

Imaging Mercy Today

Mercy recalled: it commenced with two

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! Our focus last month was on Catherine's death, remembered around the world by Mercy people gathering for 'a good cup of tea', with some fund-raising for projects sponsored by Mercy International Association, not least of them future plans for the house in Baggot Street which Catherine built.

At our gathering in Auckland to mark 11/11/11, former Congregation Leader Judith Leydon appeared as a 'McAuley lookalike', dressed in the distinctive habit that for more than a century identified Sisters of Mercy as Catherine's 'walking sisters'. Yet Sr Judith had to admit that morning to having "forgotten how restrictive the habit was." Trying to write on the blackboard was difficult, she recalls, and driving with the veil around one's face was a challenge. "One of my earliest memories is of going out with another sister on a tram. A baby began to scream when we appeared – much to the embarrassment of both its mother and us."

Sr Judith confesses that 'the outward sign' of the habit was "not necessarily a symbol of anything within." It is nice to look back on how things used to be, but memory can play tricks, and the challenge is to sort the authentic spirit from mere nostalgia, from thinking old is somehow better.

Last month held other memories for the writer of this column, returning to the South Island seminary where I had studied theology for four years in the early 1960s, to find it quite transformed. Students and staff have long since relocated to new surroundings in Auckland; Mosgiel is now a diocesan conference centre. Our workshop took place in the old chapel; where once we had gathered reverently for Mass and prayer, a laptop now threw Power Point images on the wall, while a Sister of Mercy spoke about care for the Earth and its threatened resources.

The "new" chapel, built and solemnly blessed the year my studies began, is now the local parish church, filled for

Mass this Sunday morning by families with young children and revisited in the afternoon by one of them for a baptism. Dunedin's second bishop, Michael Verdon lies buried there in the sanctuary; it was he who had invited the Sisters of Mercy to come from Singleton in New South Wales to the diocese in 1897, to work among the city's poor and sick. His own sister belonged to the Congregation in England, so he had firsthand knowledge of their willingness to walk the streets in Mercy's name.

What struck me especially about my return to Holy Cross was how so much of the past, which seemed 50 years ago to be so God-given and unchanging, has been swept away.



SISTER Judith Leydon, dressed in traditional habit for the 170th anniversary of Catherine McAuley's death, talks with Sr Chanel Peacock at St Mary's Convent, Ponsonby. Between them, the two Sisters of Mercy have spent 126 years in religious life.

On this visit, we shared meals with St John's Ambulance staff on a weekend training course. The lectern, where we once took it in turns to read at meals, stands still in its corner of the refectory, but the top table where our professors sat to dine is no longer raised on a dais; where once hierarchy held sway, equality now rules. Latin texts, soutanes and silence have gone, and with them the semi-monastic conventions that sought to keep the world at arm's length. The spirit of our age is rather to engage with the world than to escape from it. Yet new questions arise, if we let them.

For all our openness, is it simpler now to find God's presence in our lives, to hear the voice of the poor when it cries, to feel that we can make a difference where it matters? For all our freedom, is it easier for us to choose the good and to follow to where our best selves point?

As we remember the founding of the Sisters of Mercy 180 years ago this month, we give thanks for the vision which inspired Catherine and those close enough to catch a spark from her fire. And we remember her own explanation of how Mercy began. "It commenced with two, Sister Doyle and I," she recalled. May we never doubt our capacity to sustain what began in so small a way! - Dennis Horton

Waiting for our 'yes'

E Te Atua hoatu manawa -
God, your breath brings our world to birth.
As we wait once more in Advent faith
for your promise to be fulfilled,
alert us to the signs of your coming.

As we remember Catherine's faith
In founding Mercy 180 years ago,
give us the courage to sustain what began
through her trust in you.

Into the darkness of our world
Your Word comes once more,
waiting to take flesh
in the aroha of our hearts.
May Christ be born anew
in our 'yes' to your call.