

‘NEVER AGAIN’ TO ANY FORM OF ABUSE – A CALL TO MOVE BEYOND ‘THE CULTURE OF DEATH’

The letter on sexual abuse, written by Pope Francis to the whole church on August 20, opens a topic which must be near to the hearts of all who make mercy the business of their lives. For at stake is the safety and wellbeing of the most vulnerable in our communities. Until now, the subject is one that the pope has usually addressed to the bishops and people of a particular region. But, released in the wake of a scathing report from the Supreme Court in Pennsylvania revealing that 300 Catholic priests had abused more than 1000 children in that state and shortly before Pope Francis visited Ireland where he met and apologised to abuse victims in that country, this letter is addressed to the entire people of God. The pope describes sexual abuse as ‘a culture of death’, and calls the whole church to acknowledge the harm that has been done “with sorrow and shame.” He includes himself among those who need to find a new path.

“With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner, realising the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives. We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them,” Pope Francis wrote. “It is essential that we, as a church, be able to acknowledge and condemn the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable.”

What does this mean for the Sisters of Mercy and their partners in mission? How should we respond to the pope’s letter, if we are intent on reading the signs of our times? The first point to note is that we are in a very different position today from how things used to be, in a church not so long ago when Catholics were expected to leave it to Father or Sister to make most decisions. We expect now to be consulted on issues that affect us or our children, and there are effective channels within most church organisations for our voices to be raised and heard. And increasingly there are structures in place that hold people in positions of power to account.

The old silos in which clergy and religious lived and worked have, for the most part, gone. In a ringing condemnation of clericalism, Pope Francis insists that it was the creation of small elites that allowed the abuse of power to flourish. The silos were a mistake. The church is, above all, a whānau or family in which we are all connected. Commitment to loving and generous service is not for the chosen few, but for the whole people of God. No one knew this better than Catherine McAuley, who put herself and her sisters to work wherever mercy was needed, even if it meant crossing established boundaries. Her House of Mercy had scarcely opened before



*Pope Francis apologises to victims of sexual abuse, in his letter to the People of God. ‘We showed no care for the little ones.’
Photo: Franco Origlia/Getty Images.*

one priest was describing her as an upstart and a “parvenue”, wondering aloud if “the unlearned sex could do anything but mischief by trying to assist the clergy.”

Today, Whānau Mercy includes sisters vowed to religious life and all those whom they invite to share their ministries – fulltime and part-time staff and volunteers. The sisters themselves are guided by a raft of well identified resources to ensure that they work by the highest possible professional standards and integrity in their calling. And any of us whose ministry involves children or vulnerable adults will be expected to uphold similar standards to make sure that those whose lives we touch are safe and secure. Such requirements as a police check for every volunteer, and professional supervision for all those engaged in offering pastoral care are now the rule, rather than the exception.

In his letter, Pope Francis invites us all to a path of conversion, acknowledging our failure in the past and seeking God's guidance for the future. He urges us to awaken our conscience and renew our commitment "to a culture of care that says 'never again' to every form of abuse." At the very least, this should find Mercy people joining Catherine McAuley in her resolve "to be good today but better tomorrow."

In a recent WelCom column on the call to holiness, Cardinal John Dew of Wellington recommended the age-old practice of examining our conscience on a daily basis, reviewing each day in the presence of God with five simple steps, outlined in the box (right). "Over the years, I have found these questions to be helpful in becoming more aware of how my day has been," says Cardinal John. The review "is an attitude more than a method," he says, "a time set aside for thankful reflection on where God is in our everyday life. It has five steps, which most people take more or less in order, and it takes about 10 to 15 minutes each evening."

The issues to be covered in examining our conscience will depend largely on our situation in life. Are we in a personal relationship where domestic violence could be an issue? Are we parents (or grand- or foster-parents)? Do we have responsibility for children or young people? Or does the care of older people fall within our sphere? Do we exercise power of attorney for their health or property?

In the wake of calls to the Government renewed last month for an aged care commissioner, it is



Cardinal John Dew's five simple steps for reviewing each day:

1. *Ask God for light - I want to see my day with God's eyes, not just my own.*
2. *Give thanks - this day was God's gift; I am grateful for it.*
3. *Review the day - I ask the Spirit to guide me in deciding how my day was.*
4. *Face my shortcomings - I face up to whatever I did that was wrong.*
5. *Look ahead - I ask where I most need God in the day to come.*

He Inoi: Prayer

*E te Atua atawhai mutunga kore,
God of mercy without limit:
forgive us when we have failed
in your name to show tender mercy,
especially to the little and powerless.*

*Renew our hearts and minds
and set them on the right path,
that all we say and do will bring
others to life, rejoicing in the light
you wish us all to share. Amen.*

worth noting that Mercy healthcare is deeply committed to championing the rights of all residents and patients who come to a Mercy hospital, hospice or residential care facility. Policies of ongoing improvement mean that the issue is constantly under review.

Waiatarua Mercy Parklands, for instance, has become a world-first centre of excellence in delivering its Spark of Life programme, aimed at improving the quality of life – spiritual and physical, social and emotional – for residents who live with dementia.

Mercy's commitment to a bicultural partnership is another important step in ensuring the rights of the vulnerable and avoiding abuse of any kind. To seek whakawhanaungatanga, or right relationships, means that we begin by recognising the mana, or self-esteem, of every human person. Anything that diminishes mana, or prevents someone from standing tall and knowing that their worth is acknowledged, is an abuse. There is no place in our Whānau Mercy for mana-crunching.

Perhaps it's the practice of mercy that needs to be the focus of our daily review.

Where did I show mercy today? Or where did I fail

to do so? Who stood taller through meeting me? Or who left with their mana diminished because of something I did or said? Did I succeed in enhancing life for the people I met, or for the Earth on which I walked? Was it a culture of life I helped to create, or a culture of death?

- Dennis Horton