



Te Ara a Maria – Mary’s Way is Mercy’s, too

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This month, New Zealand’s Catholic bishops are rededicating the country to Mary assumed into heaven. This was the title used by Bishop Pompallier when he first celebrated Mass here at Totara Point in the Hokianga in January 1838. The bishops have chosen the title Te Ara a Maria – Mary’s Way as the focus for this event which begins on August 15 with a ceremony at St Mary of the Angels Church in Wellington, which will become a national shrine to Mary, home for an image in her honour which will be taken on pilgrimage to all six dioceses of New Zealand over the coming months.



THIS image was drawn by Christienne Dadula, then a Year 10 student at St Mary’s College, Ponsonby, as the centre of a large stained-glass cross which dominates the gymnasium opened in 2013. ‘Blue is Mary’s colour,’ she recalled, ‘and red speaks of our caring.’ The red roses which inspired her were growing nearby around the small cemetery where the founding Sisters of Mercy are buried. The college shield shows the hearts of Jesus and Mary, a star of the Southern Cross and the anchor, symbol of Christian faith. When illuminated the large cross can be seen from the centre of the city, ‘but its visibility over college life is what I most wanted to show,’ said Christienne.

Catherine McAuley would rejoice to see Mother Mary honoured in this way, as she chose Our Lady as patron of the Congregation she founded. Her original rule names Mary as the principal protectress of Sisters of Mercy who should have ‘the warmest and most affectionate devotion’ for her, especially in their care for the poor. This same high regard for Mary is reflected in the latest Constitutions of our own sisters which describe Mary as ‘first among disciples’, who made the steadfast love and mercy of God visible in her life. ‘Like Mary, Mother of Mercy, we open ourselves to receive God’s word and act upon it’ (Constitutions 19).

But to avoid these efforts at rededication being just an exercise in nostalgia, we need to connect Mercy’s focus on Mary to aspects of life today as we know it. Mary is presented in the gospels not as gentle and demure, but as a woman of courage and gritty determination, able to find her way through struggle and dispossession as she escapes with her newborn son as refugees to a foreign land. Hers is a God who puts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.

Irish novelist Colm Tóibín has written *The Testament of Mary*, a short novel that explores the realities of life for the mother of a son crucified by a regime that knew no mercy. The glimpse here is unsettling, disturbing, shedding new light on Simeon’s prophecy that ‘this child is destined to be a sign that is rejected; and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ So, Mary’s way is to be no cakewalk, but a challenge that brings pain and discomfort before new light dawns. To follow Mary’s way today is to recognise the struggle of children and families living below the poverty line, the pain of women facing domestic violence and of those who have been sexually abused, whether in their own homes or by the care-providers to whom they were entrusted.

We are faithful to Mary’s way whenever women are empowered, and girls are encouraged to pursue their dreams of a more just and better world in which their gifts can make a difference. Mary’s way is followed when the sick and dying are comforted, the old respected and shown the dignity that every human life deserves.

Honouring Mary assumed into heaven reminds us of our Catholic belief that she already shares to the full the risen life for which we shall have to wait. Here’s a recognition that God’s kingdom reaches from time to eternity and that what the Constitutions of our Sisters of Mercy describe as ‘the cosmic Christ’ is the one we meet in prayer, ‘who transforms all things and calls us to give flesh to God’s mercy’ (Constitutions 13). It is for that larger vision of Christ bringing time to fulfilment that we not only pray, but also work to achieve, as we follow where Jesus and his first disciple lead.