

# Imaging Mercy Today

## Admonishing the sinner - in all of us

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! There have been times in our Mercy story when the lines between saints and sinners were clearly drawn. At least some of Catherine McAuley's concern for the poor was to rescue them from falling under the sway of Protestant influences, especially 'at the awful period of death'. Better to die poor and Catholic, than to be well-off but beyond the pale of the one true church!

Yet there are glimpses in Catherine's own writing that she was aware of sometimes falling short of the mark. "Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from me," she writes to Frances Warde over her battles with clergy. "I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me humble, before he calls me into his presence." And there was her falling-out with headstrong nephew Willie who, years later, was never quite sure if his aunt had forgiven him. Her resolve was always "to be good today, but better tomorrow."

Admonishing sinners and calling the wayward to repentance do not seem to loom large on Catherine's agenda. Her preferred approach was to win hearts by reaching out in love. "Mercy receives the ungrateful again and again, and is never weary of pardoning them," she reminds her sisters. Catherine saw love as her enduring legacy and her Congregation's chief claim to fame: "One thing is remarkable, that no breach of charity ever occurred among us. The sun, I believe, never went down on our anger. This is our only boast."

These days that boast is not so easily made, and Sisters of

Mercy are having to stand with the church at large in acknowledging our shadow side. As Breege O'Neill reminded Mercy leaders from around the world at their conference in May, our story is a story of light and shade, of dandelion and wheat. The Ryan Report published in Ireland last year has revealed how children in religious establishments were abused, not just by individual lapses from grace but by systems that failed to protect them.

"While we dedicated our lives to the service of children, the institution to which we belong became self-serving," said Breege O'Neill. "We did not nurture our feminine, caring nature. A culture of harshness developed that caused enormous hurt. As the Ryan Report stated, 'more kindness and humanity would have gone far to make up for poor standards of care.'"



MERCY TODAY: Staff from Te Waipuna Puawai, the Mercy community development centre in Ellerslie, help to clear rubbish from a local stream as part of their Earth Day effort this year. Collective action is now part of Mercy's response to an abused and endangered world.

### Mercy in light and shadow

E te Atua Kaiwhakamana:  
with grace you lift us up,  
raise our sights again  
when we fall short of the mark.  
You extend credit without limit,  
new each morning, each day.  
There is no crack in our damaged ego  
through which your light won't shine.

In a world hasty to insist  
that after three strikes we're out,  
we know you keep no such score.  
Make us slow to admonish,  
more ready to encourage and affirm.  
As we ponder today a Mercy story  
that tells of darkness as well as light,  
lead us along paths that spell healing for all.  
Amen.

Breege O'Neill speaks not just for Mercy, but for the whole church community, when she suggests that "we live now with more humility, deeply conscious of our need for mercy... Perhaps it is the darkness we now experience that holds the greatest possibility of light, and is in itself God's gift in our time. It provides us with the opportunity to reform ourselves – this time with more compassion, tender-heartedness and respect for all life."

Admonishing the sinner was much easier when we knew for sure that we were already saved. These days, we have to start by acknowledging that all of us fall short of the mark, and that it's only by holding hands together in the dark that we grow towards the light. Let James K Baxter, himself a prophet with feet of clay, have the last word:

*'Truth' he said, and 'love' he said,  
But his purest word was 'mercy'.*

- Dennis Horton

# Mercy's window on the world

**Catherine McAuley should be officially named a saint, not because she needs the church's recognition, but because the church needs her witness.**

That's the view of US Sister of Mercy Sheila Carney, who is responsible for Mercy heritage and service at Carlow University in Pittsburgh and who leads the cause for Catherine's canonization in the United States.

She told an international gathering of Mercy archivists that the drive to have the founder of the Sisters of Mercy canonized is not really about Catherine herself or about her sisters. It's about how the church reflects its holiness.

"I pray that Catherine will be canonized because I want my church, when it pictures itself as holy, to see this woman bent, with merciful intent, to human need and suffering.

"I want my church, when it reflects on its holiness, to see this woman – a gentle, humble, honest, respectful and challenging leader.

