

Slaves no more, but sisters and brothers

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! The theme proposed for our reflection this month by Mercy International is compassion or aroha, as we know it from our list of Mercy core values. Described within our healthcare facilities as the ability to act with understanding and sensitivity, compassion derives from a combination of two Latin words meaning 'to suffer with'. It's a word that is never far from the life and witness of Catherine McAuley, whose gaze was always drawn to those who suffered any kind of need.

She writes with great feeling of the young women in Dublin who faced unemployment as a result of social changes and the trend for wealthy families to quit Ireland. "I spoke with two yesterday who were hungry, though of nice appearance," she writes in 1840. "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." She goes on to criticize Ireland's poor laws of the day, which helped to lead so many homeless and unemployed girls and women to turn to prostitution as a way of survival.

Two lessons come from this glimpse of Catherine's life. One is that compassion always has a human face in sight. This is not an abstract value, to be practised at the level of pure theory, but a flesh-and-blood response to real people living real lives. The two faces that haunt Catherine remind us of her insistence that mercy means that we must do what we can now, not when the moment of need has passed. The other lesson is that we need to read the signs of our times; true advocacy means analysing and dealing with a problem's causes, not just with the symptoms.

Compassion—slaves no longer

E Te Atua Kaiwetewete:

God, you come to liberate and set free.

Your Word took flesh among us;

he is your compassion made visible,

with good news for the poor and oppressed,

taking our burdens upon himself,

and by his wounds we are healed.

In our Lenten journey

teach us once more

the great truth of gospel living:

we are called to live more simply

that others may simply live.

Give us compassionate hearts,

to see our world as you see it –

waiting to be freed and made whole by love.

Let us join Pope Francis and

the leaders of many faiths.

We acknowledge that every

human being is an image of God,

a sister or a brother, not a slave;

to oppose human trafficking

is a call that compassion bids us hear.

Imaging Mercy Today



This month has seen religious leaders, Pope Francis among them, gathered to pray and take action on human trafficking, what the pope has called the scourge of modern slavery. His point of departure is that every human being – man and woman, boy and girl – is the image of God, and that anything that distorts that image and denies a person's dignity and freedom is a crime.

It's a crime that often masquerades behind socially accepted customs, says the pope, 'but in reality claims its victims through prostitution, human trafficking, forced and slave labour, mutilation, the sale of organs, the consumption of drugs and child labour. It hides behind closed doors, in the streets, factories, the countryside, in fishing boats and many other places, in the reception centres of the wealthiest nations as well as in those of the poorest. And the worst thing is that this situation grows more serious every day.'

Pope Francis has called on all people of faith and good will, on leaders of business and government, to join in the action against modern slavery in all its forms. A World Day of prayer was held on February 8, but the echoes of that occasion will continue to sound in the weeks and months ahead.

Action against human trafficking remains a priority for Mercy International, because it is an issue confronting women and girls, especially those who are poor and vulnerable. Sisters of Mercy are involved in the work of Aotearoa New Zealand Religious Against Trafficking in Humans and a visit to that group's website (www.anzrath.com) is a useful place to begin an exploration of the issue. The group is keen to see the battle against trafficking extended to protect the rights of migrant workers who come here voluntarily, but who find on arrival that their circumstances are less free than they may have anticipated or wanted.

On a practical note, perhaps our resolution might be to ensure that our Easter eggs and chocolate in future always bears a Fairtrade label. Fairtrade addresses the root causes of child labour, with a guarantee of premium prices for farmers, enabling them to support projects such as schools, healthcare and drinking water for their communities.

It may seem a small gesture, but choosing the Fairtrade label this Easter may spell new life for a child in another land where the cocoa trade means slavery. - Dennis Horton