

Imaging Mercy Today

Catherine - mercy empowering at margins

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! This year's McAuley Lecture was presented at four venues throughout New Zealand by Mary Reynolds rsm, executive director of Mercy International Association. Family illness prevented Mary from travelling here as planned; instead, her lecture took the form of a DVD presentation at the scheduled venues, including Dunedin where Mercy Hospital was celebrating its 75th anniversary at the end of July.

Entitled 'God's Mercy from Age to Age', the lecture offered a reflection on the birthing, expansion and challenge of the Mercy charism. The first section of the lecture, summarized here, focused on the unique role of Catherine McAuley, the woman of mercy who was the first to incarnate the Congregation's charism in the Dublin of her day.

As Mary Reynolds noted, the city at that time was burdened by enormous poverty, with many of its citizens living in destitution. Their condition was made worse by official responses such as the Poor Law system, which offered support through workhouses in which people could live, so long as they surrendered their right to own anything; the Act of Union in 1801 saw Ireland's parliament moved to London, taking with it many of Dublin's wealthy families and leaving many of their servants without work or options.

Widespread rural poverty saw people flocking to the city in search of work; but in fact they simply added to the swell of population in the slums. An historian of the times described Dublin as 'one great scene of wretchedness'. That was the city into which Catherine McAuley entered, said Mary Reynolds.

Catherine came to know of poverty through listening to the servants at Coolock. "But she was also a visitor to the

lanes and alleys of the city, where she saw firsthand how people were affected by all this." Some of the wealthy were prepared to give to the poor, said Mary Reynolds, but they saw alms-giving as their gift to the lowest stratum of society, often regarded as menial, dishonest and untruthful.

"Catherine was very different. What she imagined was a different life for these people. What she hoped for was that those on the margins would, through some intervention, be able to take their place within society. Her genius was that she could stand as a bridge between the rich and the poor, employing whatever status she had to act for the poor."

"She had a particular ability to address immediate need in



'Catherine envisaged a society where those on the margin could take their place as active participants, not passive victims of exclusion....'

- Mary Reynolds rsm, executive director, Mercy International Assn

a practical and loving way, but she didn't stop there. Her genius was that she considered the systemic causes of poverty and did something to relieve it... She saw no virtue at all in poverty; so anything that advanced the dignity and worth of people was worthy of her attention."

In Catherine, three extraordinary elements came together, said Mary Reynolds: "her innate love and concern for people; her faith and her deep conviction that she encountered Christ in every person in need; and her fertile imagination that could envisage a society different from the one in which they lived." Catherine became "a reformer of remarkable energy and compassion; her programme of mercy broke through contemporary – and until then impregnable – barriers of indifference and discrimination...."

"Through education and skills training, she empowered people, particularly women, to become agents of their own liberation and advancement. Through the works of mercy, she aimed to set people free from the structures that oppressed them, and to protect their dignity and rights.

"The expanse of her outreach was vast. She crossed new frontiers. Her foundational enterprise was directly aimed at enabling poor people and affirming them through education, healing, safeguarding their faith, and alleviating their hardships through her concern and immediacy."

As we celebrate the opening of Catherine's first House of Mercy 184 years ago this month, may we be inspired afresh to become mercy-bearers for our time. - Dennis Horton

Mercy-bearers for our time

One hundred and eighty-four years since Catherine's first House of Mercy opened its doors, we celebrate that day in faith and love, asking that God fill our hearts afresh with the same spirit that inspired her to work to empower those on the margins.

Inspire us to see how systems must change, if human lives are to be made whole.

Let us see, as Catherine did, the dignity of those whose lives wait to be transformed.

Let us see also how all life is connected on this one Earth that sustains us all.

Deepen in us the qualities we see in Catherine: her unconditional love for everyone in need; her belief that in each of them she encountered the Christ of faith; and her capacity to imagine a world radically different from the one she saw. Make us bearers of your mercy for our time.