

The courage to walk where Mercy points

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! ‘Nothing like Christian courage – the church would not have one martyr to rejoice in without it!’ The words are Catherine McAuley’s, in a letter she writes to a young novice in Galway, encouraging her to be faithful to her call and not to doubt that God will build on her generosity and make it fruitful.

The same appeal to missionary courage was made by Bishop Francis Haley of Carlow, when he spoke to the Sisters of Mercy in that Irish diocese as they wrestled with the decision to set out for New Zealand at Bishop Pompallier’s invitation. ‘If St Patrick, St Augustine and many others of whom we read had stayed at home,’ said Dr Haley, ‘how would the holy faith have been transmitted to us?’

‘God’s glory demands that we should make this great sacrifice,’ he argued. ‘Are we to stay in our comfortable homes, knowing that by going, or permitting others to go, we should save innumerable souls?’ He spoke in admiration of what Bishop Pompallier had been able to achieve in New Zealand in the space of 12 years. ‘How much more will he not be able to do when his efforts are seconded by nuns teaching in schools, instructing the natives and visiting the sick? Were I a young man I would set out on this glorious mission without delay!’

It’s the courage of that small band of Irish Sisters of Mercy that we remember with gratitude each year, as we recall their arrival in Aotearoa on April 9, 1850, after their voyage of eight months on a small ship. ‘I know not how anyone could ever undertake such a voyage, except for God,’ wrote Mother Cecilia Maher on the way. ‘Eight in a close cabin at night is not agreeable, but for us, it is not much.’

The courage we speak of here is not foolhardiness, but what results when we combine a disregard for our own safety and comfort with reliance on God for a result we

Stepping out in Easter’s light

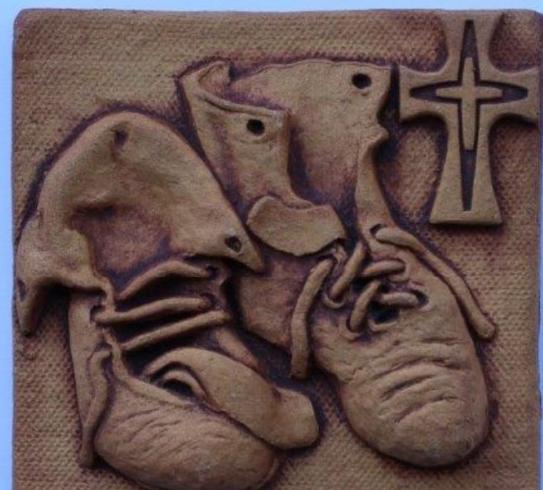
E Te Atua atawhai kaha,
God, whose name is abundant mercy,
in Jesus who died and rose again
you promise to lift us
above all that weighs us down,
to live in the light
of a love that knows no limit.

We thank you for the women
who came to the empty tomb,
the first to meet the risen Christ
and to set out in courage to share their news.

We give thanks for Mother Cecilia Maher
and her band of courageous companions,
who came here to widen the circle of Mercy,
to stand with and serve all at the edges,
and to draw them into the warmth of God’s love.

Empower us with Easter grace
to don those boots in our turn,
stepping out to wherever your love still waits to go,
in Mercy’s name. Amen.

Imaging Mercy Today



THIS ceramic plaque, depicting the handmade boots of which Catherine McAuley was so fond, and a Mercy cross, was made by Auckland artist Paddy Bourke. A plaque was recently given to Sisters of Mercy throughout New Zealand at ceremonies to renew their commitment to God’s mission of mercy.

could never achieve by ourselves. The same kind of courage is commended to religious by Pope Francis, in his letter to them announcing this as the Year of Consecrated Life. ‘Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit.’

It’s courage, says Pope Francis, that leads both religious and lay people to ‘come out of yourselves and go forth to the real peripheries. “Go into all the world” – these were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us. A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine.

‘Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems,’ says Pope Francis. ‘These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their problems, and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love.’

An image that stays with us as we think of courage is Catherine McAuley’s focus on her walking boots, ready to follow to wherever the call of mercy pointed. They took her in unexpected directions, on unfamiliar paths, until her life’s work was over. She famously charged a sister as she was dying with seeing that the boots were completely burned in the kitchen fire at Baggot Street – suggesting perhaps that she knew her life’s task was over and that others must do the walking. Are we ready to don the boots now, and to head to where mercy calls? - Dennis Horton