherine Nolan, O.P., S.T.D.**

INTRODUCTION

In his Marian encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope John Paul II reflects upon the scene of the Visitation, and in Mary's Magnificat he sees a model for the mission of the Church. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ. Today, as participants in this mission and in human history, we seek to bring the gospel into dialogue with the world.

The Word of God is both dynamic and noetic. To accomplish its purpose it must be preached and taught. To interpret the Word of God is essential for the preacher and teacher but what of the listeners and students? How do they hear the Word? Is it an active force in their lives? Do the life experiences which the hearers of the Word bring to Scripture form a filter through which the Word is heard? These questions have led me to look at the interpretation of the Magnificat from a double point of view: *first*, from the perspective of the theological meaning intended by the author, known as Luke, and *second*, from the perspective of a representative group of persons who pray the Magnificat daily.

The World Behind the Text

The task of interpretation and clarification of a biblical text is known as hermeneutics. Raymond Brown, S.S., describes

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three processes to which hermeneutics can refer. First, it can refer to speech itself, inasmuch as language interprets and expresses what is in one's mind. In the Scripture it is human language which attempts to communicate God's mind, will and Person and this entails the use of analogy. Secondly, hermeneutics can refer to translating from one language to another which may entail, also, transferring from one culture and worldview to another. Thirdly, the term can be used to refer to interpretation by commentary and explanation.

Different forms of research are used to interpret a text. Use can be made of historical research to determine the source and the probable date of the writing, as well as, the religious/cultural/sociological context. Literary criticism is used for determining the literary form and structure, as well as, tracing the development of the language used. These methods of research cast light on how the text was meant to be understood at the time it was written. That meaning can then be interpreted by translation into language understood by the modern reader and by commentary which translates the meaning from its original historical context to a contemporary one.

The literary sense of the Bible gives us the "*world behind the text.*" However, there is another sense in which Scripture can be interpreted known as more-than-literal. Raymond Brown, in speaking of general readers of the Bible, asserts that our "religion is based on a belief that God has communicated with human beings and that the Bible is a privileged vehicle of that communication."¹ More than an understanding of the literal sense of Scripture is involved in this communication. Comprehension of the literal sense may not entail a religious appreciation for what the text means in the life of a contemporary reader. The more-than-literal sense of Scripture goes beyond what the human author of a text intended to convey by words. The written words keep reaching out in a dialogue, confronting new issues and constituting a new "world in front of the text."

¹ Raymond Brown, "The Literal Sense of Scripture," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 71:17.

The World in Front of the Text

A second methodology, interpretive inquiry, was employed in an attempt to uncover the spiritual meaning of the Magnificat to a contemporary community. Both methodologies are utilized in a search for theological meaning.

The world in front of the text of the Magnificat is inhabited by real people of faith who relate to the text out of their own specific temporal, cultural and religious life situation. Interpretive inquiry uncovers the way that the text is appropriated and given meaning within this context which is fluid and changing. It is a way of discovering how the gospel is brought into dialogue with the world.

Luke writes within the context of the missionary endeavor of the early Christian Church. Exegesis reveals that the time frame is eschatological, highlighting that the *Age of Salvation* has dawned. Interpretive inquiry reveals that the respondees are faith-filled women who consider themselves called by God to be part of the missionary endeavor of the Church. Twenty centuries removed from the time of the writing of the text of the Third Gospel, the Sisters' eschatological view is tempered by their contemporary experience. The eschatological framework of the Sisters regards the reign of God to be more in *process* than *realized*.

Summary of the Exegesis

This paper will study the use of interpretive inquiry as a hermeneutical method of investigating the "*world in front of the text*" of the Magnificat. Briefly, I will say that Mary's Song contains a covenant theology and it sets themes that Luke develops in the rest of his gospel, especially, the theme of the coming of the Reign of God.

Interpretive Inquiry as Hermeneutical Methodology

Qualitative research originated in the field of anthropology and is now widely used by researchers in the fields of sociology, business, journalism, medicine and education. It provides a methodology known as interpretive inquiry.

Interpretive inquiry consists of collecting data for the purpose of understanding other people's interpretation of their

own experience. In my study of the Magnificat using interpretive inquiry, the data was collected from a representative group of Dominican Sisters' experience of Mary's Song and its meaning as expressed by them. It is validated by the process of triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods in the study of the same phenomena. My study consisted of personal interviews with Sisters and responses to questionnaires. The data collected was then analyzed according to the directives of the methodology.

The primary focus of the qualitative research was, specifically, to determine the way Mary's Song is interpreted within the context of the lives of these Sisters who belong to an American, Dominican, apostolic community—a community two thousand years removed from the time of Luke's writing.

Luke wrote to an audience of the first Christian century which held certain presuppositions concerning the world, social organization, authority, the nature and position of men and women. His gospel was received and interpreted within the cultural milieu of a society far different from our own. In the religious sphere, Christians were a minority who knew real poverty and persecution. It was also a patriarchal society in which the subordinate position of women and slaves was not called into question.

The Sisters interviewed in this study all receive and ponder the gospel; they interpret it from their own unique perspectives as highly educated, professionally experienced women of today. They live, pray and serve both within an ecclesiastical milieu where women's identity, role, and position are defined within the limits of a patriarchal structure and also within a secular cultural milieu where the limits of a patriarchal structure are not presupposed. It was necessary to let the women speak for themselves from their own life and prayer experience.

