

# *Providence Theology*



*Providence is the caring, compassionate,  
luring presence of God in our lives.  
It is present in the chaos, in the best  
and in the worst of times.*

*Mary Joan Coultas, CDP*

# Opening Prayer

**Leader: We come together**

**All:** as companions on our providence journey, called to follow Christ on a way we do not know. We recall the words of our early Sisters and our Constitutions, "The Spirit of the community is the spirit of Jesus Christ, himself."

**Leader: We have gathered in this place**

**All:** for the Lord invites us to come and see...to learn renewed ways of intensifying the spirit of our being providence in our day.

**Leader: We have come as companions on the journey...as Inquirers to become Associates of the Sisters of Divine Providence.**

**All:** Come, Lord Jesus and meet us here. Come, God of Providence! Reveal to us your will for us in attempting to open our hearts to your call to us to be women (and men) of Providence, acutely sensitive to the needs of your people.

**Leader: Let us pause to be mindful of the presence of God as we gather for this meeting.** *(A candle may be lit at this time.)*

**Let us be mindful of the Divine Presence alive within each of us.**

*(As a sign of respect to the holy indwelling presence of our Provident God, bow to the presence of Christ with us...and to one another.)*

**Leader: Come, let us worship God.**

**All:** Let us lift our songs, our prayers, our praises.

**Leader: Come, let us give praise to our Provident God.**

**All:** Let us open our lives to all the ways God's providence is at work in our lives,

**Leader: Come, let us be open to being filled with the the Spirit of the Living God.**

**All:** Breath in us, Breath of God. *Song: Veni Sanctae Spiritus*

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, come fill our hearts. Surround us with your presence.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, move in us and through us. Draw us together as women (and men) of Providence.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Spirit, give us new eyes of faith, a new voice of hope and a new heart for loving and reaching out to others as you call out to us.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, open our arms that we may embrace your call to us to be Associates of the Sisters of Divine Providence.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, open our eyes to the possibilities surrounding us.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, guide us to new ways of creating a more just world.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, open our ears to your silent music.**

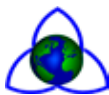
**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, enable us to become a visible presence of your gift of Providence.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.

**Leader: Come Holy Spirit, establish your new creation in us, so that God can be God in all.**

**All:** Sing one line of Veni Sanctae Spiritus.



# The Wonderful Providence of God

By Michele Bisbey, CDP, Ph.D.

*Pittsburgh Catholic*, August 10, 1990

For several weeks, I've been struggling with how to share with the readers of the *Pittsburgh Catholic* the meaning and dynamism of the charism, the special gift, which the Sisters of Divine Providence offers to the Church. Finally, I recalled a story. Stories are ordinarily meant to entertain, to delight, but in many cultures they are also meant to heal and to teach.

It all began in the summer of 1976 at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Divine Providence in Allison Park. Plans were in progress for the centennial celebration of the community's beginnings in the United States.

The original Sisters had come from Mainz, Germany, where they were founded by Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler and Mother Marie de la Roche. There was much excitement as the Sisters anticipated the arrival of community members from two additional provinces and from the missions in Puerto Rico.

Among the youngest members of the community there was a special kind of enthusiasm which surrounded a rumor of a gift that had been especially commissioned for the celebration by the Congregation's Generalate in Rome. It was an immense tapestry that had been many years in the weaving and had finally arrived from Rome. No one had seen it, except for Sister Charlotte and she wasn't talking.

It was hinted that the finished product would graphically capture the history of the community and its many significant women. There were those who said it should also sketch the hopes and dreams for the future of the community in the years following Vatican II. And, there was conjecture about the symbols and words that would express those visions.

One Sister was sure that no illustration would be complete without the saying, "Providence did provide. Providence will provide." Certainly that sense of trust was what the Sisters were all about. Still another was convinced that the community prayer, "We exalt Thy Providence, O Lord, and we submit to all its decrees," would concretely convey our submission and abandonment to God's will.

