

Imaging Mercy Today

Comforting the sorrowful in our time

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! If comforting the sorrowful was high on Catherine McAuley's agenda, this was no doubt because she knew so often what it was to lose those closest to her. Her young niece and namesake entered the Baggot Street community when she was just 15; she died three years later from TB, the disease that had already claimed her older sister, also a Sister of Mercy, and would take her two brothers as well. "All are sorry to part our sweet little companion," wrote her aunt next day, "we feel just now as if all the house was dead."

No wonder that when sadness came to others, Catherine was quick to respond. When a young member of the Limerick community dies, she writes to the superior there, 'My darling Sr Elizabeth, I did not think any event in this world could make me feel so much... My heart is sore – not on my own account, nor for the sweet innocent spirit that has returned to her heavenly Father, but for you.' Though it means adding an extra 100 miles to her journey, 'you may be sure I will go see you.'

Comforting the sorrowful is essentially being there for those who grieve, with a willingness to stand beside them and share their pain. For Catherine, it's a matter of offering gifts more precious than gold but which cost nothing to give – a patient listening ear, a compassionate look and a kindly word. Her recipe still works, even if our worlds have changed.

Life in Catherine's day was often so hard that death came as a blessing. "What is this poor miserable world but a place of sorrow and continued disappointment?" she once lamented. "God be praised, it is not our fixed abode, only

the weary road that leads to it." No surprise that her rule required her sisters to devote the first Sunday of every month to prayers for a happy death! We are less inclined these days to accept life as a vale of tears, more resolved to see God's kingdom achieved in the here and now, wherever God's spirit is allowed to reign.

Yet as the goal posts of social expectations rise, so do the pressures which modern life seems to bring. Where the first Sisters of Mercy were called to comfort the victims of cholera and consumption, the sorrowful today are more likely to be families dealing with the legacy of suicide or sexual abuse, women trapped in the cycle of domestic violence, wives and children who are the invisible victims of this country's high rates of imprisonment.

Thank God for Mercy sisters and lay colleagues whose



MERCY TODAY: Christchurch Sister of Mercy Anne Frost receives a Diversity Action award on behalf of Mercy Ministries NZ Trust, presented by visiting Australian Disability Commissioner Graeme Innes in August. The awards went to 13 New Zealand organizations for their outstanding contribution to cultural diversity and race relations.

Mercy made reckless

E te Atua , hoa o nga hunga pōuri
God, friend to those who are sad,
bless us as we seek to become
signs of hope to a broken world.

In the interweaving of our lives,
we hear your voice in those who cry;
in the faces of those the world does not see,
we recognise your presence and your pain.

Make us true to our call,
using our gifts to do your work.
May your bounty stir us not
to security, but to reckless generosity.

To a world weighed down with sorrow
make us bearers of unexpected joy.
May your Spirit help us to turn
our talk of mercy into deeds of love.
Amen.

ministries today include grief and bereavement counselling, psychotherapy and pastoral care, spiritual direction and personal accompaniment. Some are offering their skills on a one-to-one basis, free of charge or at reduced costs, others work with groups that restore mana and offer mutual support, as stories are told and heard and lives are healed and made whole.

Comforting the sorrowful is vital to our capacity for outreach, what Deirdre Mullan rsm describes overleaf as 'the divinely dangerous glue' of humanity, rescuing our charism from chapter and vision statements, prayer books and holy pictures, and turning it into action. Let Mercy be our hallmark, ahead of our trademark! - Dennis Horton

Mercy's window on the world

Catherine McAuley understood clearly that the purpose of wealth is not security, but reckless generosity.

It's the kind of generosity that rekindles hope on dark days, reminding us that God is with us always. It creates a freedom of spirit that takes a person light-footed through the world, scattering possibility as it goes.

Catherine McAuley put her faith in God and moved forward to help people, undaunted by the social conventions of her day. She knew what she had to do - and did it.

Mercy action has been happening every day since it began in 1831. Catherine McAuley believed that a better world, a more peaceful and equitable world, was possible. Our annals are rich in examples of how she consistently, confidently and courageously made choices for the future, whatever the difficulties she confronted.

This was one of Catherine's greatest gifts to us - her genius for practical Mercy action.

