

Serving – broken by whatever breaks God’s heart

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! A word check through the writings and sayings of Catherine McAuley suggests that service is not a word she often used. But others who witnessed the work to which she and her associates devoted themselves were quick to spot service of the poor and the sick as central to their efforts. So much so, that at a profession ceremony just six years after the Congregation was founded, Bishop John Murphy of Cork suggested that service be added to the vow formula of Sisters of Mercy, in addition to their commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience.

“Apparently Catherine liked this idea,” says biographer Mary Sullivan (*The Path of Mercy*, p 209), but the new wording was not generally adopted until the Rule was approved in Rome in 1841, the year of Catherine’s death. Since then, ‘the service of the poor, sick and ignorant’ has featured as a fourth vow in the profession of Sisters of Mercy.

Catherine picks up the theme in her *Familiar Instructions*: “By our vocation to the Order of Mercy, and by a sacred vow at our profession, we are engaged to comfort and instruct the sick poor of Christ. This is the principal reason we are called ‘Sisters of Mercy’ and why, to the faithful discharge of our duty, so many graces are annexed. Remark the words of our Lord, quoted in the first section of our rule: ‘I say to you, as long as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ Oh, what a consolation to serve Christ himself, in the person of the poor, and to walk the very same path he trod! And the happy vocation is ours, all unworthy as we are of such a grace!”

A reflection on the vow of service, prepared by sisters in the United States, insists that a commitment to serve people in need is essential to being a person of Mercy. “The impetus for our service is to allow our hearts to be broken by the very thing that breaks the heart of God. ‘In the end,

Serving with a spring in our step

E Te Atua hoa hikoī, God, companion on our journey:
in the constant unfolding of our world,
you go before us, inviting us to become
what in your love you call us to be.
May that love be at the heart of our service,
as we learn to stand with fragile communities
and to share generously the riches you entrust to us.

Let our desire to dream a bigger reality than we possess
be the sign that you are the inspiration of our lives.
For a better world will never unfold if all we want
is more of what we have known till now.

Continue to broaden our view, stretch our minds
to embrace new possibilities for those we serve,
and let our hearts be broken by whatever in our world
is breaking your heart as we pray.

Replace the clay of our lives with the mercury
of your love, causing our hearts to soar above
the now into a future that waits for us to be brought
to life in Mercy’s name. Mauri ora!

Imaging Mercy Today



AUCKLAND’S Carmel College represents its core value of āwhinatanga or service by the Mercy cross and a pair of boots, recalling the fact that Catherine’s Sisters of Mercy were known as ‘the walking sisters’, ready to go wherever they were needed.

what needs to get disrupted will find its disruption in our solidarity and in our intimate kinship with the outcast’.” The last words in this quote are those of a priest whose ministry has been to gang members, Fr Gregory Boyle, in his popular book *Tattoos on the Heart*.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, service or āwhinatanga is identified as a core value by all of our Mercy ministries. In our healthcare facilities, it’s described as ‘meeting human needs through quality care’, with a special focus on combining professional skill with compassionate care. Quality in this sector is also linked with ongoing improvement, reflecting Catherine’s resolve “to be good today, but better tomorrow.”

In Mercy schools, service leads to quality care, excellence in teaching and learning and a determination to see that Mercy makes a difference in how lives are lived. And in our community development ventures, service means learning to stand with fragile communities, to walk with them in their struggles and to rejoice in their achievements.

Lest we think of service as a matter of simply doing doggedly what we are called to do, we need to remember that Catherine McAuley linked service of the poor with an ‘ardent desire to be united to God.’ There’s a spring in her step as we watch her throw herself into what she called ‘the business of our lives’ and draw others, most of them women younger than herself, to the works of mercy.

A true charism is mercury, not clay, says Joan Chittister; the challenge we face in mission is to nurture the indefinable ingredient that makes Mercy different from what others are able to promise. At Mercy Hospice Auckland, they have called it ‘the thing’ and wondered anxiously if it would go with them to new premises when they moved from where their work had begun. The good news is that it did; may it continue to blossom in all we do! – Dennis Horton