It was a presupposition of mine that the women interviewed in this study would have an "historical self-consciousness," that is, I assumed that the Sisters would place the Magnificat in historical perspective, look at the meaning that it had at the time it was written and consciously translate that meaning into a form which fit into their own modern perspective. As data

revealed, this was not the process in interpretation of the Scripture which the Sisters employed.

From the beginning of my conversations with the Sisters it was clear that they had not been influenced by the orientation toward the text which I had as a result of having done an exegesis of it.² For them, the Magnificat was a prayer to be said or sung, not a text to be analyzed. In fact, they were grounded in a tradition of liturgical prayer in which the Magnificat was used, if not daily, at least often. The Sisters' approach to interpretation of the Magnificat was not as an academic enterprise.

The historical gap between the world of the first Christian century and the modern world of the Sisters' experience was not problematic. Ancient images in the text were quite simply reinterpreted when they were found meaningful and bypassed when they were not. How close the world of prayer of these modern women is to the world of prayer of the early Christians remains a mystery, but the words of psalm prayers they both used are the same.

The World in Front of the Text

Paul Ricoeur tells us that discourse has a reference which he calls "its *world*." This *world* is a situation common to the speaker and the hearer. When discourse is written, it becomes fixed, yet the meaning of what is written is able to move beyond the author's original intention. As the text becomes distanced from the original situation of the discourse, it creates a "world" which it projects ahead of itself. Subsequent interpretations make it possible to find within the text a "surplus of meaning." Ricoeur states: "The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text says now matters more than what the author meant it to say, and every exegesis unfolds its procedures within the circumference of a meaning that has broken its moorings to its author's psychology."³

² Sister Mary Catherine Nolan, "The Magnificat, Cantic of a Liberated People: A Hermeneutical Study of Luke 1:46-55: Investigating the World Behind the Text by Exegesis, the World in Front of the Text by Interpretive Inquiry" (S.T.D. diss., International Marian Research Institute, 1995), Part One.

³ Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 78.

Leonard Bernstein, in his lyrics for the musical "The Mass," wrote: "You cannot imprison the Word of the Lord." Bernstein understood the beautiful line from Isaiah 55, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

In her insightful writing on biblical hermeneutics, Sandra Schneiders calls the "world in front of the text" the world of Christian discipleship. She says: "This is the world structured by the paschal mystery of Jesus, in which life issues from death, and by the eschatological hope of liberation for all in the boundless shalom of the reign of God."⁴ Schneiders speaks of the world in front of the text as a world of possibility which invites the reader who is engaged with the text to move into its midst and appropriate the text to him-/herself. But this appropriation involves *metanoia*, not just a change of opinion but change to a new way of being. She considers genuine interpretation of Scripture as a hermeneutics of *transformation*.

The Magnificat is more than a text to be interpreted. It is a psalm prayer. The very fact of prayer implies a relationship that has been established between the one who prays and the one to whom the prayer is addressed. In the case of the Magnificat, set forth in the Gospel of Luke as the words of Mary, Mother of the Lord, still another relationship is involved, the relationship between Mary and the one who is praying in Mary's words.

Methods of Interpretive Inquiry

The process of interpretive inquiry began with the formulation of an interview question which was designed to guide the discovery of the worldview of the Sisters relative to Mary's Song. The first question was "What does this passage of Scripture, Luke 1:46-55, mean to you?" The question was purposely open-ended. In qualitative research care is taken not to direct responses to a research question toward the expectations of the researcher. Instead of beginning with a preconceived notion of what the worldview of the Sisters was regarding the Magnificat and then attempting to prove it, I was setting out to

⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (1989): 8.

discover their worldviews. The question was formulated to allow room for other questions to develop from the initial responses. The main purpose of using a grounded theory method is to develop theory. Questions are used that give the researcher flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth.

In some cases the topic of Dominican charism or mission arose as part of the response to meaning; in other cases it did not. A question concerning a connection between the Magnificat and the Dominican sense of discipleship and mission was posed to each interviewee after the response to the general question of meaning seemed to have been exhausted. A second question was then asked: "Do you find any themes in the Magnificat which are supportive of a Dominican theology of mission?" My primary interest lay in uncovering the personal meaning of the Magnificat to individuals. My interest in the connection to Dominican mission was secondary.

After coding and analyzing the first interviews a few more questions were added in follow-up to clarify and ascertain the commonality of themes that had emerged. These questions pertained to the way the Magnificat was used and the frequency with which it was used in private prayer as well as in the creation of communal prayer services. An image of Mary had begun to emerge from the initial responses and the question "Who is Mary to you?" was asked, in order to more clearly identify this image, as well as, to capture an understanding of the nature of the Sister's relationship to her. A theme of change in relationship and image emerged and a question was added to probe the cause of that change.

Context of the Inquiry and Sampling Procedures

The sample group of Sisters interviewed ranged in age from 43 to 92 years. All were highly educated, experienced teachers who were engaged at the time of the interviews in a variety of other ministries (e.g., pastoral, liturgical, administrative; work in the medical field; congregational service; and social work) as well as teaching.

Geographically, the Sisters lived and ministered in twelve different U.S. states, ranging from the Atlantic to the Pacific

coast including the southwest and from Michigan and New York in the north to the southernmost tip of Florida. Four had experienced living and ministering in third world countries. The ethnic background of the Sisters was varied.

