

A POWERFUL WOMAN: MARIANNE COPE

Recently I was invited to Hawai'i to conduct a retreat for the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse, New York, approximately fifty of whom live and work in the islands. I was not eager to go to Hawai'i because of the length of the journey from New York, and upon my arrival, I found that the sisters had arranged another flight for me to Moloka'i. Barely out of jet lag, I flew in a tiny plane to Moloka'i where we stopped for a few minutes on "topside," and then continued on with another five-minute flight to Kalaupapa.

The island of Moloka'i is usually associated with a leper¹ colony and with the Belgian priest-leper recently beatified, Damien De Veuster. I had certainly been aware of Damien as well as the name Moloka'i, but it was only on this trip that I learned that Moloka'i has a large area referred to as "topside" where all the "clean" people once lived, and "the flat plain"—Kalaupapa—an isolated peninsula at the base of a steep cliff (2215 feet or 675 meters) on the north side of the island. It was there the lepers were exiled when the disease was an epidemic.

Upon arrival and after being warmly greeted by Sr. Frances Therese, we drove immediately to the tomb of Mother Marianne Cope² about whom I knew next to nothing. We got out of the car and approached her grave. I walked around it, read the inscriptions and stood there in silence. After a few minutes, Sr. Frances Therese suggested that we move on, but for some strange reason I could not. I asked to remain there longer because this sacred place was impacting me. I was experiencing again the spirituality of place³ that pilgrims often do. I felt spiritual energies begin to flow within, connecting me with a Franciscan forbear who preceded me in our family. I was picking up the energies of this great woman, Marianne, who herself drew on the energies of Francis for the same work of love that she did for 30 years in this sacred place. She, together with her sisters, literally replicated the primitive thrust of the Franciscan movement—ministry among the lepers.

Since that experience at her tomb, I have seen a video, read a biography, and listened to many sisters share their oral tradition about Mother Marianne. But none of this has impacted me as forcefully as this valiant woman did when I stood at her graveside. I felt the power of her spiritual energies in that sacred place. And it is precisely the power of this woman that I have reflected upon since my visit to Kalaupapa.

Our brother, Richard Rohr, OFM, has spoken of power as:

1. the ability to act from the fullness of who I am;
2. the capacity to establish and maintain a relationship with people and things;
3. the freedom to give myself away.⁴

And it is within this paradigm that these considerations have evolved.

Reflecting on *power* as the ability to act from the fullness of who I am, I saw Marianne's power stemming from the fullness of being woman. It is from this solid base that she acted and accepted the challenges that came her way. Even her title of "Mother" is instructive. Francis was very fond of the use of this term—even for himself,⁵ because it expresses an attitude that is tender, sensitive, warm, delicate, nurturing. That became Marianne's attitudinal stance with the lepers as she tended their body, soul and spirit.

Moreover, Marianne was a woman of faith. She was open to the risk that faith offers when one is challenged. From the very first response she made last century as provincial to the request for sisters to go from Syracuse, New York, to Hawai'i, her risk of faith was evident when she wrote:

I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen ones. . . .I am not afraid of any disease.⁶

After establishing a successful home for young girls with leprosy, she was asked to do the same for the boys. Her faith-response was:

. . .my heart has bled for them and I was anxious and hungry to help put a little more sunshine into their dreary lives.⁷

Her power as a woman of faith risking all is most evident in her words to Sister Leopoldina in 1889:

You will never be a leper, nor will any Sister of our Order.⁸

Sister Leopoldina later wrote:

It was wonderful what **power** there was in Mother's words to banish every fear⁹

Marianne's promise, full of the risk of a woman of faith, has been realized, for to this date, no sister has ever contracted leprosy.

A second dimension of the word *power* is the capacity to establish and maintain a relationship with people and things. Before the arrival of the sisters, the patients were living in repulsive squalor. So Marianne, together with her sisters, rolled up her sleeves and swept, washed and scrubbed the entire facility. She planted trees, flowers, shrubs, and vegetables wherever she could. As they took care of such "things," the patients warmed up to them and quickly came to trust and cherish the care they received from Marianne and her sisters. The power of relationship took root from the beginning, and Marianne began to speak of the patients as her "children."

Living and working in such a setting was a superhuman feat, for the sight and odor of leprosy was a constant challenge to the senses. We glimpse at Marianne's thoughts when she writes in a convent journal:

I suffer when I go to church, the smell and the sight of lepers everywhere is disagreeable. . . .How glad I was to get outside to breathe again the fresh clean air. We met many of our old patients outside. All were anxious to shake hands—something that makes one shudder—yet we did it. . . .¹⁰

Her words clearly echo those of Francis when he wrote:

It seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body. . . .[Test 1-3]

Marianne, very aware of her struggle within, never outwardly displayed this conflict because the poet “Robert Louis Stevenson would testify only five years later, after he had seen **Mother Marianne and the sisters attending the lepers** at Moloka’i, in their presence ‘even a fool is silent and adores.’ ”¹¹

A third aspect of *power* is the freedom to give oneself away. As provincial, Mother Marianne accompanied the first sisters by train to California and by steamer to Hawai’i, intent on establishing the new mission and returning to Syracuse. As she embarked upon her work, it became clear to her sisters, to the King and Queen, to government and church officials, to the lepers, and finally to herself, that God brought her to Hawai’i to stay. And by giving herself away fully to this new place and work, she was empowered by God to root this mission in the Franciscan spirit, which continues to this very day.

As I sit here in Assisi writing these words on this feast of St. Francis (1998), the very place where Francis both struggled within himself to face lepers and later came to serve them, living among them, I cannot help but imagine how proud he must be of men and women like Marianne Cope, her sisters and members of our Franciscan family who literally do this same ministry today. Marianne is but one example I discovered as I opened our family album. From the very origins of our Order it is clear that being with the minors, the little ones, the marginalized enfleshes a significant dimension of our charism. Our being with the marginalized, in whatever capacity, seems to enflesh for us the words of Jesus: “I have come that they may have life” [Jn 10:10].

When Francis found himself among lepers, I am convinced he experienced this “life” Jesus promised because he proclaims that “that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body.” I am certain Marianne knew this sweetness and it is there waiting for us as well.

I am aware that correct usage today urges: a person affected by Hansen's disease." But I retain the word "leper" to connect with its usage in early Franciscan writings.

Her cause for beatification is pending.

Cf. The Cord, Jan/Feb 1997, Vol. 47, No. 1.

Richard Rohr, OFM, "Menders of the Breach," Franciscan Gathering, Tampa, FL, Feb. 7-12, 1993, audio cassette.

Cf. 2Cel 17, 17; RegEr 1; 2Cel 137; RegB VI:8.

Sr. Mary Laurence Hanley, OSF, and O.A. Bushnell, *A Song of Pilgrimage and Exile: The Life and Spirit of Mother Marianne of Moloka'i*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980).

Ibid., p. 326.

Ibid., p. 138.

Ibid., p. 304, emphasis mine.

Ibid., p. 348.

Ibid., p185, emphasis mine.