

# KINDNESS MUST BE MERCY'S REPLY TO THE 'WICKED' PROBLEMS THAT FACE OUR WORLD

**A couple of decades after the death of Catherine McAuley, Mercy major superiors met in Limerick to scope the mission she had entrusted to them. "The objects of the Institute are of vast extent," they agreed. "They embrace the endless miseries which poverty, sickness, ignorance and sin entail... Mercy to the poor, the homeless, the captive, the erring, the afflicted, to suffering humanity in every phase of its manifold miseries, in which it is possible for aid or sympathy to reach it. Such is the spirit of our Institute," they declared.**

Since that meeting in 1864, Mercy's canvas has not shrunk. If anything, it has grown. To the cry of the poor has been added the cry of the Earth itself, as the effects of climate change take their toll. Mercy's presence in the world today has a twin focus, on the displacement of peoples and the degradation of Earth; in many ways the two issues are woven together and interconnected.

As greenhouse gas emissions soar to the highest levels ever recorded, temperatures and sea levels rise, and poverty increases with them. At least 80 percent of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day. More than 66 million primary school children in developing nations go to school without breakfast – 23 million of them in Africa alone. Globally, around 815 million people go to bed hungry – about one in every 10 people on earth.

And as Pacific leaders meeting at their forum in Nauru recently agreed, the biggest single threat to security in our region is climate change. Fresh from that gathering, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the United Nations General Assembly last month that the impacts of climate change on those who live in the South Pacific are not academic or even arguable. "They are watching the sea levels rise, the extreme weather events increase, and the impact on their water supply and food crops.... Nations like Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands and Kiribati – small countries which have contributed the least to global climate change – are and will suffer the full force of a warming planet."

In today's world these Pacific communities have become our neighbours, sisters and brothers who



increasingly look to us for understanding and practical support as prospects for themselves and their children worsen. For the second year in succession, Pope Francis invites us to join him in prayer and action for World Day of the Poor on Sunday 18 November. Perhaps it is the people of the South Pacific who need to be most in our sights as this day approaches.

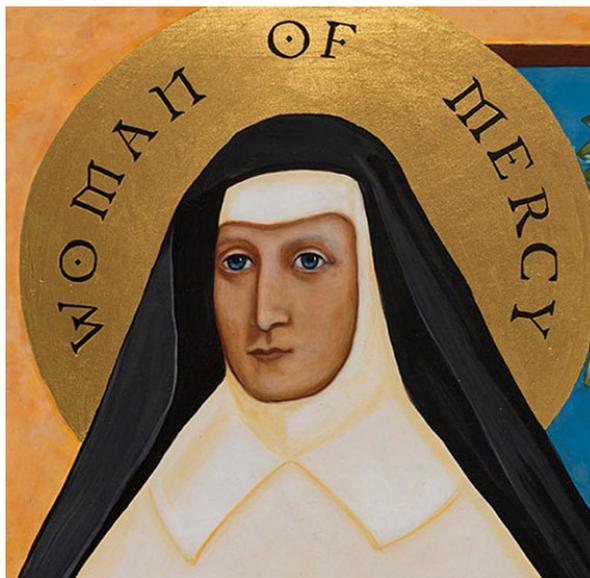
"If our Pacific neighbours do not have the option of opting out of the effects of climate change, why should we be able to opt out of taking action to stop it?" asked Jacinda Ardern at the UN. "Any disintegration of multilateralism – any undermining of climate related targets and agreements – aren't interesting footnotes in geopolitical history. They are catastrophic."

She went on to pledge New Zealand's resolve to play its part. "We will not issue any further offshore oil and gas exploration permits. We have set a goal of 100 percent renewable energy generation by 2035 and rolled out an initiative to plant one billion trees over the next 10 years." She described these plans as "unashamedly ambitious. But the threat which climate change poses demands it," she said.

Ms Ardern acknowledged in her speech to the UN that the times are challenging and the problems we face are what New Zealanders call "wicked", intertwined and interrelated. "Perhaps it is time to step back from the chaos and ask what we want. It is in this space that we'll find simplicity. The simplicity of peace, of prosperity, of fairness. If I could distil it down into one concept that we are pursuing in New Zealand it is simple, and it is this – kindness.

“In the face of isolationism, protectionism, racism – the simple concept of looking outwardly and beyond ourselves, of kindness and collectivism, might just be as good a starting point as any,” said Jacinda Ardern. “So, let’s start here with the institutions that have served us well in times of need, and will do so again.”

She might well have included the Sisters of Mercy among those institutions which have served well in times of need. Kindness – atawhai in Māori – is not only our name but should also be our defining characteristic. “Sisters of Mercy should be particularly kind,” wrote Catherine McAuley in one of her instructions, “the kindest people on earth, with the tenderest pity and compassion for the poor.” It was never a question of her doing everything, but of doing absolutely all that she could. “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry, than the poor should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford.”



*Catherine McAuley, woman of mercy .... a saint for our time? Image by Vivian Imbruglia*

Saints for our times are those who hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth, and who resolve to leave the world better than they found it. People like Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, shot down in 1980 as he preached the gospel he lived, and named as a saint of the church last month. As we observe the anniversary of Catherine McAuley’s death this November 11, we pray that her name may be added to the list of our saints, not because she or we expect this honour, but because our

church needs to recognise the witness of women like her, who give their all to tackle the “wicked problems” of our age.

– Dennis Horton

*This is the final instalment in this series prepared by Dennis Horton, who retired last month from the mission team of Mercy Ministries after 19 years in the role.*

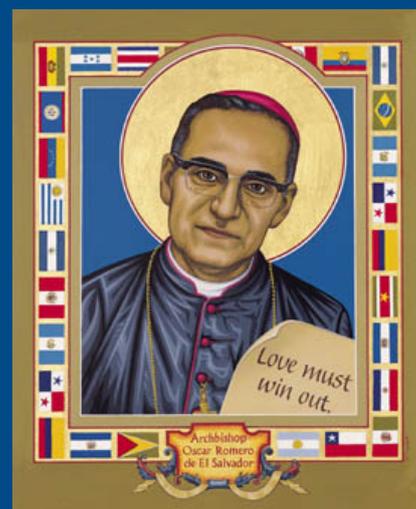
## **He Inoi: Prayer – Saints for our time**

*E te Kaiwhakamārie – nurturing God: you invite us to follow the Master, to hear the cries of the poor and the Earth, responding with tender love.*

*May kindness be the answer we give to the ‘wicked’ problems of our age. Let the Spirit of Jesus empower us to look outwards and beyond ourselves, making us unashamedly ambitious, in times when nothing less will do.*

*In a church that honours Oscar Romero as a saint who lived the gospel he proclaimed, by sharing your preference for the poor, give us the courage to follow in his steps.*

*As we remember Catherine McAuley this month on the anniversary of her death, we pray that she too will be declared a saint, inspiring women and men of our time by the witness of her tender love for your poor. Amen.*



*Saint Oscar Romero*