And, so the anticipation grew with each passing day. Until one evening a group of novices were sent to prepare the auditorium where the assembly was to meet the next morning.

Completing their task, after turning off the lights, someone noticed a light shining out from under the stage curtains. As a novice ran to turn it off, dashing behind the stage curtains, she gasped at what she stumbled upon, before her was the tapestry. And, what a disappointment it was. She could discern none of the images or patterns she had come to expect. The texture was of an uneven quality. The colors were all wrong. The whole thing was nothing more than a mess of tangled knots and snarled strands.

In the hours that followed, she kept wondering what she should do. Maybe she should forewarn the provincial administration. Wouldn't they be embarrassed?

The next morning she was sitting in the crowd as the tapestry was revealed. The weaving before them was beyond anything anyone had imagined or hoped for. It was indeed a tapestry, beautifully executed in the most clever and minutest detail. She was stunned. How could it be? What happened to the hanging she had seen?

Later that day, still puzzled, she ran into Sister Charlotte. She stammered, "Sister Charlotte, how did it happen, when did it happen?" She confessed to her how she had seen the tapestry the night before. Sister Charlotte smiled and walked the novice behind the hanging. It was then that she realized that what she had seen was the verso side.

The gift that was given that day was much more than a lovely woven work of art and a comical story for the community archives. With the gift and the story came



the realization that all too frequently our vision is myopic. Sometimes we look too closely, seeing only strands and knots and snarled threads.

On life's loom, our days are stretched as separate threads. Some stained, some fair -- they are shuttled back and forth as the separate fibers are interlaced, woven in and out, under and through. Out of the individual filaments a fabric is woven. Out of the bits and pieces, a design is interwoven into the fabric to become an intricate part of the whole.

We are connected one to another in this tapestry that is still in the making. And, since it is still in the making, we must take care not to make the mistake that the novice did with the tapestry. The part is not the whole.

It seems that there is a distinct relationship between Providence spirituality and seeing. I wonder if that relationship is not articulated in the story just told. To name God "Providence" seems singularly appropriate in an age where the chaotic and irrational seem to prevail, in a time when we are concretely aware of the brokenness, the woundedness of our lives.

Providence spirituality is not Pollyanna spirituality. Providence spirituality cannot say, "God is in heaven; all's right with the world." Nor can it deny the realities of disorder, chaos, brokenness, alienation, and injustice. Providence spirituality calls us to see these realities, to name them, to wrestle with them, to know that there is meaning in the midst of what appears to be meaningless.

Because we, the Sisters of Divine Providence, have seen the meaning of our own chaos, in our broken heartedness, in our own disordered lives, we can give witness, and we can reveal the vision that we share. We witness to the reality that the God who weaves our lives is the Provident God. We eagerly anticipate that day when the whole tapestry of our lives might be unfolded before us and when we might exclaim with our foundress, "Visibly do I see in all things the wonderful Providence of God."

### Reflection Questions

The charism of the Sisters of Divine Providence is "trust in and openness to the Providence of God." Recall a situation when you or another witnessed this charism.

Sister Michele said that sometimes "our vision is myopic." In retrospect, we may recognize that the part is not the whole. How did you feel when you were able to expand your interpretation of an event?

We are connected one to another in the tapestry of life. Reflect about a time when you felt connected to a significant other, to a Sister of Divine Providence, to another human being, to God.

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## Providence Spirituality and the Earth

By Barbara Doherty, S.P.

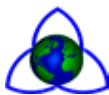
*A Spirituality Named Providence from the  
Proceedings of Women of Providence, March 1991*

Because the classic understanding of Providence has to do with the design and governance of the universe, it seems appropriate that we examine, in light of a Providence spirituality, the growing concern in many persons for our planet.

One of the beatitudes of Jesus which takes on new significance is they that who are meek shall inherit the earth.

