

Books, not bullets, will change the world says Malala

Nga mihi atawhai - greetings to all in Mercy! - Pakistani-born and the youngest ever to receive the Nobel peace prize, Malala Yousafzai achieved another goal a few weeks ago - six A+s and four As in her GCSE exams at the secondary school she has been attending in Birmingham since recovering from gunshot wounds to the head in her homeland.

Malala, now 18, became an advocate for girls' education as a child, which resulted in the Taliban issuing a death threat against her. A gunman shot her as she travelled home from school in October 2012. She survived and underwent surgery in Pakistan and later in the UK where she has continued to live.

She plans to remain in Britain to complete her education, which she sees as the only way to achieve real change. Books, not bullets, is her plea. "My dream is to empower myself with education, and then it is a weapon."

On that point, she concurs with Catherine McAuley, who saw the education of women and girls as the most potent force for social change. "No work of charity can be more productive of good society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor," she wrote in her Rule, "than the careful instruction of women." Whatever their station in life, she says, their example and advice will always possess influence, and wherever a wise and good woman presides, "peace and good order are generally to be found."

Literacy was high on the scale which Catherine used to promote the cause of the women and girls whose lives she sought to transform. She saw that their ability to read and write was a vital tool for changing the world in which they and their families lived. If she were here today, Catherine would be concerned to know that illiteracy rates among women are still so high - UNESCO estimates that two out of every three adult illiterates in the world are women.

A glimpse of how illiteracy impacts on women's lives comes in a recent article in *The Tablet* about women in Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East where female genital mutilation (FGM) is practised as a religious and

Imaging Mercy Today



NOBEL peace prize winner Malala Yousafzai was in the news again last month, having achieved six A+s and four As in her GCSE exams at her school in Birmingham. Like Catherine McAuley before her, Malala believes in the power of education for women and girls to get ahead.

cultural tradition. "A study by the Pacific Institute for Women's Health reports that 97 percent of women living in the city of Hodeida have experienced FGM," writes Shelley Stromdale. "More than 60 percent of these women are illiterate, making it difficult for them to access information about the dangers of FGM, which include severe pain and haemorrhaging, infections and complications in childbirth.

"This barbaric practice, often performed in order to control sexual desire in girls, is just one issue in a broader framework of domestic violence against women, which has been worsened by the current conflict in Yemen."

The theme of this month's column has women and girls as its focus; at the heart of our reflection is Catherine McAuley's deep conviction that women have the power to change society by making small but significant changes in the lives they touch. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon has praised Malala Yousafzai as "a brave and gentle advocate of peace who through the simple act of going to school became a global teacher." Her message to world leaders is to fund the real weapon for change - education. "If the whole world stopped spending money on the military for just eight days," Malala writes, "we could have the \$39 billion still needed to provide 12 years of free, quality education to every child on the planet."

Among those acting for change this past month have been students at McAuley High School in Otahuhu, who took part in a 'Pledge of Silence', urging New Zealand to increase its quota of refugees. The students wore signs and collected donations while remaining silent for three hours during the first part of the school day.

Despite the global refugee crisis, New Zealand accepts just 750 refugees a year, a quota which has not increased for nearly 30 years. According to Amnesty International, our country is ranked 90th in the world in terms of its per capita refugee intake. McAuley is one of several Mercy-founded colleges which have thrown their weight behind the push to double our refugee quota in response to the current global crisis. It's an issue from which Mercy cannot remain disengaged. - Dennis Horton

A faith that changes all life

Mary, mother of mercy,
in your 'yes' to God's call
you changed the way we
see life and its possibilities.
Teach us to believe
in our capacity to make
a difference to other lives
by trusting that God can work
in and through us, however lowly.
May we learn from the women
in our lives to listen to our hearts
and to find within them a faith
that moves mountains,
a love that renews all life.
E whakapaingia ana koe i roto i nga wahine,
and blessed are we in remembering you.