

MERCY'S VOICE OF ADVOCACY AT THE UN: MORE ABOUT JUSTICE THAN CHARITY

IT'S about a year and a half since Pope Francis visited the United Nations headquarters in New York and made his historic presentation to the general assembly. Later that same day, the UN released its 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, with a raft of 17 goals aimed at transforming human society with a hope to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all. Each goal has specific targets to be achieved over the next 15 years. It was no coincidence that the pope's visit should take place on the day the UN's agenda was announced, since sustainable development is high on the pope's agenda, too.

His insistence has been that human development be integral – that it should include spiritual as well as material goals, and that it be not imposed by states but allowed to be freely chosen by real men and women. Such integral development lies at the heart of his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, published four months before his visit to the United Nations and providing an insight into what his comments to the UN were likely to be.

It's no coincidence, either, that the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been welcomed by the Sisters of Mercy, and that eight of the 17 goals have been identified as most relevant to their mission around the world. For almost two decades, the Sisters of Mercy have had a special consultative status at the UN, as one of many faith-based NGOs which represent poor and vulnerable people and offer input on their behalf as policy is made. Among the Sisters of Mercy working at the UN recently has been New Zealander Bridget Crisp rsm, who has devoted part of her sabbatical to working at the UN, advocating on strategies to alleviate poverty.

The goal of eliminating poverty, the first of the SDGs, heads the list of those identified as most relevant to the mission of the Sisters of Mercy. The aim of the other seven can be glimpsed in their titles: Zero Hunger, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Climate Action and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

A snapshot of the work done by Sisters of Mercy at the UN comes from Irish-born Sr Áine O'Connor, who recently stepped down after five years as coordinator of Mercy Global Action. She told an Irish Catholic paper that their voice at the UN is credible because sisters work alongside people at the grassroots level and their critique is not



"It must be stated that a true right of the environment does exist... Every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life and beauty, and its interdependence with other creatures."
Pope Francis at the UN General Assembly, 2015.

motivated by profit or self-interest. Member states know "that we bring to the table an analysis based on justice and human rights." The rights-based approach is critical, says Áine. "It's more about justice than charity," she explains. "We want to reorder systems that have created poverty and injustice."

Sr Áine praises *Laudato Si'* as both inspiring and radical. "I think it looks at root causes. Pope Francis calls on the moral voice; he talks about how the question of justice must enter the debate on the environment. That's one of the reasons we are at a place like the UN – to see that justice comes into issues of development. I think this is prophetic, and has really given hope to people today."

ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT

After a recent public outcry over foreign exports of New Zealand water and a petition calling for a moratorium on the practice, Prime Minister Bill English has asked a panel of experts to consider the issues relating to the use of this natural resource. In the same month, a Treaty of Waitangi settlement has conferred the legal status of a person on the Whanganui River.

In what is regarded as a world-first, the settlement means that New Zealand's third-longest river now has all the rights and safeguards that come with personhood. Treating a river as a person

may seem unusual to some, but not to Māori, who often regard rivers as living entities and as tūpuna (ancestors). To the peoples of Whanganui belongs the famous proverb, 'ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au' (I am the river and the river is me).

In his address to the United Nations, Pope Francis insisted that the environment has "a true right." This is partly because every aspect of God's creation has its own intrinsic value, and partly because human beings depend on nature for their survival and growth. "Any harm done to the environment is harm done to humanity," said the pope.

Pope Francis has also insisted that the future of humanity depends on our ability to safeguard and share potable water around the world. In a message last year to mark World Water Day, he described water as "the most essential element for life." In recognition of this fact, Sisters of Mercy have endorsed the UN's sixth goal for sustainable development, with its focus on Clean Water and Sanitation, as especially relevant to their mission. "Sisters of Mercy worldwide have a growing concern about the global water crisis," according to Sr Áine O'Connor, former coordinator of Mercy Global Action.



Pope Francis marked World Water Day last month with a special greeting to participants at a Vatican-sponsored conference on water. He welcomed efforts to raise consciousness about "the need to protect water as a treasure belonging to everyone." He quoted UN figures, noting that every day a thousand children die from water-related illnesses and millions of people drink polluted water. "It is not too late, but it is urgent to realise the need and essential value of water for the good of humanity."

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You are invited to end this reflection by pondering, alone or with someone who shares your commitment to Mercy, on these questions:

- *What is your response to news of the Treaty settlement conferring the legal rights of personhood on the Whanganui River?*
- *What lessons might all New Zealanders draw from the way Māori regard rivers and waterways as tūpuna or ancestors?*

– **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

Easter – promise of living water

*E Te Atua Kaihanga, Earthmaker:
we praise you for our world and all it contains,
especially for water that sustains all that lives.
Teach us to respect Earth's fragile balance,
and to care for the gifts of your creation.*

*Let us reverence the other life-forms
that share this planet with us,
on which we and future generations depend.
Help us to change our mind-sets and life-styles,
that we and all your creatures
may know the joy of abundant life.*

*May Jesus, whom you sent among us,
keep his promise of living water
welling up within us to unending life.
As we celebrate the feast of his rising,
may we find new ways to support all who thirst.
Alleluia!*