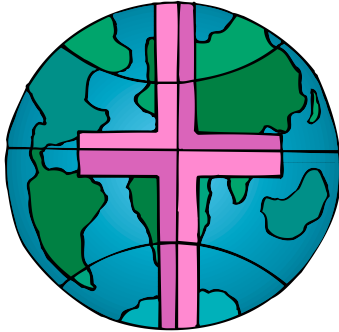
Matthew recalls this teaching of Jesus as a blessing of the homeless, landless, and poor, or the *anawim*, the ones who know their need of the God who saves. Their blessing is to be land. They, in their powerlessness, shall be the inheritors of the earth.

Their God will give them land, whether in actuality or within themselves as



they come upon the expanses of an internal terrain which is home and which is, indeed, a promised land. Is there a way in which we can identify providence persons as the meek and make another identification of a spirituality based on a theology of Providence?

To make an identification between a Providence spirituality and this particular beatitude necessitates the use of an accommodated sense of this scripture. With some reluctance, yet with the classic definition of Providence and with the present concern regarding the destruction of the planet in mind, it seems useful to identify



Providence persons as particularly designated to be the caretakers of the earth.

In their capability as non-aggressors, in terms of verbally asserting Providence in every event of reality, and in their quiet, sometimes pain-filled surrender to reality, it seems they might be characterized as the meek.

This naming would mean that they are the persons who know their need for the God who saves. They feel, perhaps, that turning human choices around in terms of saving our planet is outside of human capability. In their participation in the ordering and governance of earth with the God who saves

lives the only hope for the salvation of the earth, not only in a spiritual, but also in a material sense.

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” might then come to be a blessing for those who undertake the studies and the activities of ecology and socio-ecology, so as to turnaround the baneful directions we destroyers of the earth have chosen for many centuries.

This effort is of great magnitude and could only be undertaken by those who believe in the power of the God who saves and who recognizes their call to participate in the governance and the ordering of the universe in ways about which the Greek philosophers did not speculate.

The world, in its moments of history, gives shape and determination to the gospel. And, the gospel as articulated in each milieu by the assembly, illuminates the world.

The moment now is the moment of confronting the destruction of the planet. To take the gospel teaching regarding a particular blessing of the meek, the non-aggressors (because of their utter powerlessness in their society) and to suggest that Providence persons, powerless in themselves but participants in divine governance of the earth, can be the new inheritors of the earth, seems a legitimate accommodation of the text.

In this way, the gospel again sheds light in our world and illuminates our paths in order that we might clarify to others the teachings of Jesus and their relevance for the Eucharistic assembly these many centuries later.

## Reflection Questions

This article was first presented to Providence Women in March 1991. The presenter urged a new vision of human participation in the governance of the earth.

Does it seem to you that it took “a long time” for most of us to hear and implement this message?

How has the media’s concept of “going green” been a factor?

One of the Directional Statements of the Provincial Chapter of 2006 was: “We will educate ourselves about ecological economics; i.e., the impact of our living on all creation. We commit ourselves, personally and communally, to seek and implement creative ways to enhance the sustainability of the planet.”

How has the Congregation implemented this goal?

How have you personally done so?



# Obedience

By Michele Bisbey, CDP, PhD

As we approach the dawn of the Third Millennium, it becomes clear that we are faced with compelling and urgent needs. The weight of the world's anguish presses heavily upon us as we attempt to find ways to make God's providence visible. A concept that demands our attention is the relationship between God's providence and the human experience, between God's providence and human responsibility.

The Hebrew Scriptures narrate a story of liberation and power that sounds all too contemporary. Power is what the Exodus is all about: political power, oppressive power, and religious power. Pharaoh is high priest and king of Egypt, the recognized authority. He is characterized as shrewd and deliberate. The Hebrews are an oppressed people under the command of Pharaoh. Ironically, because of the strength of their numbers, they are feared by the Egyptian oppressor who has a plan for their extermination. As the story of the Pharaoh's attempt to annihilate the Hebrews unfolds, it becomes clear that the actual purpose of the narrative is to dramatize the conflict between the providential plan of God and the plan of Pharaoh.

