

Matariki – time to celebrate sowings of past

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! It's Matariki once again, the Maori new year, signalled by the presence of the Pleiades star cluster in the pre-dawn sky. In Maori tradition, Matariki is a fallow time, a chance to let the soil recover as we make plans for another spring. It's also a time to learn about whanau or family, to remember our whakapapa or family history, to sit around the winter fires and tell the stories that keep the memory of our past alive.

Some of that has been happening in the Catholic parish of Rotorua in recent weeks, where after 56 years parishioners have been saying farewell to the Sisters of Mercy. The Congregation arrived in 1958 to open St Michael's School.

As often happened in those boom years, neither the school buildings nor the convent had been completed at the start of the school year, so the five founding sisters, four of them newly arrived from Ireland, lodged with the Sisters of St Joseph at St Mary's Convent nearby, and were driven to and from the school each day by the local clergy. The school was officially opened by Bishop Liston in October 1958.

Students who attended St Michael's School in those early days remember bringing donations of food to fill the sisters' cupboards, as they were unpaid teachers. Some went to the convent each week for music lessons, which helped to provide the sisters with a source of income. This was augmented by an annual fete held each autumn.

In time, responsibility for the school passed to the diocese and the school is now led by a lay principal and taught by lay teachers. But two Sisters of Mercy, Agnes Browne and Monica Costello, have lived most recently in the parish, serving as pastoral assistants and helping to lead the Social Justice group. They were guests of honour at a farewell

Matariki - waiting for another spring

Matariki atua,
bright eyes in our pre-dawn sky:
you are our promise
in the midst of winter cold
that new life will come again.

We join with our Mercy sisters
as they discern when to stay
and when mission bids them go.
May their spirit of hope
in a future yet unseen
keep us open to all
that still waits to be.

Matariki atua,
ka heke mai i te rangi e roa:
blessed Matariki,
come down from the distant heavens.

E whangai iho
ki te mata o te tau, e roa, e:
Bestow the first fruits
of the year upon us. Amen.

Imaging Mercy Today



MERCY REMEMBERED: Artists Luca Muggleton and Molly Osborne from Room 4 of St Michael's School in Rotorua add their impressions to a display to farewell the Sisters of Mercy from their parish. It is several years since sisters taught at their school, so their paintings are more impressionist than realistic; likeness to any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

dinner attended by the local bishop and clergy, many parishioners and friends and about 30 Sisters of Mercy who shared the joy and warmth of the occasion. Messages of greetings and good wishes were sent by several sisters who had served in Rotorua, including one from Sr Mary Anne in Ireland who was in the first group to teach there.

A memorial to the Sisters of Mercy has been placed in St Michael's Church. Carved by Maori master carver James Rickard, the kauri carving features a Mercy cross, flanked by a pair of manaia, mythical creatures which stand as guardians to hold the cross in esteem. The carving is a gift of the New Zealand Maori Arts & Crafts Institute, donated "in commemoration of the presence and ministry of the Sisters of Mercy in Rotorua."

Keeping the spirit of the Sisters of Mercy alive is one of the key tasks of the school's present teachers, says principal Shelly Fitness. "The sisters leave behind a full and lasting legacy." That legacy is embodied in the school's core values which, like many other Mercy-founded schools in New Zealand today, St Michael's works hard to maintain.

Sister of Mercy and mission advisor Teresa Anderson visited the school recently, to help staff and students reflect on the Mercy charism which gives the school its distinctive character. "The story of Catherine McAuley and our founding sisters is familiar to these teachers and children. It's part of a heritage in which they take a lot of pride.

"The ceremonies held to farewell the last two sisters to reside in Rotorua will help to ensure that the seeds planted by those early teachers will continue to blossom in the years ahead. Matariki is the ideal time for this Mercy-founded school to remember its history and to give thanks for those who worked to see it established."

For all that has been, we give thanks. For what in your mercy waits to be achieved, we say "Amen."

—Dennis Horton