



Hīkoi ngātahi - pilgrim people travelling together

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IT'S NEARLY 20 years since eco-theologian Jim Conlon was here from the Sophia Center in California at a Mercy conference in Auckland, insisting that in fidelity to Catherine McAuley, Mercy people today need 'listening hearts' that hear the poor and the voiceless.

'The invitation is to awaken to the realisation that where we stand determines what we see, and that Mercy's position on this planet is to share with the children and the poor of every species on this sacred earth. We are at the door of the empty tomb,' said Fr Conlon. 'Easter comes through resurrection moments, whenever creativity happens, and newness is born.'

Something of this same creativity was present earlier this year, when leaders of Catholic women's religious Congregations met in Rome for their three-yearly assembly, focused on the theme of 'embracing vulnerability on the synodal journey.' More than 500 Congregation leaders from around the world attended the gathering, hosted by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG); another 200 were linked online, some from war-torn areas like Ukraine and Syria.

Representing around 600,000 sisters around the globe, the assembly pledged 'to live vulnerable synodality through service as leaders together with the people of God.' The event coincided with a moment in the life of the global church when Pope Francis is seeking to use synodality to shape a more inclusive church.

All participants were aware of how the pandemic had affected their shared experience. 'Our lives are very different now, and what we have learned above all is that we are all deeply interconnected,' said retiring UISG president Sr Jolanda Kafka. 'Vulnerability is something shared by all of us as women religious. It is a part of ourselves we want to embrace with tenderness as we draw close to the wounds of humanity and make them our own.'

'We are vulnerable and fragile people. We need each other. We keep in mind the paradox of fragility – when we welcome it, we become stronger. Embracing means listening to what so many people affected by the pandemic are feeling.'

Over the coming months, when Whānau Mercy Ministries in New Zealand has gained Vatican approval and begins to function, lay people will bear increasing responsibility for Mercy's healthcare, education and community development ministries. On them will rest the task of ensuring that Mercy values continue to inspire these ventures and that the same spirit which animated Catherine McAuley and the generations of sisters who followed in her steps still shapes the ministries undertaken in her name.

Catherine was never one to exaggerate her role in seeing that the work survived. 'If the Order is my work, the sooner it falls to the ground, the better,' she said. 'If it is God's work, it needs no one. Let us never think any one individual necessary... We can all be done without.' Her trust instead was always in 'the great God who will finish in us the work he has begun.'



He pikopiko fern fronds – Graphic by Unsplash

Diocesan responses to the worldwide synodal process, culminating in an assembly of bishops in Rome next year, have highlighted our role as pilgrim people. As part of an evolving, unfolding world the church has not yet reached its final goal. A guiding image for the local church has been 'hīkoi ngātahi – journeying together.' The idea of journeying together 'has for many New Zealanders become a synonym for pilgrimage and even protest (seeking to bring about change)', says Cardinal John Dew. 'It is about growing closer to one another as disciples, as we try every day to make a Gospel response to the situations life puts before us.'