The duration of the first nine interviews was unrestricted, lasting from one-half hour to two hours, depending on how much the Sister had to share. Analysis of the initial interviews indicated that perspectives on the Magnificat were uniquely related to the life experiences of the individual Sisters interviewed. A second sampling expanded the number of participants to include a cross section of Sisters who represented the general makeup of the congregation.

Researcher as Instrument

As a Dominican, I shared a history of singing or chanting the Magnificat as a daily part of the community's prayer of Vespers. I knew that the younger members of the community that I interviewed had not experienced the praying of the Canticum in Latin or even daily in English as had the older members, but at the beginning of my study I did not think that this was significant. Actually, the preconceived notion that I understood the perspective from which the Sisters were responding to my questions was a bias that I had to overcome.

Barney Glaser, an authority in the field of interpretive inquiry, in his discussion of grounded theory holds that a skill required of the researcher is to be able to distance oneself from the data being collected. He states: "It requires the ability to maintain analytic distance, while at the same time drawing upon theoretical knowledge and astute powers of assimilation of data which allow concepts to emerge that patterns of data indicate."⁵

My approach to the Magnificat at the time when I began the interviews was somewhat academic and definitely influenced by the exegesis that I had done. This experience shaped my expectations. Glaser states that the goal of grounded theory is to generate theory not to prove a theory already held. In his

⁵ Barney G. Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Mill Valley, Calif.: Sociology Press, 1992), 12.

words, "We are discovering a world not creating it." The Sisters' approach to the Magnificat was different from mine. They reflected upon the Magnificat from the perspective of their own personal, meaningful prayer. Exegetical concerns, such as whether Mary was really the author of the canticle, were not considered; nor was there any explicit attempt to situate the canticle in the context of the theology of Luke. What was emerging in data was a lived spirituality of the Magnificat.

Data Collection Methods

In collecting data a request was made of each Sister to tape the interview. Handwritten notes of the sharing were also taken. These notes recorded the setting of the interview, non-verbal communications, mode of the responses, etc. In each case the same translated text of the Magnificat was used. My awareness of the personal nature of the sharing was increased as I observed the mode of response of each participant.

The interview began with a reading/praying of the Magnificat and a short time for reflection. Then I asked the participant to share her thoughts on this canticle. The first few interviews taught me a great deal about the need for professional sensitivity in these encounters.

After each interview I spent time reflecting on what had taken place, jotting down notes for myself concerning my own reactions to the information I had received. Also, I asked the responder to share how she felt about the interview. With each encounter I continued to become more enlightened about the procedures of interpretive inquiry, more sensitive to the need for openness and respect in the manner in which I listened to the information being shared, and more conscious of the importance of the milieu of trust and confidentiality in which the data collection takes place.

After the first ten interviews, I conducted a preliminary coding of the data to see what categories would emerge as important to the interviewees. I used relations between categories to generate tentative hypotheses. These hypotheses became part of my list of expectations and they were examined in subsequent interviews. Later, transcriptions of the taped interviews revealed a depth and richness of material

which I had missed in my notes, yet the basic themes remained the same.

When categories of meaning had been identified and the findings were written up, this information was given to five members of the community, two participants and three non-participants. They were asked to confirm whether the meaning of the Magnificat which had emerged from analysis of the data represented their perspectives. Later, when the categories described had been related and theories had emerged, another member check was made by sending the study again to select Sisters of the community for their affirmation. Credibility is given an inquiry when the community involved accepts that the findings accurately represent it.

Throughout the process of collecting data I continued to reflect on the interviews and began to formulate hypotheses which were recorded in a daily research log. Thus during the course of the study I was always able to review what had been accomplished as well as to review initial analytical reflections for new insights.

Triangulation

Gathering data from a variety of persons is part of a strategy used in interpretive inquiry known as triangulation. It may also refer to the use of different methods. Different methods tap different ways of knowing. The purpose of triangulation is to increase the validity of the research findings.

As data from the interviews was analyzed some common themes began to emerge. One of these themes concerned the image of Mary that the Sisters held, the relationship with her that they expressed and the importance of that relationship. There was a wide range of attitudes in this regard and some indicated a personal change in relationship to Mary over the years. In follow-up interviews, questions of relationship to Mary and the causes of change in this relationship were asked.

Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis strategy used is known as a constant comparative analysis. This is a continuous inductive process, the purpose of which is to generate theory in a systematic way.

Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of the analysis come from the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis. My task was to understand the world of a Sister's experience from her perspective.

The process of analysis began with open coding of the data. Open coding means breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data. The purpose is to divide an incident described into conceptual units that will identify categories. The categories are named and all concepts that fit into the category are gathered and compared. In this way properties of the category emerge and the category is defined.

An example of open coding that generates categories is the following. One Sister, an art therapist, had arrived for an interview on the Magnificat after a day of working with seriously ill patients in the psychiatric ward of a hospital. She was very tired. We spent a few minutes in prayer together and then a more extended time of silent reflection on the Magnificat. She began to speak of the meaning that the canticle had for her by describing the way she had prayed it.

Referring to herself as a visual perceiver, she described imaging the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth at the Visitation which forms the setting for the canticle and putting herself into the scene. She expressed sensing the presence of Mary with her. She said:

Mary was carrying Jesus. The life of Jesus was within her. It's an exchange of life between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. I was contrasting that with my emptiness. I thought that it would have been good to tell another woman that. So that was a good image. It was a kind of healing image for me in fact, because this is something so familiar and yet this is a way to put myself into this particular aspect of Mary's life and have her touch me. It's beautiful.