The two plans are in obvious conflict. Plainly, Pharaoh's plans are foiled at every turn. Significantly, God takes no active, visible, or intervening role in defeating Pharaoh. God doesn't have to play the domineering aggressor in order to conquer the oppressor. Notwithstanding the Egyptian ruler's wealth, resources, and power, he is nonetheless undone by his own tyrannical and oppressive antics.

Set within this story is the humorous legend of the midwives (1:15-22). At first reading, this excerpt may seem to be an insignificant fragment, a mere prelude to the grander story of the rescue of the heroic Moses, but theologically, the role of the midwives is of paramount importance. Hidden within the liberation narration is the account of a pair of women who provide some fascinating insights about the relationship of power, responsibility, collaboration, and Providence. Their story is recounted in the first chapter of the Book of Exodus: 15

"Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah. 16 'When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool; if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.' 17 But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the male children live. 18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them: 'Why have you done this and let the male children live?' 19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous; and before the midwife reaches them, they have given birth.' 20 And God dealt favorably with the midwives and the people multiplied and increased greatly. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he established houses for them."

In its largest context, this periscope is part of a unit found in the prologue to the Exodus. The centerpiece of the prologue is concerned with the issue of Egyptian oppression and economic exploitation. Furthermore, it sets the stage for the birth of Moses, who will be instrumental in the deliverance from that oppression. This section recounts three unsuccessful attempts commanded by the pharaoh to impede the growth of the Hebrew population. Of these three schemes, two are thwarted by the defiance of women. The sly disobedience of the midwives is prelude to the boldness of Moses' mother and his sister, Miriam, who hide the child in the bulrushes. This is followed by the seeming disregard of the pharaoh's own daughter, who finds the child and raises him as her own son. The midwives' fear of God, the ingenuity of Moses' mother, the keen practical judgment of his sister, and the pity of the Egyptian princess all combine to defeat the intentions of the pharaoh.

Midwifery in Egypt was one of the few professions open to women. As practitioners, they seem to have been held in high esteem. As an index of the importance of their actions in this Scriptural setting, they are mentioned no less than seven times within the brief span of six verses.



Notably, the midwives are accorded proper names--Puah and Shiphrah, whereas, by contrast, the name of the reigning monarch, a demi-god, is to this day the subject of dispute and scholarly conjecture. In this way, the Biblical narrator's scale of values is expressed. A concern for life outweighs civil duty. The midwives' sole and untested motive for disobeying Pharaoh's directive remains "fear of God." The women fear God, not Pharaoh. The midwives remain lifegivers, not life-takers. Their defiance takes the form of active noncompliance. The Exodus event begins with an act of disobedience to oppressive authority. Thus, we have perhaps the first act of civil disobedience in recorded history. The midwives' fear of God proved to have a vital role in the history of the chosen people and God later gave expression and tangible confirmation that their option for life was the correct choice.

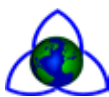
Surprisingly, the midwives succeeded in disobeying Pharaoh without incurring punishment. They outsmarted one who was regarded as the divine ruler of one of the wisest nations on earth. They outwitted one who had proposed to "deal shrewdly" (1:10). The midwives work together to deceive oppressive power, save the children, and use their energy to help a people survive. The present form of the story evidences high enjoyment of sophisticated Egypt's embarrassment. What began as a story about death, becomes a story about life. And in the end, even the midwives have families. The text states that "because the midwives feared God, God established houses for them" (1:22). A suggested interpretation of this verse is that God elevated them to the headship of their fathers' houses. It would seem that the divine blessing affords the women honor and progeny in the present situation, and remembrance throughout future generations--"as long as the story is told."

