

# Imaging Mercy Today

## Homeless sheltered, strangers welcomed

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! Responding to the call to 'shelter the homeless' depends on where in Mercy's world you stand. Working alongside earthquake victims in Haiti or Chile is not the same as supporting those in garages or overcrowded homes in Auckland suburbs. Australian Mercy sisters caring for asylum seekers on Christmas Island face challenges quite different from their counterparts on New Zealand's West Coast, offering a place to stay for mothers and children at risk. Yet the human reality is the same – families in search a dry, safe place to call home.

Talk to Mary Foy rsm, who chairs Monte Cecilia Housing Trust and serves as Kaiarahi and mentor to Te Ukaipo, a Mercy agency involved with rangatahi and whanau in Waitakere City, and she'll name access to healthy, affordable housing as a huge hurdle to well-being faced by the families she meets. "None of the other basic needs, such as education, health and employment can be really addressed till a youth has a roof over his head. Empowerment and restoration of mana don't happen while living with your family in damp, overcrowded conditions."

Her views are echoed by the two Sisters of Mercy who live and work in Wiri. "There are many families living near us who don't have access to adequate, affordable housing, and who call on us for assistance," they report.

"As well as advocating for individual families, we also work with other agencies, monitoring current practice and pressing the Government for policies that are fair for the poorest people – often women and children. One such area is helping families to overcome barriers in the system, and working with *Housing New Zealand* to dismantle them."

It's the human face of homelessness which Mercy helps to reveal. "Some come as new-born babies or as fresh-faced youngsters," say the two sisters who run Cobden Mercy Outreach near Greymouth. "Other faces are lined and stressed, fearful and uncertain. Some have



MERCY TODAY: Mary Foy rsm (left), with colleagues in Ranui at the blessing of a new house provided for homeless families by Monte Cecilia Housing Trust. Adequate and affordable housing tops the list for families supported by the Trust and by Te Ukaipo, a Mercy community agency working in the area.

### On earth, as in heaven

E Te Atua, hoa o te rawakore  
God, friend of the dispossessed:  
You were in the world you made,  
and it did not know you.  
You came to live with your own,  
and they did not accept you.  
But with all who welcome you  
You share your life and power.

In these Easter days  
fill us once more with light  
to see that all we have  
is your gift to us,  
not to keep for ourselves,  
but to share with others,  
especially with those  
who wait for our love.

Give us fresh sight to see  
the homeless in our midst,  
the strangers at our door.  
Show us how to welcome them  
in your name,  
the Christ who died and rose,  
that all may have abundant life  
in this world, as in the next. Amen

lost their homes for a variety of reasons, others have chosen to flee. Some come for a night or two, without even a change of clothes or a toothbrush; others come with everything they own – a houseful of furniture that has to be stored. All come with stories, most with unfinished chapters."

It's often mothers who come, say Cobden's Mercy sisters. "They come with their kids. Or when their kids have been taken from them, they come here to see them in a supervised environment. They come on home detention, because here they're able to keep their children with them. They come to stay with us, because a family member is in hospital. They come, because they are about to give birth and need a safe place to rest."

Mercy's way is to welcome warmly, without condition or judgment. The hymn, *Come as you are*, makes sense, say the Cobden sisters. "We help people to close some doors and to open others. We offer space for them to rest and sort themselves out. From their strength and resilience in the face of huge obstacles, we can learn so much." Who are the homeless strangers knocking on our door today? - Dennis Horton

# Chile's jolt - 'longest moments of my life'

**The three minutes spent in the 8.8 magnitude quake that jolted Chile in February were the longest in her life, says Kiwi Margaret Milne rsm.**

The Sister of Mercy from Christchurch, who works with families and women's health groups in poor areas around Santiago, says the experience was like being in a huge washing machine.

"It really was a shocking experience that felt like it would never stop.

"The thousands who live in Santiago's high rises must have been absolutely terrified as they fled down flights of stairs in pitch darkness."

