

Imaging Mercy Today

Visiting the lonely - sick and imprisoned

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! In her biography of Mother Cecilia Maher, archivist and historian Marcienne Kirk rsm has a poignant account of visits by the founder of New Zealand's first Mercy community to a soldier in Auckland's jail, sentenced to hang for murder.

Contemporary reports describe how he used to stand at his cell window, waiting to catch sight of the sisters who came to see him. Mother Cecilia spent time the day before his execution, praying with him and offering comfort. Her companion, Sister Borgia Tyrrell, was nervous about being locked in the cell, 'but the sight of that saintly Mother kneeling beside the poor fellow, with tears rolling down his face, was a scene on which the angels must have looked with delight.'

In one of her own letters, Mother Cecilia notes that Sunday visits to women prisoners formed a regular part of the ministry of her sisters, who were also constant callers at the city's Colonial Hospital. Visiting the lonely, especially the sick and imprisoned, has been a hallmark of Catherine's 'walking sisters' since they were first founded.

As a corporal work of mercy, the outreach to those shut away from the rest of society is personally endorsed by Jesus who identifies himself with the least of his sisters and brothers. 'I was sick and in prison, and you visited me,' is how his parable of the Last Judgment makes the link, put just as succinctly by one of this country's Catholic prison chaplains who says, 'We don't take Christ to the prisons; he

is already there.'

One of those chaplains is Sister of Mercy Joy Danvers, who serves on the ecumenical team at Waikeria Prison, New Zealand's largest jail. The sense of loneliness is felt acutely by prisoners, she says, especially 'first-timers' held in high security units. 'Physical contact with visitors is restricted. Not being present at the birth of a child or the burial of a loved one, limited phone calls and hours spent on their own – all serve to make prisoners realize how stripped they are of what they once took for granted.' The feeling of loneliness which prisoners experience can often turn into depression and isolation, she notes.

One way we can respond to the gospel challenge is through an *Adopt-a-Cell* prayer card, says Joy Danvers. 'Praying for individual prisoners, their victims and their



PRISON chaplain
Joy Danvers rsm...
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Where grace alone leads

E te Atua, Kaiwetewete,
God, you come to set free,
and no one is beyond
the reach of your embrace.
Your mercy seeks to
save what is lost;
and the power of your truth
is to convert, rather than condemn.
We know it is your grace
that brought us here,
and that grace will lead us on.

Let your Spirit open for us
ways to reconcile
and to forgive.
In the face of wrongdoing,
keep us from feelings of revenge.
May we work to create a system of justice
that restores rather than strikes back,
that heals as well as puts to right,
calling those who fall from grace
to new ways of life,
in mercy's name. Amen.

families, as well as for the officers and chaplains who care for them, is one positive action that people can take.' As well, she suggests volunteer work, helping prisoners to read and write or to pursue their interests in art or music. A third option is to set up a group to study justice issues, with a view to changing attitudes to crime and imprisonment.

Another Mercy perspective on prisons comes from social workers who support the families of offenders. 'When men are incarcerated, it's children who may feel their absence acutely, crying for their dads,' says one of our community development leaders. 'The behaviour of children often changes, particularly boys who will sometimes act out.' In another current case, it's the mother who is in prison, 'and Dad is trying everything he possibly can on behalf of his children to get an early release.' Support from Mercy agencies includes gaining access to experienced lawyers, accompanying women to court or family group conferences, organizing prison visits, writing letters of support or offering 'the kindly spoken word' urged by Catherine McAuley.

The last word on the topic comes from the Catholic bishops of New Zealand, whose statement for Social Justice Week last year called for a better response than more jails and longer sentences. 'All of us are called to find paths to a justice system which reconciles, which rejects attitudes of revenge, which helps victims to heal and offenders to turn their lives around. This is the only true path to the security and safety for which our society longs.' - Dennis Horton

Better good nurses than clever ones

A letter written by Florence Nightingale features in a display at Waiatarua Mercy Parklands, the aged care facility in Ellerslie this month, marking the 100th anniversary of her death in this International Year of the Nurse.

The notes were hand-written by the founder of modern nursing in 1881, for the nurses and students at the School of Nursing at St Thomas's Hospital in London where she taught after returning from the Crimean War.

