

How are we to be in mission? In the context of our story

Nga mihi atawhai—greetings to all in mercy! ‘How are we to be in mission?’ is one of the questions which our Sisters of Mercy asked of themselves at their Chapter in 2009. And among the brief responses to that question, listed in their Chapter Statement, is ‘in the context of our Mercy story today.’ In the new light of the Easter which has just dawned, and the launching of a new pontificate, now is as good a time as any to look at that context afresh.

Sisters of Mercy New Zealand are a Congregation of around 220 women. As the years pass, fewer of them are directly involved in the more than 20 ministries which belong to Tiaki Manatu, the Sisters of Mercy New Zealand Ministries Trust, though many of them continue to work in a rich diversity of individual and shared ministries. A challenge for those charged with the Trust’s mission is to ensure that lay people who come to work for Mercy, especially in leadership roles, know the story well enough to contribute to its integrity and growth.

Later this month, the Sisters of Mercy are holding a Congregational gathering in Wellington, to a portion of which they have invited some of their key lay leaders. The presenter for that day is expected to be US Sister of Mercy Mary Sullivan, who last year published her biography, *The Path of Mercy: the life of Catherine McAuley*. A central theme in her writing has been Catherine’s tireless energy

Imaging Mercy Today



ST MARY'S CHAPEL, Ponsonby, opened in 1866 by Bishop Pompallier, now boasts a new spire and roof. More than a monument, the chapel issues a challenge to Mercy in our day.

Bearers of Easter joy

Kua ara a te Karaiti!
Kia hari, kia koa tatou.

Christ is risen!
Let us rejoice and be glad.

As the light of a new Easter dawns,
let us join the women who first set out
with good news from the empty tomb,
bearers of joy to a darkened world.

We give thanks for Catherine’s resolve
always to get up again for the poor.
May her spirit encourage us to know
that the task of mercy is never done
while we can still draw breath.

We give thanks, too, for 163 years
since Sisters of Mercy first reached our shores,
for their faith to journey around the world
and to begin their works of mercy
in this foreign and far-away land.
May their courage inspire us today
to write a new chapter
in the story they began.

We pray with our new pope,
Francis, a poor man, a man of peace,
who wants to care for and protect all of creation.
May we join him in using whatever power
we have to serve the needy in our time.

on behalf of the poor, her determination always to ‘get up again’ to meet their needs. In the author’s view, words like ‘retrenchment’ or ‘retirement’ were unknown to Catherine and her first companions. “Of course we have to adjust our ministry and our lives to our physical capacity,” she has said. “But that’s not equivalent to bowing out of the picture or retiring. I don’t think we retire until we breathe our last breath.”

Something of that same indomitable spirit surfaced in an interview last month with two of the Sisters of Mercy who participated in a recent six-week sabbatical at Mercy Spirituality Centre in Auckland. The pair feature in the latest issue of *Te Kete Atawhai*, published early this month. One of them, an Australian now in her 70s, has returned home to take up a new assignment in Papua New Guinea, supporting an initial formation programme there. The prospect is daunting. “PNG is going to be hard for me. I’m moving into a completely different phase of my life – a new institute and a new way of being.”

It’s that courage to face the unknown which is such a hallmark of Mercy mission. Sisters and companions gather early this month in Auckland to mark the arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand 163 years ago. The focus for their gathering this year is the historic chapel at St Mary’s Convent in Ponsonby, built by pioneer Mother Cecilia Maher and opened by Bishop Pompallier at Easter 1866. Under current renovations, the chapel boasts a new spire and cross and a roof which should guarantee its preservation for another 100 years or more.

The building is more than a memorial. To those who visit the chapel and absorb its story, it issues a challenge to ‘get up again’ to meet the needs of the poor today. There’s an echo here of the call to us all from Pope Francis, to be a church ‘of and for the poor’ and to use whatever power we can claim to serve the needy of our time. – Dennis Horton