

## MIA Special Series for 2015: the Year of Consecrated Life and the 25th Anniversary of the Declaration of Catherine McAuley as Venerable



### **Twelve Thematic Responses on Mercy Themes:**

Hospitality, Compassion, Mercy through an Ecological Lens, Courage, Forgiveness, Trust in Providence, Right Relations, Service, Respect, Women & Children, Justice, Ordinariness.

- JANUARY** Daring Hospitality—'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' by *Elizabeth Davis rsm*
- FEBRUARY** Called to Compassion by *Breege O'Neill rsm*
- MARCH** Extravagant Mercy—A New Story in an Ecological Key by *Elaine Wainwright rsm*
- APRIL** 'Take from My Heart All Painful Anxiety': Catherine's Courage by *Janet Ruffing rsm*
- MAY** "God's Healing Mercy is Forgiveness" by *Kathy Rule rsm*
- JUNE** 'Every Grace Abundant' by *Sheila Carney rsm*
- JULY** Whakawhanaungatanga – Making Right Relationship by *Kath Rushton rsm*
- AUGUST** 'It is a SPECIAL FAVOUR of God to be made SERVANTS of his suffering poor ("Sayings")' by *Helena O'Donoghue rsm*
- SEPTEMBER** Respect - A 'Looking Again', an Enlarging of Love by *Jo O'Donovan rsm*
- OCTOBER** Mercy Craving Realisation by *Lynda Dearlove rsm*
- NOVEMBER** The Feminine Face of the God who does Justice by *Sheila Curran rsm*
- DECEMBER** Is there Anything More Extraordinary than the Ordinary? by *Brenda Dolphin rsm*

*We are grateful to our authors for thematic responses which have resonated, nourished, inspired and challenged us over the course of 2015 as we sought to address through our Mercy lens the call of Pope Francis to 'Wake up the world'.*



## 1. Daring Hospitality – “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” – Elizabeth Davis rsm

*Aíocht, hospitalidad, manaaki, kagiliwan, hospitalité, ukarimu, gutpela lukaut, hospitality* – this life-giving word strengthens us on our global Mercy journey into the Year of Consecrated Life, the Year of Religious Life. Although seemingly simple, warm and comforting, hospitality at its best is radical and prophetic. Let us hear this word spoken in our scriptures and tradition, inviting us into new thinking, challenging us to “daring hospitality.”

Hospitality was an essential aspect of Israelite culture, embedded in sacred codes of conduct requiring that strangers be given food, water and shelter. Abraham’s first action after God’s call into covenant was to offer hospitality to three strangers, not knowing that God sent them, “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree” (Gen 18:4). The Shunammite woman spoke to her husband about Elisha, the holy man of God, “Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp” (2 Kgs 4: 9-10). God is described in Ps 23:4, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” About Woman Wisdom, celebrated in Proverbs, we are told, “She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy” (Prov 31:20).

The same sacred code is embedded in the New Testament. Elizabeth welcomed the newly pregnant Mary into her home, “Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (Lk 1:39-40). Jesus invited the first disciples to his home, saying, “Come and see” (Jn 1:39). He shared meals with the most likely and most unlikely people: his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus; Peter’s mother-in-law, tax collectors, rich men, a prostitute, five thousand men, women and children; his apostles. He met a Samaritan woman at a well and asked for a drink. He defined “neighbour” by a Samaritan traveller’s response to an injured man, “He put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him” (Lk 10:34). The first Christian community “broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

When Jesus was asked how to become a faithful follower, his words were stark, clear and reflective of his people’s code of conduct, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36).

Like Abraham, Jesus began his ministry with a meal, attending the wedding feast at Cana. He ended his ministry by serving his disciples bread and wine at the supper before his death. After his Resurrection, he helped the disciples know him as transformed by sharing a meal with them: Mary and Cleopas at Emmaus, the disciples in the Upper Room, the disciples on the beach. Key moments in Jesus’ life and moments in which he led the disciples to significantly shift their thinking were marked by hospitality.

In later Jewish culture, there were *haknasat oreḥim*, houses where travellers obtained lodging. Rabbis suggested that every house should have doors on all four sides, so that poor people might find easy access from everywhere. In a remarkably similar way, in ancient Irish culture, the Breton Laws mandated hospitality for the stranger, newcomer and traveller. The *bruideans* were public houses designated for this purpose and placed strategically at major road intersections with doors open to every direction.

Like Jesus, Catherine began her ministry with an act of hospitality – she built a house on Baggot Street as a school for poor girls and a shelter for homeless servant girls and women. Mary Sullivan, rsm, records that, after the first Sisters of Mercy returned from their profession of vows, “the Christmas dinner for the all the neighbourhood children was held as usual, again with plum pudding, and Catherine once more waiting on the hungry, ragged children she loved.” Again like Jesus, Catherine’s last action on this earth was to direct her community to engage in hospitality, “Get a good cup of tea – I think the community room would be a good place.” Following the *haknasat oreḥim* and the *bruideans*, Catherine’s House of Mercy was and is a place of hospitality, the wellspring for Mercy alive today in forty-five countries.

In our history as women of Mercy, true to our Jewish and Irish roots, we have faithfully followed Jesus and Catherine in creating places of ministry – hospitals, orphanages, hospices, boys’ homes, women’s shelters, shelters for refugees, affordable housing units – all places of hospitality. One poignant example, the [Gathering Place in St. John’s NL](#), is a community centre for vulnerable persons who are homeless or living with inadequate supports. In this place enlivened by Sisters of Mercy, Presentation Sisters and more than two hundred volunteers, a sculpture of hands, created by artist [Gerald Squires](#), reflects Jesus’ words, “I was hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, a stranger . . .” The sculpture confirms that daring hospitality creates community marked by inclusion, equality and respect.