An integral issue in the discussion of responsibility in the Hebrew and the Christian Scripture is the concept of power. The Christian Scriptures give ample evidence that Jesus' primary concern with power was to "empower the powerless." The sisters, Martha and Mary, offer a fascinating portrayal of women empowered by Jesus. In them, we have the prototype for a discipleship of equals.

Martha and Mary were sisters who lived with their brother Lazarus in Bethany, a village outside Jerusalem. The Gospels record three separate occasions when Jesus was a guest in their home. In the most familiar scene (Luke 10:38-42), Martha is occupied with the tasks of hospitality, while Mary chooses to sit and listen to Jesus' teaching. This story indicates that Jesus had two women friends. He was a guest in their home. The women, for their part, were interested in what he had to say. Martha may be representative of a typical female figure in Luke-Acts. She is one of a number of relatively well off and independent women who keep their own house and place it at the disposition of the community or of itinerant preachers. Mary, is described as one who charts her own course, choosing to disregard religious propriety, she sits at the feet of the Teacher. Jesus not only allowed Mary to set her own priorities; he applauded her choice, making it abundantly clear that women were called to the intellectual and the spiritual life.

The portrait of the sisters is more fully sketched in John 11:1-44.

1 Now there was a man named Lazarus who was sick; he was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 This Mary whose brother Lazarus was sick was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and dried his feet with her hair. 3 So the sisters sent to inform Jesus, "Lord, the one whom you love is sick." 4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This sickness is not to end in death; rather it is for God's glory, that the Son [of God] may be glorified through it." 5 Yet Jesus really loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 And so, even when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he was two days longer. 7 Then, at last, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." 8 "Rabbi," protested the disciples, "the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going back up there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? If a man goes walking by day, he does not stumble because he can see the light of this world. 10 But



if he goes walking at night, he will stumble because he has no light in him." 11 He made this remark, and then, later, he told them, "Our beloved Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up." 12 At this the disciples objected, "If he has fallen asleep, Lord, his life will be saved." 13 (Jesus had really been talking about Lazarus' death, but they thought he was talking about sleep in the sense of slumber.) 14 So finally Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. 15 And I am happy for your sake that I was not there so that you may come to have faith. In any event, let us go to him." 16 Then Thomas (this name means "Twin") said to his fellow disciples, "Let us go too that we may die with him." 17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had [already] been four days in the tomb. 18 Now Bethany was not far from Jerusalem, just under two miles; 19 and many of the Jews had come out to offer sympathy to Martha and Mary because of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary sat quietly at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died. 22 Even now, I am sure that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." 23 "Your brother will rise again," Jesus assured her. 24 "I know he will rise again," Martha replied, "in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection [and the life]: he who believes in me, even if he dies, will come to life 26 And everyone who is alive and believes in me shall never die at all. Do you believe this?" 27 "Yes, Lord," she replied. "I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, he who is to come into the world." 28 Now when she had said this, she went off and called her sister Mary. "The Teacher is here and calls for you," she whispered. 29 As soon as Mary heard this, she got up quickly and started out toward him. (30 Actually Jesus had not yet come into the village but was [still] at the spot where Martha had met him.) 31 The Jews who were in the house with Mary, consoling her, saw her get up quickly and go out; and so they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary came to the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." 33 Now when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had accompanied her also weeping, he shuddered, moved with the deepest emotions. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Lord, come and see," they told him. 35 Jesus began to cry, 36 and this caused the Jews to remark, "See how much he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "He opened the eyes of that blind man. Couldn't he also have done something to stop this man from dying?" 38 With this again arousing his emotions, Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across it. 39 "Take away the stone," Jesus ordered. Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, it is four days; by now there must be a stench." Jesus replied, "Didn't I assure you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you because you heard me. 42 Of course, I knew that you always hear me, but I say it because of the crowd standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 Having said this, he shouted in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips and his face wrapped in a cloth. "Untie him," Jesus told them, and let him go."

