

Imaging Mercy Today

Clothing the naked in streets near us

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! We don't have to agree with the adage about 'clothes making the man' to know how critical clothes are to feeling good about ourselves. Whether it's smart we prefer or casual, brand-new or pre-loved, our choice of attire can make a big difference to how our day unfolds. Choosing what to wear touches on the quality of our lives; empowering others to make that choice is a work of mercy.

In another place and age, the summons to 'clothe the naked' has meant just what it says, drawing on our own resources to see that others have enough to clad themselves decently and to keep warm. In New Zealand today, it's more likely a case of helping struggling families to have some choice about what they and their children will wear.

Social workers in our community development ventures express gratitude for schemes like the Sharing Shed at one Auckland independent school that provides a steady flow of good used clothes. A group of parent volunteers from the school turns up with fresh supplies each week, sometimes asking about what's needed and trying to meet special requests.

The shops run so successfully by Mercy Hospice Auckland – and by Atawhai Assisi in Hamilton – offer another opportunity for recycling clothes no longer needed by their owners. With their aim of "turning second-hand goods into first-class care", the shops combine sustainable living with fund-raising for palliative and aged care –



MERCY TODAY: Sr Patrice Lowell (left) who works as a volunteer in the Hospice Shop in Ponsonby, with some of the women who help to run the six hospice shops now operating throughout the city.

a double win for Mercy. A focus on quality and a touch of class, which Catherine McAuley would have endorsed, lifts the merchandise above second-rate hand-me-downs.

If there are rogues in the field, they must surely be the drivers of home-shop trucks operating in some of our suburbs, enticing cash-strapped families to over-spend on clothes they cannot afford. Mercy community workers report that clients are told they can pay later, but quickly run up huge debts incurring high interest. "The clothes are two or three times more expensive than at outlets like The Warehouse, but our mothers have no transport," a Sister of Mercy reports. "Women who sign on for our courses learn to budget better, pay off their debts and buy from other sources." "The trucks are on the streets every day, chasing our women," adds a colleague. "If I had a witch's broom, I'd sweep them all away!"

As for our own responses, whether personal or collective, the choices are endless. Resisting the lure of designer labels. Wearing what we've worn before, rather than splashing out on something new. Recycling what we no longer need, and maybe choosing a pre-loved garment while we're about it. Settling for a modest \$40 shirt, when top of the range are \$300 and more. And why do school uniforms continue to be so expensive? Where's the enlightened Mercy board or PTA insisting on clothes off the rack, with a simple crest or tie as the distinguishing mark? What would Catherine say of youngsters who may miss out, for the price of a blazer?

- Dennis Horton

More than sparrows



We're worth more than many sparrows,
says Jesus, since we are in God's hands.
We cannot worry about food or drink,
or about how we are to be clothed,
if our hearts are really set on the kingdom.

Instead, to the one who takes our coat
we are to offer our shirt, as well;
we're to give without counting the cost,
to lend with no hope of return -
that's what marks us out as believers.

May we be forgiven for choosing
to live within our comfort zones;
may we learn to embrace the spirit
of giving where true life is found,
in mercy's name. Amen.

Mercy's window on the world

While the global recession has put pressure on all Pacific nations, the needs of their women and children are the greatest.

That's the view which surfaced at a Pacific conference in Vanuatu last month, on *The Human Face of the Global Economic Crisis*.

More than 220 delegates from around the Pacific spent three days looking at ways that countries in the region can mitigate the effects of the crisis.

The conference was opened by Helen Clark, in her role as administrator of the UN Development Programme.

Progress in the Pacific region has been adversely affected by food, fuel and economic crises, as well as by natural disasters, she said.

"Behind the facts and figures on falling exports and remittances are the human stories of the families and communities who are affected.

"With governments confronting lower revenue, rising costs and pressures to cut back on spending, men and women in the Pacific have been facing difficult decisions.

"Can they afford basic health care? What food and shelter can they afford for their families? Will their children be able to go to school, and from where will they get the money



for fees, uniforms and books?"

Miss Clark emphasised the value of social protection programmes, especially those aimed at meeting the needs of women and children.

Efforts to advance gender equality, so that women as well as men can benefit from job creation, and school subjects that equip students with business skills were encouraging, she said.

Other nations can help by keeping labour markets open to Pacific workers on a seasonal basis, said Miss Clark.

"Remittances back to Pacific nations form a significant part of GDP. They play a role in boosting family living standards and access to services, including health and education. They are also positive for mobilising funding for local community infrastructure."

A plea on behalf of young people in the Pacific came from 17-year-old Danielle Willis from Palau, who spoke at a two-day pre-conference meeting, on how the global economic crisis had impacted on the lives of Pacific people.

"More fathers and mothers are unemployed and have less income. Families have started to skip meals or cut the variety of foods, pulling youngsters from school to work, and leaving children

'Frustration, tension and violence are increasing.... Girls and women are the most vulnerable.'

without appropriate care while they struggle to make ends meet.

"Frustration, tension and violence at home and within communities are increasing. Growing substance abuse worsens these situations. Girls and women are the most vulnerable, due to existing gender inequality.

"Please listen to what the voices of the vulnerable are telling you," she told delegates at the conference. "The decisions you make this week can change their lives."

Rest home sponsoring Samoan students

Residents and staff of St Catherine's Rest Home in Ponsonby are once again sponsoring two students at Paul VI College in Samoa, paying their fees and stationery costs for 2010.

Totalling \$500, the annual payment has been made to the college for several years as part of the Mercy rest home's mission outreach.

The money is earned from selling homemade marmalade and chutney, raffles and other fund-raising schemes.

Among the marmalade makers are Samoan-born Sr Theresa Schaumkell and Irish Sr Ethna Diviney, who spent several years in Leulumoega after Sisters of Mercy from Auckland went to Samoa to administer and staff the Catholic secondary school in 1972.

Of the two Paul VI students who are currently supported by St Catherine's,



DISPLAYING a recent batch of marmalade are St Catherine's Rest Home residents Sr Theresa Schaumkell, Sr Ethna Diviney and Miss Catherine Watt, with (centre, rear) staff member Lynley Simonson.

one is now in Year 12 and will sit School Certificate at the end of the year; the other is in her final Year 13 and will sit her Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate. Both are described by principal Sr Fatima Lemisio as promising pupils, whose families are very grateful for the support their girls receive.

Student fees at the college, which is still run by Sisters of Mercy, help to pay the salaries of the school's lay teachers.

Families can struggle to meet the costs, especially when many of them have been supporting relatives whose loved ones lost lives and homes in last year's devastating tsunami.

Other outreach projects supported by St Catherine's Rest Home include a structured holiday programme for rangatahi (young men) at risk in West Auckland, and a Christmas hamper scheme for older people living on their own in Auckland's eastern suburbs.