As you read this, world leaders have been gathering at the UN to review

progress made since September 2000, when 189 of them signed the Millennium Declaration, a concrete plan to halve world poverty by 2015. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon is frank in saying that the targets will not be met, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.



Sister of Mercy Deirdre Mullan heads *Mercy Global Concern* at the UN headquarters in New York. As world leaders gathered last month to review progress on the Millennium Development Goals - to halve world poverty by 2015, she provided a reflection for *Mercy International's* website, summarized here.

The weakened world economy and environmental disasters all over the globe have moved the focus away from the urgency of these goals, which represent the moral compass of the 21st century.

Thankfully, many Sisters of Mercy and their associates understand the morality of this action. They are monitoring what their governments are doing, and have been key advocates with *Mercy Global Concern* in pushing this global moral agenda.

The time for new decisions is long past. The time for analysis is over. For the sake of our credibility as Sisters of Mercy, and for the poor who need help now, not next week, let us have the courage to call each other to 'reckless' mercy today.

Mercy is not a social façade. It is the emotion that links us to those outside ourselves. It is our capacity for outreach.

Mercy is the divinely dangerous glue of the human race which must be rescued from its relegation to chapter statements, vision statements, prayer books and holy pictures. To respond, we have to step outside our comfort zone. Those we think we are liberating in fact will set us free!

US Sisters of Mercy count cost of Iraq war

AS US combat troops leave Iraq, Sisters of Mercy in the United States have been reflecting on the tragic outcomes of the seven years of US military action in Iraq and of the sanctions prior to the 2003 US invasion.

In March that year, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas made a public statement opposing war against Iraq.

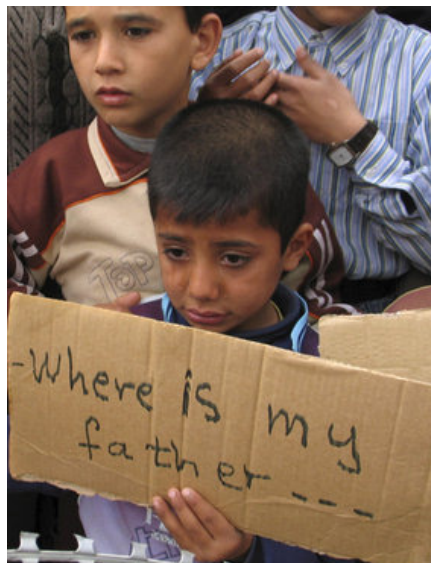
'It is our firm belief that war is not the answer to the difficulties of our world and particularly of the Middle East. We believe that such action would be immoral and unwise.'

Seven years on, the Sisters of Mercy in the US have been taking stock. Around 4.7 million Iraqis have fled their homes to become refugees. Around 100,000 civilians have died.

More than 4000 US military were killed, close to 32,000 seriously wounded. US citizens have spent \$900 billion in tax dollars on the war.

As well, massive destruction was done to Iraq's infrastructure and irreparable damage to the environment. Access to electricity, water and healthcare is scarce. Unemployment is high, and more than a quarter of Iraqi children are malnourished.

'The US-led war ignited a spiral of violence that brought about internal



CIVILIAN CRISIS: This photo accompanied an International Red Cross report, noting that Iraqi civilians face 'an ever worsening humanitarian crisis' following the US-led invasion of their country.

sectarian divides which continue today,' the US Sisters of Mercy say. 'As a result, the Iraqi government is unstable, corruption is widespread, human rights abuses persist, and religious freedom is not recognised.'

'While we welcome the end of US combat operations, we recognise that Iraq is far from peaceful. Up to 50,000 US troops

will remain. This ongoing US military footprint in the country, as well as in the region, will thus require our close vigilance.'

In their latest statement, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas say the departure of combat troops brings to a close their public opposition to the war. But they state that their public statement of 2003

'We have learned that violence does not yield peace and security'

- Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

continues to resonate, particularly in its commitment to non-violence.

'As the US escalates its military presence in Afghanistan, now more than ever it is important to elevate the call for non-violent resolution to conflicts. If anything, we have learned from the seven-year war in Iraq that violence begets violence and does not yield peace, security and long-term stability.'

'The United States has a moral responsibility to aid Iraq, which has suffered dearly. We need to continue to provide the necessary resources to strengthen civil society, so that the people of Iraq can rebuild their systems for education, healthcare and economic recovery.'