

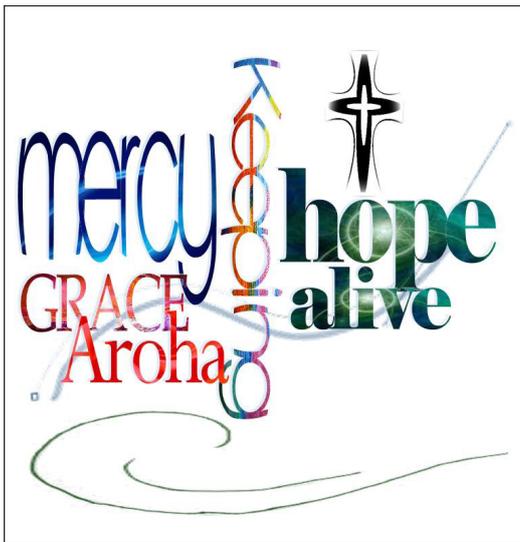


Works of mercy: turning words into deeds

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FOR the fourth month in succession, Te Puna Atawhai continues its focus on the Statement of Purpose developed for Whānau Mercy Ministries, the public juridic person (PJP) to which Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand plan to entrust the healthcare, education and community ministries which they have established in the name of the Catholic Church. Our focus this month is on what we call the works of mercy.



Words of Mercy – graphic by Cheryl Connelly rsm, used with permission.

Taihoa – spare a moment

As a way of concluding this reflection, you are invited to name the work of mercy which expresses best the aim of the ministry in which you are most involved. How do you think this work of mercy relates to one of the pressing needs in New Zealand society today?

Those familiar with the Catholic catechism will know that there are two clusters of these works, known as corporal (attending to physical needs) and spiritual (caring for mind and soul), seven of each. To these Pope Francis has added an eighth work of mercy, care for our common home, with a focus on protecting the environment we share with all other living creatures (*Season of Creation*, 2016). The Statement of Purpose takes a broad-brush approach to the topic, offering five headings to highlight its theme.

The document begins this section by noting that if we are intent on extending God's mercy, we will need 'to respond willingly and walk compassionately' with those who seek support. Mercy can never be handed down from a position of power or superiority but comes from those who have learned to walk in the shoes of the powerless. We can offer mercy only when we admit that we have first received it – atawhai mai, atawhai atu.

The first heading relates to 'healing and wholeness', a favourite theme in both the gospels of Jesus and the writings and witness of Catherine McAuley. Jesus comes to heal, with a promise of life in abundance. And Catherine describes mercy as 'the principal path' which Jesus points out to those who wish to follow him, by serving and comforting the least of his brothers and sisters with 'hearts animated with gratitude and love'; it is by attending to this quality of Catherine's 'tender love for the poor' that the creation of a PJP must always be seen as more than just a rejigging of bureaucratic structures.

The second heading, 'relief from suffering', is another link to Mercy's origins, reminding us that our ministries are meant to be a response 'through direct service and advocacy to relieve misery, to address its causes, and to assist those who are most in need.' (*Sisters of Mercy Healthcare Philosophy*, 3.1, e). At the heart of this view is the belief that life is sacred, a God-given gift to be valued and cared for from its very beginnings to the end of life.

'Restoration of human dignity' is the third heading among these themes. Mercy's focus on upholding the mana of every human person carries with it a recognition of culture. We are never isolated individuals and a sense of identity, based on our family and cultural roots, is one of the insights that Mercy has drawn especially from its partnership with Māori and its commitment to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The fourth heading in this section of the Statement of Purpose is 'Knowledge, understanding and wisdom'. This is a simple recognition of the fact that, from their earliest times, the Sisters of Mercy have been concerned for the uneducated and disadvantaged, especially for women and children, and that an education grounded in gospel values and church teachings on the dignity of every human person is integral to their mission. Mercy education upholds the view that women and girls are free to pursue their dreams with no gender bias to stop them.

The fifth and final heading, 'care for our common home', will feature as the topic for an upcoming reflection to mark this year's Season of Creation which runs from September 1 to October 4, the feast of St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of the environment.