

# Imaging Mercy Today

## Counting down to Sisters' Chapter

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy!

This month we're setting aside our series of reflections on the draft Vision and Mission of Ngā Whāea Atawhai o Aotearoa, to join in prayerful, thoughtful solidarity with our sisters as they prepare for their 10-day Chapter which begins in Christchurch on August 25.

It's an historic event, as Sisters of Mercy from throughout New Zealand, Samoa and Tonga gather for this first canonical assembly of the Congregation formed in 2005 when the four previous foundations became one. In a sense a Chapter is a little like a five-yearly parliament, when vowed religious have the chance to respond anew to their founding charism, articulate a vision for the future and choose leaders to help them on the path they have discerned.

But there is more at stake at a Chapter than simply administrative and procedural issues. These will be days of grace, when the sisters whose lives and communities form the heart of Mercy's world are in close touch with the spirit that breathes life into all our undertakings. At a point in time when religious themselves are fewer in number and less involved in many of the works that bear their name, there is need for all of us to acknowledge once more the gift which sisters continue to make to what we do.

Our ministries have grown from their faith-filled response to a vast range of human suffering and need, with a trust in Providence that has often defied conventional logic or commercial sense. It was Catherine's insistence that the poor need help today, not next week,

that drove her sisters to where others were slow to go.

It's that same imperative which in our own time has led Mercy to stay in residential aged care when other church groups have moved out, to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and engage with tangata whenua as partners, and to work at closing the gaps long after the nation's leaders decided this was no longer politically correct.

It's been our vowed religious who have found ways of breaking the glass ceiling for women in all aspects of Mercy's work, of naming the feminine in God and celebrating God's presence in rituals that are inclusive, of creating a spirituality that helps humans to see they are dependent on and connected to all other forms of life. It's through trust in an unfolding universe that our sisters can see new life emerging from chaos, and accept that the patterns of one age may evolve into new and unexpected forms, for a future yet unseen.

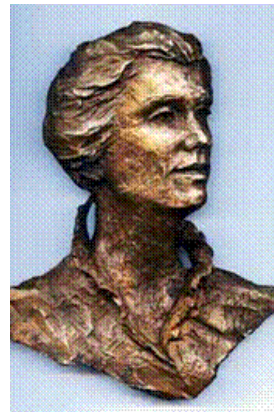
Mercy sisters have known, before many of their companions realized, that fidelity to Catherine's charism has meant letting go of the past, stretching boundaries to accommodate the new. Their stance finds an echo in these words, from the US Leadership Conference of Women Religious: "Our foremothers and founders stepped into the chaos and unknown of their day, trusting in God's good guidance. In our time, we are called to do the same. Inspired by the radical call of the Gospel, led by God's Spirit, and companioned by one another, we embrace our time as holy, our vocation as gift, and our challenges as blessings." It's in that spirit that this month's Chapter beckons. - Dennis Horton

### He Inoi - Prayer

#### Mercy for our time

Today we join in a spirit of faith and aroha with Sisters of Mercy, as they prepare for their Chapter. May these be days of grace, as they open their hearts anew to Catherine's founding spirit, and find in her openness to God a fresh outpouring of mercy for our time.

We pray for all those vowed to religious life, called to be mystics in an age that has lost its power to wonder. May they drink deep from the puna that springs forth and flows, even in the night; may they shed a light to show us where mercy waits to go.



Catherine  
- in her  
own words

#### All out for the poor

'We intended to stay a day in Charleville and go on to Limerick, but I found I could be more useful there than perhaps I have ever been.

'There was danger of all breaking up, and my heart felt sorrowful when I thought of the poor being deprived of the comfort which God seemed to intend for them. I made every effort, and praised be God, all came around. The first stone of a nice convent was laid...'  
(October 1838)

# The difference Mercy makes

**When the Sisters of Mercy bought a large house on two acres of land in Epsom in 1921, it was one of several spacious properties on the outskirts of the city.**

The two-storied house in The Drive stood where only recently market gardens worked by Chinese settlers had thrived.

The Sisters of Mercy brought a new focus to the area with a school, boarding facility for 17 young children and a place of worship for local Catholics who were without a parish church.

So began a story of welcome, hospitality, education, prayer and spiritual nourishment which continues to unfold.

These days the buildings may not look the same; the environs have changed; the grounds are only half their original size. And the current residents may not look much like those founding sisters. But the same spirit of welcome and prayerfulness lives on.

Te Ngakau Waiora Mercy Spirituality Centre provides an urban oasis for prayer, contemplation and learning, making

space for whanaungatanga - right relationships - with self and others, God and all creation.

Whether it's through quiet reflection days, retreats or the spiritual accompaniment offered by our



Each month this year we're inviting the manager of one of our Mercy ministries to highlight the difference Mercy makes in their special field of endeavour. This month's perspective comes from RITA VESSEY rsm, manager of Te Ngakau Waiora Mercy Spirituality Centre in Epsom.

centre's staff, or through programmes run by parish, educational and community groups, the reflective and supportive environment can open up the spaces within, so that the wairua may flow with new life.

Society today is under pressure from busy schedules, endless traffic queues, financial hardship, emotional tensions and interpersonal anxieties.

In such a world, the chances to tend to one's inner self, to keep a sense of personal equilibrium, and to find space for right relationships are often remote and hard to come by.

The task held so respectfully by all who work at Te Ngakau Waiora is to provide that place and opportunity.

Drive into our grounds, off the busy roads, and be in that other space. Discover the sense of peace, beauty and welcome.

There's time here to be present - to our world, and to the God within. As one guest observed, with deep awe, "I never realized a daisy was so beautiful." This is holy ground we stand on; God is here!

## Knowing when good intentions can harm

**Pastoral care providers play a vital role in sustaining hope among people who are old and ill, but they also need to be aware that good intentions can sometimes do harm.**

That was the message from Dr Ksenija Napan, who led a reflection day in Auckland last month for Mercy sisters and companions involved in pastoral care.

Among the group of 24 were staff from Mercy health and aged care facilities, and six from the chaplaincy department of North Shore Hospital.

In a presentation called 'Dangerous Spirituality - when good intentions hurt', Dr Napan stressed the need to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy religious attitudes.

"Chaplains might ask whether they are forcing their values on their clients, when they decide what topics can be discussed.

"They may also have to consider whether their own strongly held views hinder or help them in working with clients who hold different religious convictions."



DR Ksenija Napan .....core of spirituality lies in love, respect and acceptance

She recommended that pastoral care staff create a space for dialogue that allows a client's true beliefs to be heard, in a way that offers support but still allows destructive beliefs to be challenged.

"My intention here is to challenge, but not offend," she said. "In my book, the core of spirituality lies in love, respect and acceptance. But we still need to see how our beliefs colour our perceptions and shape our actions."

Another of Dr Napan's presentations explored the theme of the day, 'Sustainers of Hope'. She noted that pastoral care staff who work with people nearing the end of their lives often have to balance hope with honesty in their work.

"How do you engender hope when you feel powerless?" she asked. "Is offering hope different from predicting the future? Does hope need to be realistic?"

Dr Napan quoted recent research to show that many patients seem able to maintain a sense of hope, despite acknowledging the terminal nature of their illness.

Patients and their families mostly prefer honest and accurate information, when it is offered with empathy and understanding.

Dr Napan is a senior lecturer at Unitec's Faculty of Health and Social Sciences. She currently teaches a course in spirituality and social practice, aimed at helping students to integrate spirituality into their work without imposing it on clients.