One usually thinks of this passage as the raising of Lazarus, but Jesus' raising of Lazarus actually occupies a very small part of the story. Of the forty-four verses that constitute this story only seven of them take place at Lazarus' tomb (38-44). The miracle of the raising of Lazarus is the climax of the story, but it is not its center. The story centers on the conversations Jesus has as he travels to Lazarus' tomb. These conversations help the reader/hearer to see that the raising of Lazarus is not a freak act of nature, but a demonstration of God's power for life. Jesus' main conversation





partners as he travels to Lazarus' tomb are Mary and Martha. The sisters take the initiative in this story.

The conversation between Martha and Jesus is the theological heart of the story. Martha expresses complaint and confidence. In the context of this conversation Jesus declared himself to be the resurrection, the only time such a pronouncement is recorded in the Gospels. According to this evangelist, Jesus revealed the central event of the Gospel to a woman!

It is of no small consequence, that for her part, Martha publicly confesses Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Without a doubt, Martha represents the full apostolic faith of the Johannine community, just as Peter does for the Matthean community. She is responsible for the primary articulation of the community's christological faith. Her belief is prior to the accomplishment of the sign. Her willingness to base her faith on Jesus' words implies that she is indeed one of the blessed.

Jesus' conversations with Mary and Martha transform this story from a miracle story about the raising of Lazarus into a story about the fullness of new life that is possible to all who believe in Jesus. The initiative of these two women in sending for Jesus, their bold and robust faith, and their unfaltering love for Jesus are marks of the life of faith.

Martha and Mary model how people are to live as they struggle to free themselves from the power of death that defines and limits them and move to embrace the new promises and possibilities of life available through Jesus.

In John 12:1-8, it is the same Mary of Bethany who anoints Jesus.

1 Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the village of Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave him a dinner at which Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at table with him. 3 Mary brought in a pound of expensive perfume made from real nard and anointed Jesus' feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair, while the fragrance of the perfume filled the house. 4 Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was going to hand him over), protested, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold? It was worth three hundred silver pieces, and the money might have been given to the poor." (6 It was not because he was concerned for the poor that he said this, but because he was a thief. He held the moneybox and could help himself to what was put in.) 7 To this Jesus replied, "Leave her alone. The purpose was that she might keep it for the day of my embalming. [8 The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.]"

This anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary is an act of sheer extravagance, underscored by the comment that the house was filled with the fragrance of perfume. Mary has anointed Jesus so lavishly that all present can participate in it. Judas protests the anointing, but his protest does not diminish Mary's act. Rather, it reaffirms the extravagance of her gesture; she has spent almost a year's wages for Jesus. The centrality of Judas in this scene, and in the foot washing scene that follows, emphasizes an evangelistic intention to portray the true disciple, Mary of Bethany, as counterpart to the unfaithful disciple, Judas Iscariot.

Perhaps no religious concept has been so abused as that of Providence. In the past, God's will has been invoked to sanction colonial conquest, racism, the gross exploitation of the poor, shameless abuse of political and even ecclesiastical power. The poor, the oppressed, have been tendered a fatalistic piety which has taught them to accept their positions and their suffering as the will of God. At the same time, those in power have justified their oppression by the belief that they were the agents of God in their conquest. The story of the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and the example of Martha and Mary of Bethany, thwart both of these views.

In the midwives' refusal to cooperate with oppression, the liberation from Egyptian bondage had its genesis. The passage is fundamental in that it highlights the key role women played in God's providential plan of deliverance. Throughout the passage's centerpiece there is a positive portrayal of women. Consistently, the women respond with resourcefulness and ingenuity. They are characterized as individuals



who behave according to the dictates of conscience and with compassion. Without exception, and ignoring the pharaoh's command, they make choices for life, not death. It is in the women's refusal to accommodate themselves to those in power, to the whims of the oppressor that the cries of bondage begin to give way to the birth pangs of liberation.

