

PROPHETS IN OUR TIME: HOW DO WE RATE?

From their Chapter in 2014, Ngā Whāea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand produced a logo and cluster of words that sum up the key threads of their assembly, to provide Sisters and their partners in ministry a vision to strive for in the five years until the next Chapter is held. The word standing at the top of their list is ‘prophetic’, which seems in the circumstances of our time to have assumed a new importance.

While in common parlance prophets are thought to be especially able to predict the future, this is not the primary or most important meaning of the word. In scriptural terms, the prophet was one who was gifted to speak a word from God, especially to a people who had lost their way or forgotten the mission which God had entrusted to them. For a religious congregation to be prophetic today, its members need a capacity for hearing the cries in our world that reach God’s ear. They also need a special brand of courage, which allows them to make a stand which does not necessarily win them friends in high places, a stand which is to some extent counter-cultural - not a vote-winner or a crowd-pleaser, but which is adopted because it is morally right.

Pope Francis gives us a clue as to what it means to be prophetic today when he insists that we should be building bridges, not walls, ready to welcome refugees as our brothers and sisters. He is also speaking prophetically when he denounces human destruction of the environment as sinful, and calls on us to work at caring for the common home we share with all other creatures.

And the pope sounds a prophetic note when, as he did last month, he cautions governments that they “must obtain free and informed consent from indigenous peoples” before they approve of any project that affects those peoples or their lands. This same point was picked up by the Sisters of Mercy of the United States, in a recent submission they helped to present to the UN’s Commission for Social Development, arguing that ‘life is land’ for indigenous peoples, and that preserving their land and culture can help to prevent poverty. “Loss of land and resources is a major threat to their well-being,” the US Sisters noted. “The people are displaced from their lands by dams, river pollution and deforestation or by the effects of climate change.”



Te Whakaminenga Chapter 2014: the image produced by Ngā Whāea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, expressing their commitment to whakawhānaungatanga, making right relationships happen.

Since then, the Sisters of Mercy in the United States have been highly critical of the Trump Administration’s decision to allow work to proceed on a pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. The decision suspends an order by President Obama to evaluate the impacts of the pipeline and to consult with the tribes concerned and undertake a full public input and analysis.

“This morally unacceptable decision ignores the dignity and tribal sovereignty of our Native American brothers and sisters,” the Sisters of Mercy note. “It furtively undercuts the rule of law and the US government’s duty and responsibility to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and to its water, health and sacred ancestral lands.”

The same Congregation has denounced as immoral the new president’s executive orders that seek to “halt refugee resettlements in the United States, ban entry of persons travelling from seven Muslim majority countries, call for construction of the US-Mexico border wall, increase immigrant detention, and more.

“These measures are counter to our gospel call to ‘love our neighbour’ and ‘welcome the stranger’ as well as this country’s founding principles and values,” the Sisters of Mercy said. They added that they and their partners work with immigrants and refugees, both in the US and across the world. “We renew our commitment to stand in solidarity with people forced to migrate. A national examination of conscience is needed to reflect on the root causes of migration, and act on the values we are grounded in as a nation and people of faith.”

Nearer to home, the Sisters of Mercy in Australia have joined a coalition of more than 100 religious Congregations and community groups, urging their country’s major political parties to form a bipartisan commitment to bring the 1600 refugees now detained on Manus Island and Nauru to Australia for resettlement.

The camps have been managed and funded off-shore by successive governments, the statement notes. “The people detained there are clearly Australia’s responsibility. This situation has reached crisis point, and immediate action must be taken.... Many of these people have been recognised as refugees. We owe them protection and safety now.... We do not have years. Australia cannot allow another person to die or suffer because of our actions.”

As our own nation moves towards a general election in September, we are challenged to reflect on how the voice of Mercy is seen to be prophetic. Certainly Mercy’s call last year for ‘shelter for all’ and our decision to ‘make care for our common home’ a priority are steps in that direction. So too are the ongoing commitment of Mercy hospice and aged care ministries to uphold the dignity of vulnerable lives, the determination of our Mercy colleges to enhance the academic achievements of Maori and Pasifika students, and the resolve in all Mercy ministries to keep their word to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Groups involved in last year’s Mercy International Reflection Process have identified paths to pursue, many with actions related to protecting the environment and its fragile resources; a meeting in Dublin this month of local MIRP coordinators may help to show how powerful a prophetic voice can be when it echoes around the globe.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You are invited to end this reflection by pondering, either alone or with someone who shares your commitment to Mercy, on these three questions:

- *What aspects of the Mercy ministry with which you are most closely involved would you assess as being prophetic? What reasons can you give to support your assessment?*
- *Between now and September, what prophetic stand would you like to see your Mercy ministry take? How might you help to see that this happens?*
- *From a recent look at the wider Mercy world (see www.mercyworld.org), what examples can you cite of how Mercy is responding to the critical signs of our times? How are these examples relevant to our New Zealand context?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

In search of Easter light

*Me rapu tātou i tōu mata, e te Ātua –
your face, Lord, do we seek.*

*As this Lenten journey unfolds
lead us by your Spirit to see you anew
in our neighbours’ need.*

*Open our eyes and soften our hearts
by your mercy, to see you beyond our borders
in friends waiting to be met and welcomed.*

*Give us faith to encounter
those longing to be loved.*

*May we see the face of Christ
and reflect your love in unexpected ways.*

*Make us prophets in our times,
able to hear the voices that first reach your ears.*

*Let Mercy be a power in our world
for standing with fragile communities,
for bringing hope and light.*

*Let our Easter joy be the blessings we have shared
in Mercy’s name. Amen.*