As I analyzed this small portion of discourse, several units of meaning were identified. She had spoken of imaging the Magnificat scene, of feeling empty and contrasting that with Mary being filled with life, of sensing the presence of Mary touching her, of healing, of the familiarity of the prayer, of sharing life

with another woman. As I continued to code the concepts of the interview I noticed that she came back again and again to the concept of *praying with images*, of expressing her prayer in art, using color and form. I made a category which I named a *way of prayer*. She had mentioned her own *emptiness* and spoke later about her need to be *filled* with life's energy and to be *healed* inwardly. I made a category for *healing* and one for *life*. Many times she returned to the ideas of a *healing presence* and *affirming life*, expressing her own *mission* as that of bringing a healing presence to others and affirming life in them. I then made a category for *mission*. When a *relationship to Mary* was described in several parts of the interview, it became another category.

I continued in this way, reading the transcript, constantly comparing the units of meaning, gathering them into categories and defining the categories. Then I listed categories and grouped the ones which were related. As the categories became integrated some were reduced to properties of other categories. Finally, the relationships between the remaining categories were examined to find the core category. After reviewing the entire transcript a second time, an attempt was made to capture the core meaning by giving the interview a title. An account of the analysis was recorded as a memo and kept with the copy of the interview.

The second phase of the coding process is focused coding. As I worked with other interview transcripts, coding concepts, generating categories and comparing categories, it was evident that some of the same categories were emerging in several interviews. Comparing interviews, I was able to pull out the common categories. For example, one of the first categories which I identified as a cross category, because it arose in almost every extended interview, was that of *joy*. Then there was a category of *identification with Mary* in the saying or singing of the canticle. In every case except one it was the consideration of Mary's expression of rejoicing in the first two verses of the canticle that led to individual sharings of personal joy and gratitude. A relationship between the categories of *joy* and *identification with Mary* in the praying of the Magnificat was then identified.

The next phase of the process of interpretive inquiry is development of theory. This happens as different categories and their properties tend to become integrated through constant comparison. The analyst then attempts to make some related theoretical sense of each comparison.

In my own daily reflections upon the material that I was analyzing, hypotheses began to form in my mind. For example, I noted that the way the Magnificat was interpreted and the way it was used as prayer was quite specific to a Sister's personality and experience. The philosopher defined prayer; the artist spoke of images; the musicians considered the transformative power of music and the importance of singing the canticle; a psychiatric nurse saw it as a prayer of a woman with self-esteem; a third-world missionary heard in it a call to social justice. Constant comparing of interviews led me to a hypothesis linking life experience with interpretation of meaning of the Magnificat.

As I proceeded with the work of analysis, categories continued to emerge. For example, it was evident to me that a profile of Mary as understood from the Magnificat had emerged from the data. It was also evident that a category of the Sister's relationship to Mary included a subcategory which indicated a change had occurred in this relationship over time and with life experience. Some referred to Mary's relationship to God. Many mentioned Mary as a spokesperson for women.

Various aspects of Mary as seen in the Magnificat—such as her womanhood, her prayer, her spirituality, her awareness of social evil, her role in salvation history—became properties of the category of *Mary's personhood*. Statements which spoke of identification with Mary in the Magnificat—Mary as intercessor, as a special presence in life, as a role model, etc.—were grouped under *relationship to Mary*. Identification with Mary statements were further divided into ways in which this identification was made. A special subdivision recorded expressions of early relationship to Mary, change in that relationship and the cause of the change.

A structure was evident. A diagram assisted me to see the picture of relationships. I proceeded to analyze data from other categories. The Sisters' understanding of God as

reflected through Mary's words in the Magnificat was such a category. Finally, the relationship among all the major categories was examined. The Sisters had drawn meaning from the Magnificat in a way that reflected their perception of God, of Mary, of prayer, of mission. The worldview of the Sisters emerged as they spoke of the meaning they found in Mary's Song.

The lines of the Magnificat which were the most meaningful had the most abundant quotes. There were twenty-three statements referring to God's *mercy*; only five referring to *God's mighty arm*. No judgments were made on what had been interpreted. The purpose of this interpretive inquiry study was to seek out the *world in front of the text* of the Magnificat.

The credibility of my analysis of my Sisters' interpretations of the Magnificat rested upon their acceptance of this study—which was enthusiastically received.

FINDINGS

I. MARY: IMAGE AND RELATIONSHIP

A. Personhood of Mary

The Magnificat functions as the medium of a message about Mary. It would seem that the scriptural text itself is a catalyst that triggers reflections upon the personhood of Mary and the place she has in the spirituality of the Sisters. To most of them, Mary is important for what her life and words reveal about the meaning and purpose of life with God and as a helpful friend and companion on life's journey.

Mary emerges from the reflections as a paradigm of a real woman of inner freedom, who responds to God's call with faith, trust, love and humility. She rejoices in the life that she bears and shares. She is a graced woman of deep spirituality who ponders and integrates the scriptures into her life, a contemplative woman whose actions proceed from her prayer.

Mary's importance, however, is relative to her relationship with God. One Sister remarked, "Mary is not the message. She is the medium of the message." In relation to Dominican mission, Mary is a participant with God in the on-going creation of

the world. She is a real woman of human history who walked the earth and experienced the vicissitudes of the human condition. She is intriguing, for much of her life remains a mystery.

