

THE CHARISM OF MERCY – GIFT TO OUR WORLD

As each New Year begins, we look ahead with fresh hope, for any little signs to suggest that the next twelve months may be better than the last. Two such signs have raised our spirits so far. The first is the news that athletes from the two Koreas will march at this month's Winter Olympics under one flag, and field a single women's hockey team. At a time in our global history where rhetoric from both little and big rocket men has edged us close to unthinkable nuclear peril, this promise of a more peaceful initiative on the Korean peninsula comes as music to the ears of the world.

The other sign of hope has been the announcement by our new Prime Minister that she is expecting a child in June, and that she and her partner have plans to cope with this event while she continues to do her best in a role she sees as one of service to all New Zealanders.

Mercy people especially can delight in seeing her joy of becoming a mother woven seamlessly into the broader sphere of public involvement and political life. Catherine McAuley believed that the interests of society were never so well served as when women trusted in their own power to make a difference for themselves and their families. Many of us will be keeping Jacinda Ardern in our thoughts and prayers as she waits for her child to be born.

No year begins without its reminder to all of us that we share a collective responsibility for the charism of mercy – a gift that God has entrusted to us on behalf of our world. Mercy is not something we can hold to ourselves; it is one of the gifts of the Spirit, to be cherished because it helps to reveal, to us and to those we encounter in love, what God wants for our world. Mercy makes God's love visible; mercy is our mission, but it is God's first of all – God's gift to a world that has been created in love, for love. Mercy is a legacy we have inherited from the pioneering women who came to this land, knowing next to nothing of the life that awaited them. What they left us has survived and flourished, only to the extent that we have continued in the McAuley tradition to divide and share, and to search for new patterns of ministry in an unfolding future.

The charism of mercy cannot last if we simply keep doing what we have always done. Sustaining mission involves us in a never-ending process of re-inventing ourselves. Mercy survives when, like the rest of creation, it enters the constant cycle of letting go, dying to old ways, and being reborn in new forms. The yoke of mercy, which the Saviour invites us all to take up and carry, is borne today by sisters who are vowed to Mercy as a way of

life, and by a broad range of colleagues and companions, associates and alumnae, who have caught the spark of mercy and devoted a piece of their lives to keeping that flame alive. As the number of sisters declines and their energies



Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern with partner Clarke Gayford, announcing that they are to expect their first child in June.

Photo - Hannah Peters, Getty Images.

dwindle, new partners take up the load they once carried. In Mercy colleges, hospice and healthcare facilities, community development ventures and other ministries of care, lay people serve in governance, management and staffing roles. Mercy's need to provide skilled and compassionate palliative and aged care has never been so vital and urgent, as this country prepares to debate an End of Life Choice Bill.

There is no hierarchy in this community of sisters and companions; no one way is better than another; the gift is given differently, as the Spirit decides. All that is required is that we respond with full and generous hearts to whatever God seems to be inviting us to be. And here's another truth – mercy is reflected, not so much in what we do, but in who we are, how we live our daily lives and touch the lives of others. Thus Mercy becomes a presence in our world.

Communities of sisters are helping us to discern what this Mercy presence may mean, especially in terms of hearing the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor. Imaging Mercy Today will continue throughout this year to focus on issues relating to the degradation of Earth and the displacement

of peoples. We shall be inviting you, wherever you find yourselves in the Mercy world, to join us in this process of listening, discerning and acting in Mercy's name. A blessing on your year and all you hope for it – **Dennis Horton**

LENT: TIME FOR HEARTS TO WARM

Pope Francis has begun his Lenten message for this year with a warning from Jesus about the end of time, when because evil has grown, "the love of many will grow cold." (Matthew 24:12)

The pope uses an image from Dante's *Inferno*, of the devil 'seated on a throne of ice, in frozen and loveless isolation.'

Lent is a time to ask if there are signs that our own love has begun to grow cool, says Pope Francis. He even wonders if the environment itself reflects this cooling. "The earth is poisoned by refuse, discarded out of carelessness... Polluted seas engulf



Pope Francis marks a cardinal's head with ashes, at a Lenten liturgy. Ash Wednesday falls on Feb 14.

Mercy - God's gift to all

*E te Atua aroha o ngā mea katoa,
God, great lover of all that lives;
as this new year of grace begins,
we renew our commitment to mercy,
your gift to us, given to share with a world
hungry for love.*

*Touch our hearts afresh, as you call us to be
hope-bearers and life-givers. Let us see how,
in even small ways, we can put an end to the
degradation of Earth and the displacement
of peoples, by becoming a Mercy presence.*

*We ask a blessing on all who bear the yoke
of Mercy in our day: sisters who have taken
a lifelong vow, and their companions who
offer a piece of their lives, with time and
talents to keep the same Mercy flame alight.*

*We pray especially for the staff in
our hospice and hospitals, easing
the burden of pain by compassion
and skill. May their ministry help the
very ill and the very old to know that
life is precious for as long as God allows.*

*We pray for all parents who welcome the
gift of new life and who create a space in
their homes where young ones can flourish
and grow. May God's own mercy fill their
hearts and homes. Amen.*

the remains of countless shipwrecked victims of forced migration. The heavens, which in God's plan were created to sing God's praises, are rent by engines raining down implements of death.'

The pope recommends the practice of prayer, almsgiving and fasting as ways to warm our hearts. Prayer is a way of listening to God 'who wants us to live life well.' Almsgiving sets us free from greed and helps us to recognise our neighbour as brother or sister. And fasting 'wakes us up. It makes us more attentive to God and our neighbour. It revives our desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger.'

Pope Francis has extended his Lenten appeal beyond the bounds of the Catholic Church 'to reach all men and women of good will, who are open to hearing God's voice. Perhaps like ourselves, you are disturbed by the spread of iniquity in the world, concerned about the chill that paralyses hearts and actions, and you see a weakening in our sense of being members of one human family. Join us, then, in raising our plea to God, in fasting, and in offering what you can to our brothers and sisters in need.' The pope ends with the promise of his prayers and a blessing to all. 'Please do not forget to pray for me.'