"I want my church to see this faith-filled woman who clung to her belief in it when it supported her and when it



US vice-postulator Sheila Carney...our church needs Catherine McAuley's witness.

didn't, who drew sustenance from it, who trusted its representatives, who chose to find the meaning of her life in it, and who passionately passed on this faith, this fidelity.

"I pray for this cause because I want my church, in seeking an image for its holiness, to see the face of Catherine McAuley.

"I pray for her canonization, not because Catherine needs the authorization

of the church to prove her sanctity, but because the church needs her witness."

Sheila Carney is one of three sisters around the globe who support the postulator and an advisory board in pressing for Catherine's canonization. Their work includes publicizing the founder's story, fostering devotion to her, and inviting prayer for miracles at her intercession.

Catherine McAuley was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II in 1990. The search is now on for the miracle that will lead to her beatification—the step before Catherine can be named a saint.

Sheila Carney told her audience of an article she'd read recently, written by a radical feminist and published in *Bitch Magazine*.

"What amazed me was that the story of Catherine was so compelling to this writer, whose beliefs and sensibilities are so different from my own.

"And I thought to myself that if Catherine's life has the ability to inspire such a spectrum that includes mainstream Catholic women as well as contributors to and readers of this magazine, perhaps this is a miracle in itself!"

## Creating inclusive, connected communities

**Catholic parishes and communities throughout New Zealand are being challenged this month to make sure that their welcome is open to people of every race and culture.**

Creating communities that are inclusive and connected is the theme chosen for this year's Social Justice Week, observed September 12 to 18.

With backing from the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, the week is being promoted by Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand with a range of materials.

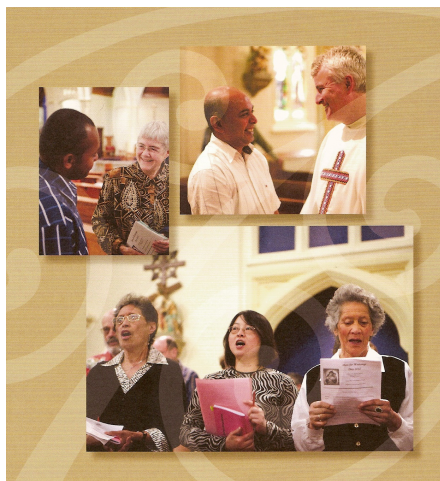
These include a resource book and poster, suggestions for liturgies with young people and children, and a handbook for parish councils, aimed at helping them to create communities that recognise and welcome cultural diversity. There are also school resources.

In their statement, the bishops acknowledge that as New Zealand society is changing, so are Catholic parishes and communities. The growing number of different cultures can bring both blessings and tensions.

"Sometimes members of the dominant culture feel under threat from newer arrivals, who may bring new languages and forms of religious expression into our communities," the bishops say.

### Your people will be my people

Creating inclusive and connected communities



SOCIAL JUSTICE WEEK: Cover of this year's resource booklet, produced by Caritas Aotearoa NZ

"We share the concern expressed by Pope Benedict that Catholic parishes remain unified, even while we celebrate increasing diversity."

The bishops have asked parish councils to look at how well their communities are doing to reflect the changing face of the church.

"Openness to understanding our different cultural heritages will help eliminate

prejudice.

"It is our hope that through Social Justice Week materials, our community will be better equipped to embrace a future which brings together the best of the traditions of Māori, Pākehā and all our new arrivals."

\* For more information, check the Caritas website [www.caritas.org.nz](http://www.caritas.org.nz)

### How welcoming are we? A check-list for parishes

Here are some of the questions which the handbook produced for the NZ Bishops Conference is posing for parish councils:

- In what ways do our liturgies include and reflect all cultures in our parish?
- In what way does our parish acknowledge our indigenous culture of NZ?
- Is prejudice kept alive in what we do or say? How can we counter this?
- How can we move beyond our comfort zones?
- How does our parish reflect our wider community? Who is missing?
- How could we begin to respond to cultural diversity?
- How could we improve on what is already working? What new challenges could we set ourselves?