Important reflections on the personhood of Mary include:

1. **Mary as woman:** She is a strong woman who spoke for herself; a woman of inner freedom, faith and humility; a giver of life both physically and spiritually.
2. **Mary's spirituality:** She is a contemplative who experienced a deep relationship to God, reflected all things back to God, and had integrated the scriptures into her life; she is a role model for prayer and discipleship.
3. **Mission of Mary:** Her mission flows from God's choice. She experiences God and goes forth to share that experience with others. She is a woman of action who serves and does her domestic duties.
4. **Mary, aware of social evil:** Her words reflect her awareness of the poverty, oppression and horrors of her day. She identifies with the downtrodden, making a strong statement on their behalf.

B. Relationship to Mary

The majority of the Sisters responding to the Magnificat spoke of a change in their relationship to Mary over the years and particularly following the Second Vatican Council. They spoke of their experience of Mary first in childhood and then in the early years of religious life. Later, there was a transition period, followed by a new understanding of Mary and relationship to her.

Summarizing many responses revealed the earlier image of Mary was that of Queen, Mother and intercessor. Mary responded to petitions. For some she was comfort and strength in difficulty, the model of a silent, passive woman who was courageous in suffering. The rosary was an important prayer. But not everyone found the practice of devotion to Mary positive.

A transition from an initial relationship to Mary to a new kind of relationship was seen by some respondents as they

reflected on the experience of the influence of Mary in their lives. Mary was later seen as a real woman who walked beside them as sister and friend.

The renewal of religious life after Vatican II was cited as a significant factor in changing attitudes. Life experiences, resulting in personal spiritual growth and especially a developing concept of self as woman, led many Sisters to a new understanding of Mary and thus a new relationship with her. The change of relationship was from child-adult to partnership of adults. The Magnificat was a prayer to be said with Mary.

Relationship to Mary now is characterized in various ways, by regarding Mary as a paradigm of right relationship to God and, in this aspect, to be imitated; by addressing Mary as intercessor and thus one to be prayed to; by considering her a special presence in life, a sister, friend, companion and, thus, a source of strength and joy; finally, and most significantly, by identifying with Mary in prayer and in ministry.

II. GOD: IMAGE AND RELATIONSHIP

A. Concept of God

The question of who God is was not asked. But as responses to the question of meaning in the Magnificat were studied and analyzed an image of God began to emerge. Mary's words in the Magnificat are understood to reflect her image of God. This image of God is accepted but elaborated upon and expanded by the respondents who expressed their own experience of God. The God of the Magnificat is the God of salvation history, the God of the covenant. But who and what God is still remains a question. The God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is perceived in the Magnificat, but a universalism is expressed that holds God to be alive and well in other faiths also. God is held to be a Person who is neither male nor female. In fact strong objection was voiced to referring to God exclusively as masculine.

As source of all life, God is proclaimed by all creatures in the vastness of creation simply by reason of their being. Because persons are created extensions of the Godhead, God is present within each one individually and in all collectively. This presence is a healing, encouraging, presence that brings joy and

motivates one to move out toward others. Also, it is possible to envision and experience God. Mary experienced God and anyone who has had this experience can relate to the Magnificat.

B. God in Relationship

In relationship with Mary and with her people God is perceived as *Mighty, Merciful, Faithful* and *Loving*. These relational aspects of God have been experienced by the Sisters in various ways. Especially significant is the need for and experience of God's *mercy*. Some Sisters express that, like Mary, God regards them with favor and has done great things for them, generously bestowing gifts on them. The understanding of God which comes from the Sisters' experience is that God responds to prayers, answers needs; gives strength, protection and encouragement. God's communication may be surprising and takes the form of revelations in prayer which give insight and grace. Yet, God is understood to respect an individual's freedom and choice.

Some statements regarding the Person and mission of Jesus were given. His mission is to bring about the *upside-down-kingdom* with the help of his followers. Jesus is called *Christ*, the *Word of God*, our *Holiness* and our *Redemption*. Jesus, the son of Mary is *Lord* and his presence with her brings *joy*. Christ is God's way of making God present in the world. God will grant what we ask in Jesus' name. The love of Jesus Christ has brought us together and He, the Lord, is faithful.

Insight and awareness are given as gifts by the Holy Spirit, as are knowledge and understanding. Generativity is within us through the power of God's Spirit to affect our lives for the future.

The concept of God and relationship to God has changed over time—with age, as well as, with life and prayer experience. Earlier spirituality was characterized by an emphasis on submission, a fear that blocked relationship with God, a need for answers. Now awe and reverence have replaced fear. Instead of submission there is a concept of helping God create, and, in realizing God's love, there is no need for answers. Earlier emphasis on knowing God's love becomes a search for ways to collaborate with God.

As one gets older the mystery of God deepens. Perhaps God could once be defined, but over time the image of God changes and there is uncertainty. Also, God's *mercy* means more as one gets older. Especially significant is understanding God as feminine as well as masculine. As relationship to God and the image of God changes for an individual, the meaningfulness of the Magnificat also changes.

Important aspects of relationship with God as seen in the Magnificat are:

1. The Mercy of God
2. God's Love and Faithfulness
3. God's Might
4. God's Response to Prayer

C. God's Action on Behalf of Justice

The exegesis of the Magnificat has shown that the first stanza (Luke 1:46-50) is a personal message of God's action on behalf of an individual, but the next stanza (verses 51-53) describes God's action on behalf of the people. The Sisters interpreted this section as giving insight into God's priorities in the social realm. That God favors some people at the expense of others caused much pondering and led to a need to try to understand why God was said to act as the words of the Magnificat describe.