In like fashion, Mary and Martha of Bethany played central roles in Jesus' life and served as models of faith and love, which were chief characteristics of discipleship in the early Christian community. The passages from John's gospel that feature Mary and Martha show them playing key roles and compel us to take them seriously, both as characters and as vehicles for John's theology. Martha's confession and Mary's anointing certify their discipleship. That they hosted dinner for Jesus, at which his inner circle was present, implies that the sisters, or women like them, were also part of, or close to, this inner circle. Mary and Martha serve as illustrations of Jesus' empowerment of women, an empowerment, which stretched the prescribed limits and boundaries of religion and culture. Is it not time for us to claim our birthright and become worthy of our foremothers? How else in our day shall we, and all those who suffer oppression, know the birth pangs of liberation? God's Providence will only be made visible in the Third Millennium if we take the inherent risks and refuse to accommodate ourselves to the whims and caprices of oppressive, political, religious, and ecclesial power.

### **A Caveat**

Over the years, people have asked for copies of my various talks and homiletic "reflections." I've hesitated to put them into print for several reasons. Chief among those reasons is rooted in my background as an English major and the accusation of plagiarism. Unlike papers that I've written for peer and scholarly review, where I've been very careful to note my sources, the talks that I've prepared infrequently reference their sources—which are many. I've found that my process in preparing a talk is akin to the process I use in cooking, where I consult many recipes in books and online and borrowing a hint from one, an ingredient from another, I concoct what feels satisfying to me and those who will join with me at the table.

The process that I typically follow when preparing any kind of oral presentation, especially for worship, involves reading the scripture, reflecting upon it, consulting various commentaries, jotting notes, reading other sermons or homilies in print and online, highlighting relevant passages, reading the blogs of other women theologians and preachers, then letting it all percolate for a time. In between times, I return to old journal entries, story collections and only then do I sit down to compose—drawing upon a combination of many others' words, thoughts, ideas, stories, and illustrations and weaving them together for my intended audience. Since most of what I present is intended for the Divine Providence community, I'm always concerned about viewing my topic through the lens of Providence spirituality. That is what I consider my original contribution to these writings. -- Michele Bisbey, CDP

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# Making God's Providence Visible Through Our Giftedness

By Ellen Rufft, CDP, Ph.D

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There is an ancient Yiddish word which describes how one feels when someone she loves achieves success in an important endeavor. The word is "kvell." To kvell is to vibrate with pride and joy. Parents kvell at the graduation ceremonies of their children; loved ones kvell when one of the family members receives an honor. Kvelling is about sheer happiness. As a Jewish friend explained to me, "In kvelling, there is no negative. It is uncomplicated joy!"

Perhaps our first task as Providence people is to kvell. We ought to be professional kvellers, vibrating with wonder and gratitude at the greatest gift we have been given, the grace to know the God of compassion.

We are God's loved ones, God's family. We need to kvell daily at God's success -- at the wonders of creation, at God's indiscriminate graciousness toward every creature in every time on every planet, at God's seeming inability to give up on anyone. The reasons for kvelling in the presence of the God of compassion are endless for those who are in love.

And, we are called to do more than kvell the One we love. We are called to imitate the kind of compassion that characterizes our God. It is a compassion that excludes no one. It stretches to encompass the oppressors and the oppressed.

We are called to give the gift of compassion to those who are poor, oppressed, or vulnerable, but we have also committed ourselves through our mission statement to be compassionate to those who batter women and children, to the tortured and the torturer, the abused and the abuser, to the Sister or Associate who is judged and criticized and to the one who criticizes. To imitate the compassion of God trusts us beyond all human descriptors of one another which divide us toward a love that embraces all created beings.

It is, of course, no easy task to use our individual and combined gifts to make God's Providence more visible in our world. Many challenges face us as we commit to kvelling God's compassion, as well as to imitating it.