Now in the archives of St Mary's Convent in Auckland, the facsimile copy of the letter was given to Mercy Sr Rita Vessey in 1971 by Wellington nurse Mabel Kane, then in her 90s. Mabel had trained at St Thomas's Hospital, and could remember Florence still visiting wards in her wheelchair.

Thoroughness is one of the values Miss Nightingale insists on. For a nurse, it's a matter of life and death. "Or rather, without it, she is no nurse – especially thoroughness in the unseen work. Do that well, and the other will be done well, too.

"Be as careful in cleaning the used poultice basin, as in your attendance at an antiseptic dressing. Don't care most about what meets the eye and gains attention."

She quotes a minister who asks a housemaid how she knows she has grace. "Because I clean under the



Florence Nightingale and (below) the signature on her letter to nurses, 6 May 1881.

*I hope to see you all,
me by one - this year.*

Florence Nightingale

mats,' was her excellent reply," says Florence. "If a housemaid said that, how much more should a nurse, whose care is for patients?"

Nurses need to be good learners, says Miss Nightingale. "We need to remember that we come to learn, to be taught. No one ever was able to teach who was not able to learn." But knowing the theory is not enough. "Theory without practice is ruinous to nurses," she warns.

She insists on doing well, "not for selfish praise, but to honour and advance the

work we have taken up. Let us value our training, not because it makes us cleverer or superior to others, but because it enables us to be more useful and helpful to the sick, who most want our help."

Experienced nurses need to remember that they were once beginners. "We will not forget that once we were ignorant, tiresome probationers. We will not laugh at the mistakes of beginners, but it shall be our pride to help all who come under our influence to be better, more thorough nurses.

"The influence of a thorough nurse over all the raw probationers who come under her care is untold. It's this influence, for good or bad, which either raises or lowers the tone of a hospital."

Among the qualities Florence admires are quietness, gentleness, patience and endurance. "Women's influence ever has been quiet and gentle in its working, like the leaven, never noisy and self-asserting. Let us seek to be good rather than clever nurses."

Sisters of Mercy worked alongside Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. One of them, Sr Mary Clare Moore who founded the Bermondsey community in London, became a lifelong friend. Another, Sr Bernard Dickson from Ireland, spent four years in Auckland before travelling to lead the first Mercy foundation in Wellington in 1861. She is buried in the small cemetery behind St Mary's Convent, Ponsonby.

Children invisible in imprisonment sagas

While prison numbers in New Zealand continue to soar – ours is now the second most imprisoned society in the Western world, next to the US – very little research has been done on the families and children of prisoners.

Addressing this issue is *Invisible Children*, the first-year report of a three-year research project being pursued in Christchurch under the direction of Liz Gordon.

First results published last November indicate that around 87% of women and 65% of men in New Zealand jails have children. For every person in prison, there is an average of 2.2 children, with numbers roughly the same for both Maori and pakeha.

Children are caught up in arrest, sentencing, visiting and the health, educational, social and economic effects of their parents' imprisonment, say the researchers. 'They are invisible in both policy and practice, and their needs are rarely a priority.'



graphic courtesy of Pillars

A child is present at about one in five arrests; researchers were told of several quite violent and disruptive arrests in front of children. Children have trouble getting to see their parents in jail. Well over half live more than an hour's drive from prison.

Families of prisoners tend to be among the poorest in society. All but six in the study live on benefits and most struggle to make ends meet.

Health effects experienced by children of

prisoners include physical symptoms like asthma, psoriasis and nervous disorders. Emotional problems include anger, nightmares, bedwetting, low self-esteem and attachment issues.

Several showed mental health or conduct disorders, especially as they got older.

Some children have changed school as a result of a parent's imprisonment, for a variety of reasons. Some have low attendance raters at school, and find it difficult to concentrate when they are there. Some are bullied, or are bullies.

Nearly all children in the study are at risk of failing at school, despite very supportive school staff.

A final section of the report, called 'making children visible', examines the role of community organizations working to improve the lives of children of prisoners.

Over the next two years, the study will accumulate knowledge from further research and develop a framework for community intervention.

For full details, see www.pillars.org.nz