1. Priority for the Oppressed

God's action in history—in scattering the proud, pulling down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty—is seen as God's faithfulness to the covenant. It is a call for us to be sensitive to the human condition. Some gave a spiritual interpretation to the idea of hunger as hunger for God. Others interpreted the verses as referring to the real unjust situation of material poverty and powerlessness. Some frustration at this was expressed.

2. Reversal of the Social Situation

The bringing about of justice involves a reversal of the social situation of the powerful oppressing the weak, the rich oppressing the poor. This is seen as characteristic of God's

kingdom. Those who worked in situations with the poor were especially sensitive to these verses. God is seen as loving rather than harsh and so the reversal is thought to be brought about by God's *might* in a nonviolent way.

D. Jesus and the Spirit

References to Jesus and the Spirit were not numerous in the responses to the Magnificat. Jesus is referred to as Word of God, Mary's Son and Christ. He is equated with God and with redemption. Christ is the presence of God in the world. Meditation on the action of God in bringing about the kingdom of justice drew comments on the mission of Jesus. There was identification with Jesus' mission to bring good news to the poor. The Spirit was spoken of in the context of growth in personal spirituality, as giving gifts of knowledge and understanding that led to personal insights on the Magnificat.

E. Changing Perceptions of God

For many Sisters a change in perceptions of who God is has taken place over time. An earlier concept of God, as one to be feared, blocked relationships. Later, fear was replaced by awe and reverence. Earlier emphasis on submission has changed to an understanding that we cooperate with God in creating the future. In trying to know who God is for women and trying to connect with God as woman, new images and concepts of relationship have emerged. A male, militaristic image of God was rejected as a nonviolent concept of relationship developed. New insights came from the study of Scripture and from prayer experiences.

III. PRAYER: MAGNIFICAT AS MEDIUM

The Magnificat is a vehicle for prayer. It is Mary's prayer and the prayer of the Sisters who identify with Mary in saying it. It is used in the Office and for personal prayer. The first part is seen to reflect Mary's spirituality and reflects the spirituality of those who pray it as their own prayer. There is a strong need to make the prayer fit the experience of women. Transliterations and expanded versions are used specifically to avoid non-inclusive language for God.

The second part is seen as a proclamation of God's action in history bringing about a situation of justice for the poor and oppressed. There is much awareness of the terrible suffering of the oppressed and the global situation of social injustice. This leads to a consideration of a personal mission and how prayer moves one to act in cooperation with God as Mary did to bring about the concrete realization of God's reign. At times, verses 51-53 were interpreted very personally as God's call to deeper prayer, filling the hunger of the soul, to humility which is seen as truth and to wholeness which is holiness.

A. Use of Magnificat for Prayer

1. Personal and Communal Prayer

The Magnificat is often used for personal prayer. It is an appropriate prayer for women's gatherings and for ecumenical services. One Sister, who had left the community for a time, cited the Magnificat as a prayer that led her back into the community a few years later.

2. Magnificat as Song

The Sister liturgists felt that the canticle is a song and is best prayed when sung. One Sister uses Mary's song in her music history course to demonstrate the historically different ways it has been chanted or sung.

3. Magnificat as Woman's Prayer

The fact of the Magnificat being a woman's prayer was very significant. This was mentioned by more than half of those interviewed. Liberating the text from masculine language gave a new appreciation of Mary as a spokesperson for women.

4. Magnificat as Mary's Prayer

Insights into Mary as a person are given in her prayer. This is significant for Mary is not the message but the medium of the message about God. Although written two thousand years ago, it is timeless.

5. Identification with Mary in the Magnificat

Many Sisters mentioned a sense of association or identification with Mary in praying the Magnificat; for example, "You are what you are now because of the favor of the Lord and what you do presently, now, will be sowing the seed for generations to come."

B. Prayer in General

For the most part, prayer was not defined by most of the Sisters. What did emerge from their reflections on the Magnificat were: how they prayed; attitudes necessary to be disposed to prayer, especially contemplative prayer; responses that are received in prayer; relationship with God in prayer and how prayer moves one to action. The importance of Scripture and the place of Mary in prayer life were also themes that emerged. Study was seen as a way to increase understanding of God and Scripture. The meaning of prayer in the lives of the Sisters was clearly more of an interest to them than an explanation of prayer itself.

1. Attitude Toward Prayer

An attitude, a disposition, an attunement, is preliminary to praying. There is a hunger for God's presence in prayer. Entering into Mary's disposition is a way to pray.

2. Contemplative/Reflective Prayer

Reflection and contemplation form part of the prayer life of most Sisters. They spoke of moving from rote prayers into reflection, pondering, clearing the mind and listening to God. Awareness of God's presence in prayer makes relationship with God more important than the words. A relationship with God, with Jesus, with Mary can and does grow.

3. Scripture in Prayer

Using Scripture, especially the psalms, in prayer was deemed significant and fruitful. "We use Scripture and it uses us."

4. Study for Deepening Prayer

The study of Scripture, including doing exegesis, was considered an important aid for understanding that led to deeper prayer.

5. Other Aspects of Prayer

The primary way that personal prayer is engaged in is far from uniform. No question was asked about this, but significant information emerged that showed prayer styles to be reflective of the personality, interests, experience and life situation of individuals. Influences were: using the imagination and images to bring one into the presence of the Holy, using poetry and music, writing to avoid distractions and enter

into receiving spiritual direction, making a retreat, sharing faith stories with others.

