

# MĀTĀRIKI – TIME TO ASK HOW MERCY IS MAKING A DENT – AND FOR WHOM

**In almost two decades of writing this monthly reflection, the most recurring theme has been the connection with our founding story, clarifying the links between our current ministries and that remarkable woman, Catherine McAuley, whose original vision must be at the heart of every genuine Mercy initiative. As time passes, social circumstances and cultural contexts change; new issues of concern emerge as older ones fade. We are not as likely as Catherine was to be confronted by a cholera epidemic in our neighbourhood or an incidence of TB within our family, any more than she was bothered by plastic waste, Treaty commitments or climate change.**

But the integrity of Mercy mission requires that as we set our agenda and plan for the future, we keep asking if our priorities are the ones that Catherine would endorse, if she were here standing in our shoes today. While the ‘what’ of Mercy’s mission may change from time to time and from one region to another, the ‘why’ remains constant. It is expressed in Catherine’s own determination to serve the poor, and to make a difference to their lives. It is about helping people to know their dignity as images of a loving and merciful God, whose promise is of life in abundance.

Defining the ‘why’ of Mercy mission calls for discernment. The most recent Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand held four years ago produced an image of the Mercy cross set in a Pacific context,

reminding us that our foundation reaches across Moana-nui-a-Kiwa to embrace the communities of Samoa and Tonga; whakawhanaungatanga – building right relationships – means that their futures are intimately bound with ours. The rest of the chapter image is mostly phrases, such as ‘Atawhai atu – Atawhai mai’ (Mercy given and received), ‘standing with fragile communities’, ‘embracing cultural diversity’, ‘widening mercy circles’, ‘disturbed into action’, and just the single word ‘prophetic’. Each of the phrases or words packs a punch, and invites the question ‘how does what we are currently doing match the vision being outlined here?’

There’s another set of questions which the chapter image may prompt, and they go like this: ‘Who would be the first to miss out if our ministry

were not here?’, ‘who would suffer if our Mercy ministry ceased tomorrow?’ And if we cannot reply that the direct losers would be the poor and vulnerable in our community, then perhaps as the inheritors of Catherine McAuley’s vision, we have lost the plot. Perhaps what started out as a work of mercy has lost its cutting edge, our good works have grown gentrified, and our tent pegs have shrunk to the limits of our own comfort zones.

Maybe it is time to sharpen our focus, to ask ourselves afresh ‘how are we to be a Mercy presence in our world today?’ The initiative of a worldwide Mercy reflection process, already under way, gained new impetus when Pope Francis declared 2016 a special Year of

Mercy. That decision, and his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, on caring for our common home, helped to focus a myriad of concerns raised by Sisters of Mercy and their partners in mission around the world into two broad but interconnected themes – displacement of peoples and degradation of the Earth. Here is a new mercy-focused agenda, for anyone who believes that our world is not as it should be, and that things need – urgently and profoundly – to change.

As this reflection is circulated, many Māori and an increasing number of Pākehā are celebrating Mātāriki, the Māori New Year, marked by the appearance in the early morning sky of the cluster of stars also known as the Pleiades or Seven Sisters. Traditionally, this has been a time for Māori to remember with love their tūpuna or ancestors, to visit cemeteries and tidy graves, and to tell the



Te Whakaminenga Chapter 2014  
Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand

stories that keep their memories alive. Mātāriki is also a season for making plans – planning for next year’s crop at a time when the ground is fallow and the soil is resting. It’s the ideal time for celebrating life and its power to renew and invigorate – a chance to quit addictions and start a diet or a health plan.

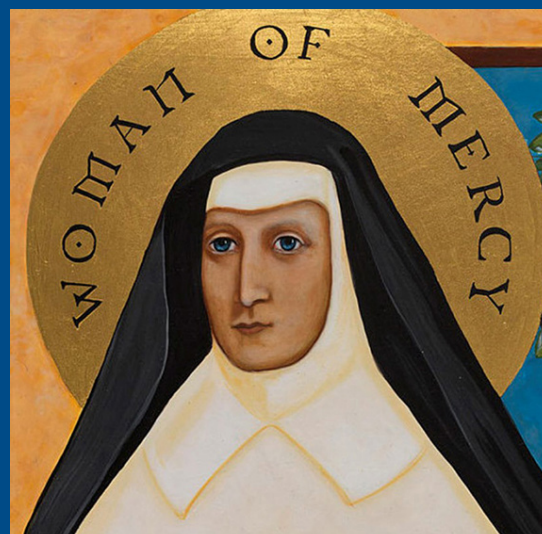
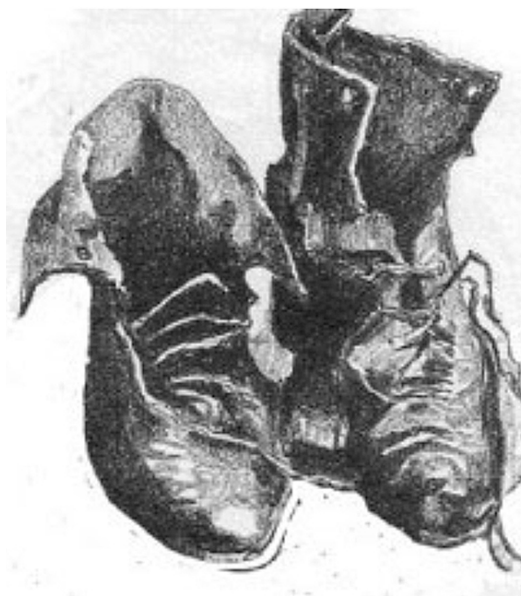
In our Mercy world, Mātāriki is a signal to remember and celebrate Catherine’s legacy, to sharpen the cutting edge of our ministries and to renew our resolve to make the dent that will mark us out as her descendants, people for whom the poor take the first priority.

*Taihoa, spare a moment.....*

You are invited to end this reflection by pondering, either alone or with someone who shares your commitment to Mercy, on these questions:

- *How do the poor and vulnerable benefit directly from your Mercy ministry? Was there a time in the past when they were more closely supported by this ministry? What accounts for the difference between then and now?*
- *What changes would be needed to the service your Mercy ministry currently provides, if the poor and vulnerable were to be better supported?*
- *If Catherine McAuley were to visit your ministry today, what would she find that would most gladden her heart? What improvements or changes do you think she might recommend?*

– **Dennis Horton**



*Icon (detail) by Vivian Imbruglia.*

### ***He Inoi: Prayer*** ***Remembering your mercy in every generation***

*E te Kaiwhakamārie – nurturing God, in every age you have called people of faith to witness to your tender love for those who live in greatest need. We thank you for the gift of our tupuna rangatira, our peerless founder, who has inspired her Sisters and companions in Mercy to follow in her steps and to serve as she did.*

*In this season of Mātāriki, call us anew to make a dent where it counts. Renew our focus and by your Spirit sharpen the edge of our ministries, so that the very poor are the ones we touch most deeply by your grace. Let us be kaitiaki of our common home, making Papatūānuku fruitful with abundant life for all. Amen.*

*The homemade boots were Catherine’s preference for herself and her sisters who quickly became known as ‘the walking nuns’. As she was dying, she gave instructions for her shoes to be burnt – an indication, perhaps, that her walking was over and that others would have to go instead to search for the poor in any sort of need.*