

# Te tapu o te tangata – a fiery respect for all life

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! The theme suggested for our reflection in the ninth month of this Year of Consecrated Life is respect. In what is known widely in our own circles as Mercy Month, September also marks the anniversary of the opening, 188 years ago, of Catherine McAuley's first House of Mercy in Baggot Street, Dublin.

What dominates our recollections of that time was her "tender love" for the poor, whom she identified so closely with the Christ she followed. Respect is possibly not a word she would have often used, but our present commitment to "respect the dignity of every human person and culture" comes close to what Catherine urged her sisters to have. The same kind of reverence is contained in the Maori words we use to translate this core value – 'te tapu o te tangata' – the sacredness of every human being and of all humanity.

One doesn't have to spend long reading *Laudato Si'*, the new encyclical letter of Pope Francis, to see that he is on about the same kind of respect for human dignity, especially for those who are poorest and most at risk. And this, for the same reason that Catherine McAuley recognised – because they are cherished by Jesus, the one whom God sent as the most poor and the servant of all.

Here's Pope Francis writing about the "immense dignity of each person, who is not just something but someone" (LS, 65). And when he insists that the goods of the earth are destined for all and not just for the few, he notes that we are required to have "before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor, in the light of our deepest convictions as believers" (LS, 158).

This kind of high regard for the least of our sisters and brothers accords closely with the insistence in Catherine's Rule that her sisters have a "tender concern and regard for the poor", as did Jesus and his first disciples. Pope Francis might well have been thinking of Catherine's maxim that the "poor need help today, not next week," when he himself wrote, "Let us not only keep the poor of the future in



**AFLAME:** A young boy holds a lighted candle, seeking Pope Francis' leadership of the urgent need for our world to pursue a fossil-fuel-free future. © LJPasion/350.org

mind, but also today's poor whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting" (LS, 162).

The respect required of us is holistic – it involves us in caring not just for individuals but for their cultures as well, it involves our care not just for human life but for all the life-forms with which we are interdependent. And if we respect ourselves and our own generation, we must ask what kind of world we hope to leave for the generations that will follow us. How can the church claim to be pro-life, asked one Catholic journalist recently, if it can't see its way clear to affirm paid parental leave? Or for that matter, how can Christians claim to be pro-life, without respecting the earth which nourishes all life, human and every other species as well?

The cry of the poor today comes not only from the millions who hunger and thirst, but also from "sister earth" which cries out "with all the abandoned of our world, pleading that we take another course" (LS, 53). "Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years," says Pope Francis, yet we are being called today to make the planet what God desired when it was created, corresponding to the divine plan for peace, beauty and fullness. The challenge we may well face is to have less, so that others may be more.

Thirteen years after the first Mercy Day, there's a lovely image in one of Catherine McAuley's letters, where she writes with enthusiasm of a group of young women travelling from Britain as novices to Baggot Street in 1840. She describes them as "fine creatures, fit to adorn society", their petticoats trimmed with lace, "coming forward joyfully to consecrate themselves to the service of the poor for Christ's sake. This is some of the fire he cast on the earth – kindling." It's the spark of their generous spirits that she spots so clearly, one which is needed in anyone who wants to help make our world more as God intended.

Sisters of Mercy are inviting us to join them in "flaming the fire of Mercy", as a Year of Mercy approaches and the vision of Pope Francis calls on us to care better for our common home. *Laudato si'*, praised be God, as we help to get this kindling lit! - Dennis Horton

## Kindling a tender love into flame

E te Atua, Mahuika te ahi ka,  
flint from whom all fire springs,  
yours is the flame which warms  
hearts in every age.

As another Mercy month dawns,  
set our hearts aflame as you did Catherine's,  
with a tender love for the poor.

Help us to see how by having less,  
we can enable others to be more.  
Place in our hearts an impatient desire  
to see many others rejoicing in the blessings  
you have bestowed in abundance on us few.

Let us hear among the world's abandoned  
the cries of sister Earth, calling on us  
to cease mistreating our common home.  
May you be praised, for the Spirit you send  
in our age to renew the face of our Earth,  
in Mercy's name. Amen.