

Imaging Mercy Today

Bearing wrongs with patience

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! To a generation used to demanding our rights, especially when we believe they're being infringed, the idea of bearing wrongs patiently doesn't sit easily. Yet it remains one of the spiritual works of mercy and provides a thoughtful way to end these monthly reflections for this year.

There's no doubt that Catherine McAuley knew well what it meant to bear wrongs with patience. Among the more striking occasions was the blessing of the Baggot Street chapel in 1829, when she felt so slighted by derogatory comments from a local priest that she absented herself from the ceremony, choosing instead to remain upstairs alone. He regarded Catherine a 'parvenue' and her ministry as meddling, believing that 'the unlearned sex can do nothing but mischief by trying to assist the clergy.'

Prolonged controversy over chaplaincy arrangements and financial issues weighed on the foundress. The line in her *Suscipe*, asking God to 'take from my heart all painful anxiety', was more than just a pious wish. She clearly believed that the load she carried was heavy even though redemptive, for herself as well as for others:

...however oppressed by grief or pain,
whatever trial I sustain:
there's not a lesson I can need
but in my crucifix I read...

What are the lessons Catherine can teach us here? Outstanding, perhaps, is her ability to retain a sense of happiness and humour in the midst of her trials. Sisters of Mercy, she insists, should be the happiest people on earth, because nothing can dull their joy of knowing God's love. The worst that bitterness can do is to consume us from within.

From shadow to light

E te Kaiwhakaora o te rongopai,
your gift of peace heals our world,
your light brings hope in the darkness,
as you enfold us in the ways of your Word.

Let this Advent candle be a symbol for us,
awakening us to the mystery of life,
even as we acknowledge our shadows
and the limits of our sight.

Inspire us with faith for the journey;
keep our hearts steadfast in love,
rejoicing in the outpouring of your mercy
new every morning, every day.

Let your aroha for all people
be the gift we bring to others,
that every heart may know
the peace you promise. Amen

'I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment,' she confides in a letter to Frances Warde. 'May God forgive me and make me humble.'

Then there's Catherine's steely determination to work at creating change, even if it takes a lifetime to achieve it. Employment for women, education for girls, health and justice for the poor remained her passion, at a time in Ireland when these goals were not widely recognised or even hoped for. Perhaps it's the same spark which fires Mercy's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi today, as many Māori press for historic claims to be settled with a generosity of spirit that belies the length of time it has taken for those wrongs to be addressed.

There's something to be learnt here, too, from the processes of restorative justice. Bearing wrongs patiently is



MERCY TODAY: Mary Foy rsm (left) with colleagues and clients at a powhiri to welcome women participating in the Pou Aroha programme being run by Te Ukaipo in West Auckland. Several wore their national dress to the event, held at Te Piringatahi Marae in Massey.

sometimes the price we have to pay for an outcome that enables both victim and perpetrator to grow to a new place. Retribution has become so engrained in our justice system that many New Zealanders find it hard to think of alternatives to harsher penalties and longer sentences. The ability to see beyond our own hurts to a deeper healing of society's ills will always be what makes mercy more blessed than strict justice.

Advent's call is another chance to see God working in a way that defies human logic, as grace undeserved and without limit envelops our little lives and worlds. 'How silently the great God works!' says Catherine. 'Darkness is spread over the earth and light comes again at dawn; yet there is never a sound of curtains being drawn or shutters being closed...' May Christmas find each of us ready to greet the light that shines in our dark! - Dennis Horton

Mercy's window on the world

It's almost a year since US Sister of Mercy Marilyn Lacey was invited to give a homily for Gaudete Sunday to a parish in her homeland.

"Where have all the nuns gone?" was the question she began with. They used to fill Catholic schools and hospitals, she conceded; they were always easy to spot in their habits. They were everywhere; they were happy; and then they all but disappeared. What happened?

For a start, family size shrank, lay ministries increased, young women began making other choices.