C. Changing Modes of Prayer

Over the years, life experiences brought to reflection on the scriptures have caused familiar passages to take on new meaning. Earlier prayer styles, mainly vocal, gave way to contemplative prayer focused on listening. "In practicing prayer I had to let go of one perception of who I was and who I was called to be to let it come to a different reality."

D. Prayer Moves to Action

"A cyclic dynamic" happens in prayer. Prayer moves to action and action leads to new ways of prayer.

IV. THEMES OF THE MAGNIFICAT: INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

It has been seen that, as a prayer, The Magnificat is the canticle of Mary but has been appropriated by the Sisters as their own personal expression of praise and gratitude to God. As such, Mary's song functions as a prism through which shines the light of individual Sisters' attitudes toward God, Mary and prayer. The Magnificat is more than a joyful response to God's favor, however. The exegesis done in the first part of this study has shown that it carries a message concerning the dramatic and salvific action of God bringing about the final victory over all evil. The responses of the Sisters to the question of meaning included their own interpretations of the message contained in the text itself. In praying the Magnificat, God's regard for the poor and lowly, as well as, God's fidelity to the promise of salvation are remembered. Hope for the future is kept alive.

The central theme of the Magnificat which emerged is *the mercy of God*. It is the essence of the whole message of the canticle. Other themes related to it are joy, gratitude, lowliness, humility, truth, faithfulness, promise, hope, fear; the danger of pride; the meaning of hunger, poverty, justice; the importance of remembering God's mercy; and confronting injustice and oppression. Life experiences illuminate meaning and meaning unfolds with life experiences.

The essence or core of meaning to each Sister flows, not only out of her prayer experience and mission experience, but also out of her unique personality and giftedness. There is evidence, also, that the experience of woundedness, pain and suffering is a significant factor in interpreting the Magnificat.

A. Personal Spirituality Emerging from the Magnificat

1. Joy/Gratitude: This was a dominant theme.

2. Proclaiming the Greatness of God: Mary is seen as reflecting the Dominican charism which includes contemplating God and proclaiming God to others.

3. Lowliness/Humility/Truth: Lowliness is seen as ordinariness or humility. Humility is truth. It follows from an experience of being a recipient of God's mercy.

4. Mercy and Fear of the Lord: After joy, mercy is the most dominant theme that is seen as the core meaning of the canticle. God's mercy is universal. Dominican mission is defined as extending the mercy of God to others. Fear of the Lord is associated with wisdom, standing in one's own being and letting God be God in reference to who we are.

The personal and communal experience of God's mercy is transformative and the remembrance of it strengthens us in our resolve to extend God's mercy in our mission to bring about justice.

B. Communal Message of the Magnificat

1. Reflections on God's Action of Social Reversal

Verses 51-55 of the Magnificat are considered to reflect salvation history, referring to the covenant, the promise, the bonding between God and God's people. We are given a view of a social situation where God's action shows his predilection for the humble, poor and lowly. This makes the Magnificat a song of social liberation.

There was a struggle to express the interpretation of some phrases: scattering/confusing the proud; putting down the mighty/lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry/sending the rich away empty. These were seen as both a personal challenge and a communal call to action in the social realm.

2. God's Remembrance

The final verses of the Magnificat speak of God's coming to the help of his people and remembering mercy. There were many references in the Sisters' responses to God's remembering and our remembering. In Dominican custom there is a special ritual remembering the lives of the Sisters at the time of their deaths and at the anniversaries of their deaths. In this way remembrance of God's faithfulness and mercy is passed on to the next generation. There is, thus, a common memory in the whole community.

V. DOMINICAN CHARISM AND MISSION

Throughout all categories of this study runs the thread of Dominican charism and mission. To seek and preach truth and to live this truth in our lives are characteristics of the charism. Joy is considered an aspect of Dominican life and mission. All of these elements are found in the Magnificat. Mary is the paradigm for Dominican mission. Like Mary we contemplate and share with others the gifts of contemplation.

A. Summary

Mary's song, the Magnificat, has functioned as a prism through which the worldview of a representative group of Dominican Sisters has been refracted into categories revealing a theology of Mary, of God, of prayer and of mission. The Sisters relate personally and specifically as women to the expression of joy, praise and gratitude in Mary's psalm. The dominant message of the Magnificat is seen as that of God's mercy which is extended to both individuals and to groups. Over time, with new knowledge and life experiences, a change in perception has occurred across all categories.

B. Conclusions

1. Methodologies: Exegesis and Interpretive Inquiry

Exegetical methods included an examination of literary genre, the structural form, the historical background and linguistic analysis to examine the Magnificat within the context of Luke's gospel. Interpretive inquiry was employed in an attempt to uncover the spiritual meaning of the Magnificat to

a contemporary community. Both methodologies were utilized in a search for theological meaning.

2. Comparisons

The meaning intended by Luke is static in the sense that the text of the writings of Luke which include the Magnificat is a given. The text does not change. The cultural and theological content of the first century of Christianity in which the text was written is set. Yet, in the two-thousand-year tradition of Christianity, the meaning that has been found in the Magnificat reflects the cultural situation of the age in which the interpretation is made. Those believers who ponder the prayer seek to find meaning for themselves in their own historical situation.

Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., speaks of an internal interpretation present in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which he refers to as hermeneutics in action. For us, then "hermeneutics becomes an interpretation of an interpretation."⁶ The Magnificat itself is a first-century interpretation of the covenant relationship between Israel and God as set forth in the Old Testament. The themes of the psalm and the language with which the themes are expressed indicate that the covenant promises of God are being fulfilled in Mary's son.

