

Pope Francis sets new tone for all our ministries

Nga mihi atawhai – greetings to all in Mercy! Pope Francis closed the Year of Faith last November with a letter to the whole church called ‘The joy of the Gospel’. It outlines his dreams for what a community that lives by the Spirit of Jesus should look like – a community that will be more welcoming to all, more merciful and more open to change. Much of what Francis has to say is relevant to our Mercy ministries, whether they be schools, health or community centres.

There is lots in the pope’s message that Catherine McAuley would have rejoiced to see – not least his requirement that shepherds of the flock should take on the “smell of the sheep” because like Jesus they are involved in their people’s lives; there’s a church that is ready to go wherever it is needed, “even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the streets.”

Francis repeats the advice he had for priests and people in Buenos Aires: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

It was Catherine’s own expectation that Sisters of Mercy “should be the kindest people in the world” because of the love they shared amongst each other. “How can we teach the love of God when our own hearts are cold?” she asked. In his turn, Pope Francis expects believers to reflect the joy that comes from faith. There are Christians, he notes, whose lives “seem like Lent without Easter”. The good news must radiate from those who have first received the joy of Christ. “An evangeliser must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!”

His plea is for a church that is open to all. “A church which ‘goes forth’ is a church whose doors are open”, offering a life in which everyone can share. The Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect,” says Francis, “but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” Christians often act more as arbiters of grace than its facilitators, he warns.

A call that waits for our ‘yes’

Her dignity is expressed in one title,
says Catherine – Mother of God.
In the words of Pope Francis, we pray:
Mary, Virgin and Mother,
in the depths of your humble faith
you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
help us to say our own ‘yes’
to the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

Mother of the living Gospel,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world.
Pray for us, Amen. Alleluia!

Imaging Mercy Today



“But the church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.”

Those who have first claim on whatever the church has to offer are unmistakably the poor. Today as always, the poor are the privileged recipients of the Gospel, and the fact that it is offered freely to them is a sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish. Says Francis: “We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them.”

The church’s option for the poor is a theological choice, not a political or philosophical one, says Pope Francis. The poor “have much to teach us,” he says. “We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them.... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”

How many of our colleagues can vouch for how their lives have been changed and enriched by those to whom they have reached out in Mercy’s name? Sick and dying people, who have helped them to see how precious is the gift of life; young people with special needs, who have lessons to teach from their courage and resilience; women especially who have grown through adversity and regained their mana and self-esteem. It is by seeing the miracle at work in other lives that we become most aware of God’s goodness to ourselves.

Pope Francis quotes Thomas Aquinas in saying that mercy is the greatest of all the virtues. “Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us... Under no circumstances can this invitation be obscured! If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the church’s moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk.”

As this year unfolds, the pope’s letter shines a light for every Mercy ministry, reminding us of the call to be channels of the mercy we have received. - Dennis Horton