

WE'RE BEING DARED TO MERCY IN A NEW WAY

In a letter of 1840, Catherine McAuley has left a touching vignette which reveals something of the Dublin of her day and her own deep personal care for its poor. It is November, and she writes to a Sister of Mercy in another town, concerned that the House of Mercy in Baggot Street is “crowded to excess” and that as wealthy families dismiss servants from their city homes where they have stayed for the summer and return to the country or to London, many “at this season cannot get employment and are quite unprotected.”

She writes of two unemployed women who came the day before, “hungry, though of nice appearance,” looking for a place to stay but whom she could not accommodate. “Their dejected faces have been before me ever since. I was afraid of hurting their feelings by offering them food and I had no money.” Clear from these few sentences are Catherine’s deep concern for the poor, her sensitivity to their plight, and her desire to be able to make a difference.

She would have concurred strongly with the insistence by Pope Francis that extreme poverty is a reality, not a vague percentage. Behind every statistic, he notes, is the face of someone who is suffering. “Poverty has a face.... Without faces and stories, human lives become statistics and we run the risk of bureaucratising the sufferings of others.” (June 2016, on a visit to the UN’s World Food Program headquarters in Rome).

The faces and stories of real people were what a couple of Pasifika aged care workers took with them from Ponsonby to Wellington last September, when Mercy people from throughout the country gathered at the steps of Parliament for our Shelter for All demonstration. The aged care workers had the chance to join several of Mercy’s Leadership team and their own manager to meet with Social Housing Minister Paula Bennett (now deputy Prime Minister) and Immigration Minister Michael Woodhouse. They were able to present scrapbooks that told of their efforts to care for the elderly in a city where the costs of living and housing their families on their low wages has become challenging and burdensome.

It is satisfying but not fanciful to think that their stories were noted on the day, and have been woven into the political discernment that saw the Government last month resolve to lift the pay rates of the many women who provide aged care, acknowledging the enormous contribution they have made in recent decades to a growing



Mercy aged care staff and resident.... New pay rates will help staff and families to a better life.

number of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Discernment in a different context has produced a hugely creative and exciting outcome to the Mercy International Reflection process (MIRP), held throughout the 2016 Year of Mercy and involving more than 250 groups and almost 5000 Sisters of Mercy and

partners in Mercy around the world. Two critical but often connected themes emerged from this year of faith-filled reflection: the displacement of persons and the degradation of Earth.

In simple terms this spells a new commitment by Sisters of Mercy and those who collaborate closely with them – estimated today at around half a million people – to persons whose lives are displaced (ranging from refugees and asylum seekers to those who live with dementia) and to an environment that suffers from severe stress in which the whole of humanity is somehow implicated. MIRP’s guiding team and coordinators say that throughout the process, Mercy has heard anew and with great urgency “the cry of Earth and cry of the poor.” The response will come from a new Mercy Global Presence, the terms of which are already being shaped.

“In this broken world, Mercy Global Presence will dare Mercy in a new way,” promise the guiding team and coordinators. It is a call to which Mercy’s leadership, both local and global, will invite all of us to contribute and share. In the weeks and months ahead, watch this space!

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 1: END POVERTY FOR ALL

Ending poverty in all its forms by 2030 is the first of 17 sustainable development goals set by the United Nations. It is also among the eight Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) identified by the Sisters of Mercy as relevant to their mission around the world.

Extreme poverty rates have been cut by more than half since 1990. While this is a remarkable achievement, one in five people still live on less than \$1.25 a day, which currently defines extreme poverty. There are millions who make little more than this daily amount; and many others risk slipping back into poverty.

The SDGs were launched by the UN in 2015, as an agenda to guide development action for the next 15 years. Whereas the previous Millennium Goals had been focussed on developing countries, the SDGs relate to all nations, including our own.

UNICEF estimates that around 295,000 New Zealand children spend their childhood living in poverty. The short-term impacts mean that they live in cold, damp over-crowded houses, they do not have warm and rain-proof clothes, their shoes are worn, and many days they go hungry. But poverty is often a life sentence. It can mean lower levels of education and income, poorer health and higher rates of criminal offending in adulthood.

A leaflet developed by Mercy Global Action to explore this SDG of ending poverty proposes a two-pronged approach, calling for both collective action and personal decisions about life-style.

Collective actions may include some of the following:

- Joining a campaign for water and sanitation rights for all, and for access to education and adequate housing.
- Lobbying for policies to ensure the safety of the vulnerable exposed to extreme climate events.

This might include Pacific peoples affected by rising sea levels.

- Encouraging sustainable food production by sound agricultural practices that are not market-driven. Have you thought about shopping from local markets or from outlets such as Commonsense Organics?

Among the personal challenges, Mercy Global Action proposes that we might consider the following:

- Make a commitment to live more simply. Complete a 'carbon footprint questionnaire'.
- Commit to not wasting food at home or when you are out. One meat-free day a week?
- Purchase only what you need when shopping.
- Join a local group to implement the SDG national plan. What about UNICEF NZ, Caritas Aotearoa or Child Poverty Action Group?

What is one choice you might make?

– Dennis Horton



He Inoi: Prayer

Daring Mercy in a new way

E Te Atua atawhai, God of unending mercy, through last year's global reflection process we have heard anew and with great urgency the cry of Earth and cry of the poor.

We believe that in your abundant mercy, we are being called to respond.

Empower us to live in solidarity with all who seek a new and better world.

In an earth where so much is broken, help us to heal and unite.

Where so many feel alone and excluded, may we be able to welcome and include.

And when so many despair and doubt they can change, give us hope, renew us within.

Let us dare Mercy in a new way.

Amen