The use of two methodologies in this study serves to identify the differences as well as the convergences in the basic context in which the theological meaning of the Magnificat is examined. Luke writes within the context of the missionary endeavor of the early Christian Church. Luke's time frame is eschatological. The aorist tense is used in the words that Luke puts upon Mary's lips to announce that God has already fulfilled the promises made to Israel. The great social reversal in the situation of the faithful but lowly remnant of Israel is portrayed as having been accomplished in the sending of the Savior. This is *realized eschatology* in that the *basileia* or "reign of God" is understood to have been established. Mary's son, Jesus, will announce the presence of this reign.

The eschatological framework of the Sisters' views of the *reign of God* is that it is more in process than realized. Whereas

⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology, and the Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 44.

the words of the Magnificat indicate that the great social reversal, which is a sign of God's reign, has already been brought about by the action of God, in their own work, the Sisters see the injustices and social evils that confront good people. In faith, they perceive that the *Age of Salvation* has indeed dawned but not come to fulfillment. Their underlying sense of eschatology is that they are participants in moving forward God's reign, but, centered in the present human condition, its presence is not always evident. Some impatience was expressed with the time-lapse between the in-breaking of God's reign and its final fulfillment.

When considering the whole of Luke's work, the Third Gospel and Acts, it can be seen that Luke was addressing the situation of the delay of the *Parousia*, the return of Christ in the final victory of God over all evil. In the Magnificat he presents a teleological viewpoint. God's promise has been fulfilled and the victory over evil accomplished. In his subsequent writing, a journey motif is employed. It is symbolic of missionary endeavor. The message of salvation must go out to the very ends of the earth before the reign of God is brought to fullness.

The motif of missionary journey is also found in the responses of the Sisters. Mary's journey to Elizabeth was seen as a model of the missionary bringing the announcement of God's saving mercy to others. Luke's image of a youthful, pregnant Mary risking the danger of a missionary journey was a source of inspiration and hope. For both the early Christians and for today's Sisters the Magnificat is a source of joy, hope and courage.

Using the methods of exegesis, it can be seen that Mary is a type of the Church in mission. Luke casts Mary in the biblical image of the Daughter of Sion, the personification of the faithful remnant people of Israel who, after a time of suffering and humiliation, are exalted by God. It is she who bears the Messiah, thus ushering in the *Age of Salvation*. The past, present and future of the Church come together in Mary. It is significant that Luke presents Mary as receiving the fullness of the Holy Spirit at the time of the Annunciation and then places her in the midst of the Apostles as they receive the fullness of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Interpretive inquiry demonstrated no parallel to the symbolism in the responses of the Sisters to the Magnificat text. Symbolically, Mary is seen as the ideal of discipleship, but there was no mention of Mary as a type of the Church. What interpretive inquiry did surface was the dominant role that the totality of life experience, including spirituality—the lived experience of God's presence, love and mercy—played in the way that the Magnificat was interpreted by each individual. Meaning was found within the context of personal relationship to God and to Mary. Meditating on Mary's Song was a transformative experience.

The twenty-first century universe is explosive and expanding. The unfolding of the future is a dynamic process that is open to many possible outcomes. The interpretive inquiry portion of this study has affirmed that the Magnificat, written almost two thousand years ago in a culture which envisioned a static universe, is still meaningful as a beloved prayer. It is, however, interpreted from the heart of a different culture, holding many different concepts of God. What is the same is that, like Mary, God is perceived as loving, merciful, faithful and just. What seems to be different is the surety of faith in who God is and how God acts. For the Sisters, God is sought in mystery and the more God is known the more the mystery deepens. The question of who God is in essence is an open question and the responses of the Sisters reveal a continuing quest.

The place of Mary in the lives of the Sisters varies widely. There is no evidence that Mary as symbol of the Church is important in the Sisters' prayer life or in their ministry. However, the image of Mary as faithful disciple who believes, loves, serves and suffers in fulfillment of her vocation is very important. Mary is related to as mother, sister and/or friend. She walks beside, inspires and encourages those who know and love her. Mary is the model of right relationship to God in prayer.

A core message of the Magnificat both for Luke and for the Sisters is joy in experiencing God's mercy. Recognition of God's mercy within the context of salvation history and the experience of it in one's personal life are concepts that span the ages.

CONCLUSION

Interpretive inquiry supports and affirms the value of doing theology which begins with human experience. In the practice of the faith, Scripture is interpreted by individuals in a way that provides meaning to their lives. It is of the essence of human freedom to search for the truth that gives meaning to human experience. Exegesis gives an interpretation of Scripture that illuminates life experiences and anchors individual interpretations in truth.

Twenty-first century Catholics, while holding and respecting an authoritative interpretation as taught by the Church, continue to seek for meaning that is consistent with the reality of their experience in a multi-cultural, rapidly changing society with its global perspective and scientific consciousness. How different the world of contemporary human life is from the world of Luke. How wonderful that the person of Mary and the words of her two-thousand-year-old song still have such power to touch the heart.

The bridge between the exegetical interpretation of the Magnificat and that of interpretive inquiry is the place where biblical revelation intersects with contemporary human experience. On this bridge, faith continues to seek understanding into the mystery of the Godhead and into the triune God's incomprehensible ways of loving and saving all people. This is theology. The sacred quest continues.