



Mercy to flourish from mountains to the sea

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THOUSANDS around the world last month will have caught a glimpse of the sparkling waters of Auckland’s Waitematā Harbour, as Team New Zealand successfully battled its Italian competitor Luna Rossa to retain the America’s Cup. Despite restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic local enthusiasts watched the races from every vantage point around the harbour or enjoyed the spectacle from one of the hundreds of boats moored close to the course.

Below: View of Auckland’s Queen Street from the new wharf in 1852 (print held at Alexander Turnbull Library).

Right: Mother Cecilia Maher who arrived in April 1850.



This month, we remember on April 9 the arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy to reach New Zealand, after an epic eight-month voyage from the other side of the world. It’s 171 years since Mother Cecilia Maher and her seven companions from Ireland responded to the call, initially from wāhine Māori but conveyed on their behalf by French Bishop Jean Baptiste Pompallier, to join the mission in this far-flung corner of the world – God’s ‘farthest outpost’ as historian Michael King would later describe it.

New Zealand’s largest city was much smaller in those days – a ‘singular-looking little town’ in Mother Cecilia’s words, with a port that even in those days was rapidly expanding. Pompallier agreed before the sisters set out that their convent in New Zealand would be on “the same footing” as the parent house in Ireland, with similar constitution, rules and customs. But in each of the four New Zealand foundations established over the following 50 years there was a recognition that local conditions would need to be respected if the charism of Catherine McAuley were to take root in this land.

There is a sense in which God’s mission must be linked with the land and its first people if it is to succeed. Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand have long recognised that their ministry has a bicultural context, reflected in their commitment to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

This same commitment to a bicultural perspective, embedded in the needs of this land and its first people, is reflected in the Statement of Purpose which has been developed for Whānau Mercy Ministries, the ministerial PJP which the Sisters of Mercy are in the process of creating to ensure the long-term future of their ministries. That statement opens with the Māori phrase, Atawhai ki uta, atawhai ki tai, kia horahorahia, i te rito o te ao marama, and ends with its translation – May mercy be felt inland, may mercy be felt on the shore, may mercy be widespread, living in the heart of our world today.

The same phrase – ki uta ki tai (from the mountains to the sea) – heads a major statement from New Zealand’s Ministry for the Environment on this country’s fresh-water resources. The greater Wellington Regional Council in 2015 used the same title – Ki uta ki tai – mountains to the sea – for its proposed Natural Resources Plan. And Ki uta ki tai is named by Te Waihora Co-Governance Group in Canterbury as a philosophy that reflects the view of environment and resource management held by Ngāi Tahu, the largest Māori iwi in the South Island. “It represents kiatiakitanga or guardianship from the mountains and great inland lakes down the rivers to the sea. It encapsulates the need to recognise and manage the interconnectedness of the whole environment.”

So Whānau Mercy Ministries will be in good company in declaring that it means to pursue the interconnectedness of all things in advancing Mercy’s mission. As this month we honour the faith and courage of the founders who brought Mercy to Aotearoa, we pray that our ministries will find new ways of responding to the cry of the poor and of the Earth through the whole of our land.