The quake, which killed more than 500 people and caused damage worth billions of dollars, was followed by frequent aftershocks and a power failure that plunged almost the entire Chilean population into darkness.

Signs of damage are everywhere, Margaret reports in a recent letter to her Congregation here. "In our vicinity

the public hospital is completely closed, described as 'uninhabitable'. Patients have been distributed around the city's other hospitals.

"There are collapsed walls, sheds and poorly built structures – including the house I live in. Shakes still continue. We had one this afternoon, and I leapt out of my skin – normally I don't.

"I spent a day in Rancagua (90 minutes south of Santiago) with other Mercy sisters and hundreds of young people in 'chain gangs', passing boxes of donated goods from a huge lorry for distribution to outlying parishes and pueblos.

"I lost count of the boxes we passed along, and next day I understood why I had sore shoulders."

Life is getting back to normal, Margaret reports, but pleas continue for equipment like water filters and for blankets and plastic, as the rains are due. "Thanks for the messages, prayers and moral support; it has helped so much."



Margaret Milne rsm... on the job in Chile

*A support group in New Zealand sends funds to Margaret on a regular basis. Contributions to the Margaret Milne Support Group may be sent to Mary Boyes rsm, Unit 2, 14 Wharenui Rd, Upper Riccarton, Christchurch 8041.*

## Mercy's window on the world

**Sisters of Mercy across the Tasman have been helping to provide pastoral care for asylum seekers held at Australia's detention centres on Christmas Island, 2600km north-west of Perth.**

In partnership with Jesuit Refugee Service and supported by Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the sisters have taken on the role in response to a proposal from a Mercy Justice Conference held in Canberra last year.

The conference called for action to ensure that detainees be treated with dignity and respect, and for factual information aimed at reducing fear and anxiety generated by un-informed media reports.

Back from two months on Christmas Island, Melbourne Sister of Mercy Maureen Lohrey spoke of her experience to *Mercy Matters*, the email newsletter of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy in Australia.

She said that much of the fear-mongering and negativity about the number of asylum-seekers trying to reach Australia by boat is based on ignorance.

"Compared with the numbers going from Africa and other countries to Europe, this is a drop in the ocean."

Those who blame the government for the influx of asylum seekers are missing the global picture, she said. "The world is in a sorry state, unfortunately."



MERCY Sr Maureen Lohrey - asylum seekers just want a life with their families.

Maureen wished that other Australians could meet some of the detainees and know what they have gone through – "and what they would go through if they return to their countries. We have no idea of their suffering. All they want to do is to get their families out and to have a life."

She spoke of a 19-year old who sailed with his father and 39 other men from Sri Lanka. After 59 days at sea, their boat broke up. Most spent over 18 hours clinging to debris before being picked up by a Thai fishing boat. The boy's father was among 12 drowned; only one body was recovered.

Another detainee Maureen met was an

Afghani mother of three, whose husband was killed by the Taliban. After her 12-year old daughter was maimed by a bomb, she took her family to Pakistan in search of treatment. From there, they made their way to Malaysia and Indonesia, before sailing to Christmas Island in a small boat.

Living conditions at the two detention facilities are adequate, Maureen said. While both centres are secure – a large complex for 1400 men and a smaller one for around 400 families, mostly women and children – neither gives the feeling of being a prison. Staff do their best to treat people with dignity and respect.

The worst feature detainees face is the time they spend waiting for visas, Maureen said. "Some manage reasonably well, but others get sick with worry." The waiting can spell depression, and while detainees may reapply for visas, the process can be a continuous cycle of disappointment.

"These people are traumatized by what they've been through, and by the fact that their families are often still in danger. This weighs on them terribly."

Maureen was glad of the chance to be there, to hear their stories and give them encouragement. But she found the work draining and the humidity intense. "I knew that at age 76, I couldn't do much more."

Another Mercy sister from Melbourne, Lizzie Finnerty, filled the role from mid-February until March 17 when Sr Joan Kelleher from Perth was due to begin full-time pastoral work.