



Our call to be ‘sowers of prophetic hope’

By DENNIS HORTON

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SATURDAY 12 December marks Foundation Day, 189 years since Catherine McAuley and two of her young companions took vows in Dublin as the first Sisters of Mercy. It is also, by both thoughtful planning and good fortune, our own Foundation Day, marking 15 years since Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand, Tonga and Samoa agreed to merge their historic four Congregations and become one. ‘Hurrah for foundations,” wrote Catherine. “They make the young happy and the old young!” Rejoicing over our beginnings, however, can never be an excuse for resting on our laurels.



Taihoa – spare a moment

CROSS and koru: The bronze by Gael O’Leary, resting Mercy’s cross on an unmistakably Kiwi base, suggests a global charism taking root within our local context. What will Mercy Aotearoa look like 10 years from now? What is our role in helping this process to unfold?

That’s a question for us to ponder this Advent season.

It is a happy coincidence that our celebration of Mercy’s origins, on both the global and local scene, always falls within the church’s season of Advent, named from the Latin word meaning “a coming, approach, arrival”. There is an acknowledgement here as we keep this season that we have not yet reached our destination. We are always waiting, liminal people who stand at the threshold, hoping and longing for something better than we have so far achieved. Like Mary, expecting her Child, we carry within us a hope that waits to be born.

Pope Francis, in his recent letter, has highlighted the Covid-19 experience as a new starting-point for all humanity, a reminder that we simply cannot go back to doing things as we once did. “If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and all its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected.” (*Fratelli Tutti* 35)

What are we waiting for, this Advent? Where does our focus lie, in terms of doing things differently as we reach beyond the walls we have created? One clue may come from the current Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse, especially of children, young persons and vulnerable adults in faith-based institutions between 1950 and 1999. The evidence which has surfaced over recent days has left us all with a profound sorrow over the abuse that has occurred within Catholic institutions, and a heartfelt desire that such mistakes will never occur again. Our bishops and Congregation leaders, including our own, have spoken for us all in expressing sadness, seeking forgiveness from survivors of abuse, and resolving that we will work with them to create new and better pathways for the future.

This Advent brings another landmark for Mercy in our land. After years of discerning and months of discussion and planning, Ngā Whāea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand are close to seeking approval from the Holy See for a new way to sustain their ministries. They have made a commitment to co-create their future as they seek, in the words of their new Constitutions, a “new way of living God’s mercy in courageous response to the needs of the times.” In practical terms, this will mean entrusting their healthcare, education and community service ministries to a new, largely lay-led trust, Whānau Mercy Ministries. This will involve sisters moving into an unknown future as they “commit to journey together as sowers of prophetic hope.” (*Chapter Vision*, August 2019)

For those of us who are their partners in mission, the invitation to us is to join the sisters in seeing that the Mercy seed they have sown is nurtured and takes root in this unfolding future, doing our best to ensure that Whānau Mercy continues to be part of Mercy’s global presence. May we help the Christ whose coming we await to take flesh in the world of our day.