More importantly, Vatican II charged all religious with going back to their roots, to discover the original spirit or charism of their founders. "We took that very seriously, and we discovered a lot," Marilyn Lacey said.

"We learned that sisters were not necessarily meant to be the 'workforce' of the church, an army of servants staffing large institutions.

"We got back in touch with the special callings of our various beginnings. Some call them new ministries, but actually



Marilyn Lacey rsm, of *Mercy Beyond Borders*, with friends in the Sudan.

we were returning to the vision of our earliest years. We realized more clearly that we are meant to be more of a leaven - or perhaps even a disturbance - to the official church. Our role is to be voices from the edges, not the mainstream.

"Sisters began visiting jails. Starting affordable housing for the poor. Moving to work with addicts and prostitutes. Comforting those suffering with AIDS. Caring for the Earth. Welcoming refugees.

"And all the while, giving ourselves entirely to the God of our hearts."

There are fewer sisters, now, and they are ageing, Marilyn Lacey agreed. "But look at how they are living the Good News proclaimed in today's gospel."

There's Sr Dorothy Stang, killed a few years ago while standing with the poor against ruthless landowners in Brazil.

These days, two Sisters of Mercy are running a safe house in California that welcomes abused women who have just been released from prison.

"If you want to find me, you'll need to fly to Nairobi, then climb on a jeep and drive for hours, escorted by two trucks of men armed with machine guns to fend off ambushes, till you reach the village where *Mercy Beyond Borders* is educating 830 eager students at the first all-girls school in the whole country.

"We do not claim to have a corner on the truth. But we do try earnestly to live each day with joy, faithful to our vows, and present to the poor in ways that respond to the suffering of our day.

"And all the while, we give witness to the good news that God is right in our midst. Happy Gaudete Sunday to you!"

Mercy at work—founding spirit still shows

A third edition of *Mana Atawhai: Mercy at Work* has been published this month, featuring the Sisters of Mercy and their ministries in New Zealand and the Pacific.

With an introduction by Congregation Leader Anne Campbell rsm, the 16-page booklet profiles ministries provided by individual sisters, as well as two larger ventures involving lay managers and staff.

The front cover shows Mary Wood rsm who currently works as the food bank coordinator at the Christchurch City Mission, where services have been stretched since the earthquake which struck the region in September.

Another sister works in South Auckland as a Plunket nurse, while a third in Dunedin practises as a psychotherapist and counsellor. Two others are providing accommodation for women in crisis on the West Coast, while another in Greymouth coaches Year 9 students with reading difficulties.

Larger ministries featured in the booklet are St Mary's College in Wellington, which has just marked 160 years of unbroken schooling on its Thorndon site, and Mercy Hospital in Dunedin, where its focus on sustainable practice is shown in care about waste disposal.



A feature of this year's edition is the inclusion of stories on each of the pioneer sisters who established the four original foundations in Auckland, Wellington, Hokitika (later Christchurch) and Dunedin.

"In Auckland, we've known well the story of Mother Cecilia Maher and the first sisters arriving from Carlow, thanks to her biographer Sr Marcienne Kirk," says mis-

sion facilitator Dennis Horton, who has edited the resource for the third successive year.

"This latest edition has provided a chance to give the other three stories an equal airing, as well. Sisters in the other centres have helped to ensure that historical details were correct."

The booklet includes pencil sketches of the four founders, with the convents they built as the background, drawn by a young Auckland artist, Glen Kepa.

Some of the interviews were done by email, but the writing involved trips to Dunedin, Christchurch and the West Coast. A visit to Hokitika was especially memorable, says Dennis Horton.

"To stand in Hokitika at the graveside of Mother Clare Molony, and see her headstone flanked by scores of crosses, marking the graves of other Sisters of Mercy who lived and worked on the Coast, is to realize what a link they've had with the community there.

"The big convents they built have gone, but there's no doubt the sisters have had a huge hand in shaping the faith and identity of generations of people there.

"And while new ministries continue to emerge, it's clearly the same Mercy spirit which has inspired the work all along."