

SURE STEPS FOR MAKING US GREAT AGAIN 'AND A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM'

As thousands of migrant children were being separated from their parents last month and detained in metal cages at the US-Mexican border, *Time* magazine used this photo by John Moore of a two-year-old Honduran girl crying in front of a poster of President Donald Trump.

Stating simply 'Welcome to America', the cover text dramatised the heartbreak of hundreds of thousands of migrant families, and led *Time* to ask the question, 'What kind of country are we?' It also prompted the president to sign an executive order that reversed the official policy of separating children from their families at the border. Around the world, millions were caught up in the debate about how nations might protect their borders while, at the same time, respecting individual human rights and upholding the integrity of human families.

Once again, it became clear that the measuring stick for any nation's true greatness rests on how well it protects the most fragile and vulnerable living within its borders or - in this case - standing at its doorstep. The phrase that often surfaced in the discussion was the well-known quote from Isaiah (11:6), 'and a little child shall lead them.' The prophet here is not suggesting that a child leads adults with wisdom beyond its years, but rather that, in a better world, a vulnerable child will live at peace with wild animals and savage beasts - an image of nature restored once more to the original harmony of God's creation. There is a sense here in which all of us have a part to play in making our world safe and secure for children, freed from the dangers of political oppression, social inequality, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Where is Mercy in all this debate about a world in which the frail and vulnerable are protected? One of the lessons which Catherine McAuley teaches is that the work begins with real people, each with a life and future of their own. With her house in Baggot Street filled to overcrowding, she spots



two young women in a Dublin street in 1840 who were probably too ashamed to ask for food; the memory of meeting them haunts her the next day, "I am sure I spoke with two yesterday who were hungry; their dejected faces have been before me ever since. I was afraid of hurting their feelings by offering them food, and I had no money."

The Sisters of Mercy who came to New Zealand brought with them that same awareness of specific needs and a determination to do whatever they could to alleviate them, case

by case, one person after another. The day after their arrival in 1850, they were teaching children in Auckland; their young pupils included orphans, some of them Māori girls or children of mixed race. Archivist Sr Marcienne Kirk notes that some had probably been abandoned through the breakup of illicit relationships typical of a port town like Auckland, others the victims of illness or war. Within four months there were 18 in the orphanage and the numbers continued to grow. Space was at a premium; rooms used for teaching during the day became dormitories at night.

The sisters' house was soon known by Māori women as a safe place to stay for a night when they came to town with produce to sell, especially if they had no money for lodgings. "Sometimes awful occurrences take place in a seaport frequented by sailors from all parts," wrote Mother Cecilia Maher to a sister in Ireland, asking for funds to help set up a refuge for women at risk. "The house is to be under our guidance. I know you will do all in your power for its success." Cecilia's dream of a women's refuge was

never achieved in her lifetime, but the hope lives on as a group of her sisters in Auckland today work at addressing the plight of homeless women in the city. The other lesson which Catherine taught, as much by example as by word, was to insist on prayer when every other avenue has been explored. We should work as though everything depends on us, but pray as though all depends on God, she insisted. 'Prayer will do more than all the money in the Bank of Ireland. Let us pray well and never grow weary.' Prayer was important to Catherine, not because it changes God's mind, but because it enlarges our hearts and makes us better channels of the mercy we have received.



No surprise, then, that when the attention of so many around the world last month was captured by the plight of a dozen Thai youngsters and their soccer coach, lost in an underground cave for days before their discovery and dramatic rescue, Mercy International Association held the group in a special prayer intention on its website. To highlight its invitation to join in prayer, MIA used the image of a candle in the window, placed by many different cultures around the world when a family waits for a missing member to return. 'We give thanks for

the determination, bravery and skill of all those involved in a multinational team effort – said to be more than a thousand. We are aware, in this event, of being one human family.'

Some events show humanity at its best, declared MIA when the rescue efforts succeeded: 'As we rejoice in the success of this mission, achieved by the skill and dedication of all involved, let us not forget the lesson in this for all of us, summed up best in words of appreciation by Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn. When the team was first located, he said events had shown "the power of unity in action, the power of love and goodwill towards others, regardless of race and religious beliefs".'

Rarely do events draw such a united response from the world's different faith communities; and sad but wonderful to see how quickly combined skills and resources can be marshalled when the will is there. The truth is that it is easier for us to get our heads around an incident involving a dozen or so people than tragedies where hundreds or thousands are involved. May this event continue to inspire us to act together, across borders and walls, when deeds of mercy are required.

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

He aha te mea nui o te ao?

*E te Atua whānau ora,
God of life and health for all:
we join with people in nations
around the world in giving
thanks for the successful
rescue last month of the
young Thai soccer team
and their coach.*

*We ask your blessing on all
who helped in this effort,*

*commending to your love
the one rescuer who died in
this event.*

*May we learn to see how
quickly barriers fall when
people of many races and
religions unite in common
purpose, sharing skills and
resources for the poor and
vulnerable.*

*We give thanks for the spirit
of Catherine McAuley which
inspires Mercy circles around
the world to loving deeds and
to prayers that trust always
in your providence.*

*May we see at the heart of
our world your most precious
gift, people – he tangata,
he tangata, he tangata. Amen.*