We have been invited and encouraged to be attentive to the needs of the time and to respond to them through our ministries from our foundation days, as well as through the many General and Provincial Chapters after them. Sr. De la Salle's opening remarks at the 1985 General Chapter are as appropriate today as they were then.

"We live," she said, "in a world of ambiguities. On the one hand, there is rank materialism, godlessness, intellectual pride, contempt for life, political and moral corruption, on the other is increasingly convincing signs of the action of the Holy Spirit. It is in the context of this world that we must determine the authenticity of our choices in response to the Gospel mandate to bring the Good News to the poor, to manifest God's love to all whom we encounter."

We, too, live in a world of ambiguities. We are bombarded daily with news of violence, wars, and terrorism. We are inundated with enticements to buy, to own, to have more and better. We are programmed toward individualism and competition; perhaps the greatest American sin is to be a loser.

We live in a country in which 41 million people have no health care; where almost 2 million people are in prison, 42% of them African American; a nation where more than a billion dollars is spent on weapons every day. We live in a world of massive poverty, racism, and environmental degradation in which 1.2 billion people have no access to safe drinking water.

On the other hand, technology has connected people to information and to one another in ways barely imagined even a decade ago. Advances in medicine have contributed immeasurably to the health and longevity of millions of people. The new cosmology, ecology, and multi-cultural awareness have increased our understanding of the interconnectedness of all creatures. With Sr. De la Salle, we can truly say, this



is the world to which we must bring the Good News of God's Providential care.

Perhaps the contemporary poet, David Whyte describes our age the best.

He writes:

This is not the age of information.

This is not the age of information.

Forget the news, and the radio  
and the blurred screen.

This is the time of loaves and fishes.

People are hungry, and one good word  
is bread for a thousand.

## Reflection Questions

Kvelling is about sheer happiness.

When in your life did you "kvell" on another's behalf?

What emotion did you experience?

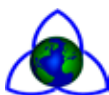
When have you experienced being kvelled?

As Providence people, we ought to be professional kvellers.

At work, what would kvelling look like in relating to others?

If you were God, how would you arrange the world regarding suffering?

As it is? With only bad people suffering? Some other way?



# Closing Prayer

**Side 1:** To be Providence is to turn our lives over to Providence, to rely on the God of Providence whose face is ever turned toward us.

**Side 2:** To be Providence in our world is to take utterly seriously the gift of freedom which we have. It is to choose, consciously and deliberately, to make a difference.

**Side 1:** To be Providence to the world is a call to engage actively in bringing about the transformation of the world.

**Side 2:** To become Providence to our world requires of us an active, creative participation and interdependence with a community of believers.

**Side 1:** To be Providence today is to walk together with a community of believers who support and challenge us in our endeavors to become clear-sighted and single-hearted in the task of bringing about the Kingdom.

**Side 2:** To be Providence in our world is to heed the call to be a people of radical Christian hope.

**Side 1:** To be Providence is to realize that all we are and all that we do belongs to a sacramental world.

**Side 2:** To be Providence is to rely no longer on our own strengths and accomplishments, but on the God of Providence who calls us to make a difference in our world.

**Side 1:** To be Providence is to have the courage to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters against the forces of evil, injustice and oppression.

**Side 2:** To be Providence in our world is to travel with lighthearted abandon, unencumbered, non-possessive, trusting deeply and unfalteringly in the God of Providence who judges, yet never abandons us.

**Side 1:** To be Providence is to prepare for the journey, to be one who sees ahead and makes wise provisions, knowing what is needed for the journey and what must be left behind.

**Side 2:** To be Providence is to be sensitive to the needs of people and times, rooted in tradition and open to change, one who knows the need for roots and wings.

**Side 1:** To be Providence is to seek first the Kingdom of God.

**Side 2:** To be Providence is to accept the challenge to make a difference.

**Amen**

*(Adapted from "Impelled to Make a Difference: Providence, Conversion and Christian Hope" by Marie McCarthy, S.P.)*