Throughout this rich history, consistent echoes startle us out of our comfortable complacency. Radical inclusion challenges us to look more closely at those we invite to our tables and to ask how we relate to guests who are strangers, convicts, persons not properly dressed for our meals, or persons not sharing our values. Hospitality at its most daring will lead us to take risks, make us uncomfortable and cause us to challenge a social order which keeps people poor. To quote Joan Chittester, osb, “Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.”

Seeing ourselves first not as hosts but as guests is most disquieting. God, self-described in Ex 34:6 as “merciful and gracious,” chose to graciously accept our hospitality. The early Rabbis called God *Shekinah*, the divine presence among us. The angel told Joseph that the baby born of Mary would be *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. Our God – Shekinah, Emmanuel – is, by choice, a guest in our homes and in our hearts. In most of his encounters of hospitality, Jesus was guest not host – at the Cana wedding, in Martha’s home, at Zacchaeus’ home, at the last supper prepared by the apostles, at the house in Emmaus. We will know daring hospitality when we can say, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Hospitality is lived in welcoming places. One such welcoming place is Earth. As we begin to know ourselves as members of a sacred community of all life, we are coming to realize that we are not masters of Earth but guests of this life-sustaining place. We are behaving as ungrateful guests, slowly destroying the home into which we have been graciously invited. Through an understanding of hospitality embedded in the Eucharist, theologians are leading us to greater wisdom about what it means to be guests of Earth. Beatrice Bruteau says it this way, “I want to perceive Earth as a Eucharistic Planet, a Good Gift planet, which is structured as mutual feeding, as intimate self-sharing. . . A sense of

the Eucharistic Planet, of the Real Presence of the Divine in the world, is something we need now for the protection of the planet.”

“Cead mile failte! A thousand welcomes!” In this Year of Religious Life, let us renew our promises to give a thousand welcomes to the stranger, to receive respectfully a thousand welcomes from Earth, to be radically inclusive, and to be gracious guests and gracious hosts. May Mercy alive in this twenty-first century be marked by daring hospitality. May we know the reassurance of hearing again and again, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

### Questions Relating to Reflection on Hospitality

1. **Welcome to the stranger:** Who are the strangers whom we Sisters of Mercy invite to our tables? Who are the strangers whom we find it difficult to welcome? Who are the strangers whom we would not even think about welcoming?
2. **Guests not hosts:** When and where are we as Sisters of Mercy the strangers who are being welcomed? What does being guests, receivers of hospitality, mean for being Sisters of Mercy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
3. **Guests of Earth:** How does our thinking change when we realize that we are not masters of Earth but guests of this planet? How are we behaving as guests of Earth?
4. **Eucharistic hospitality:** What does an understanding of Eucharistic hospitality as ecological hospitality mean for a community of Sisters of Mercy who celebrate Eucharist together?

### Resources for Reflection on Hospitality

Beatrice Bruteau, “Eucharistic Ecology and Ecological Spirituality,” *Cross Currents* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1990/1991): 499-514. Online: <http://www.crosscurrents.org/eucharist.htm>

Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

Denis Edwards, “Celebrating Eucharist in a Time of Global Climate Change,” *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 19, no. 1 (February 2006): 1 – 15. Online: <http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/14953/2006003339.pdf?sequence=1>

Anne Elvey, “Living One for the Other: Eucharistic Hospitality as Ecological Hospitality,” chapter 10 in *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics* (eds. Anne F. Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power and Claire Renkin; Routledge, 2014). Online: [http://repository.divinity.edu.au/1319/1/Elvey-Living\\_one\\_for\\_the\\_other-proof.pdf](http://repository.divinity.edu.au/1319/1/Elvey-Living_one_for_the_other-proof.pdf)

Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love: Benedict's Way of Love* (Paraclete Press, 2011).

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Elizabeth M. Davis, RSM (Newfoundland) for Mercy International Association’s Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. Published January 2015. [edavis@sistersofmercynf.org](mailto:edavis@sistersofmercynf.org) [www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)





## 2. Called to Compassion by Breege O’Neill rsm

In Manila some weeks ago a profound encounter was witnessed by thousands of people. Pope Francis was being welcomed by a young girl, Glyzelle Palomar, when she broke down and through her tears she asked the question: *Why do children suffer*”? Pope Francis did not respond with a theological lecture on the mystery of evil. Instead, visibly moved, he reached out and hugged Glyzelle, affirmed her tears, and then diverging from his prepared speech he responded from the heart saying, *“Only when we are able to weep about the things that you lived can we understand something and answer something..... Today’s world needs to weep,” he said. “The marginalized weep, those left aside weep, the scorned weep ... but those of us who lead a life more or less without needs, don’t know how to weep..... Certain realities of life are only seen with eyes cleansed by tears”*. This encounter between Glyzelle Palomar and Pope Francis personifies the essence of compassion – an ability to enter into the suffering of another and feel it as one’s own.

The word compassion, in Hebrew, *“Rachamim”*, which translates in English as ‘womb compassion’ was the name God used in revealing himself to Moses. *“Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, abounding in mercy and fidelity, showing kindness to a thousand generations”* (Ex 34:6). The love overflowing with tenderness, compassion, protectiveness and forgiveness that binds a mother to her child mirrors this *“Rachamim”* of God. *“Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you”* (Is 49:15). Throughout the Scriptures, God repeatedly reveals to us the unconditional, compassionate nature of the *“Rachamim”* in God’s heart for each of us.

We look to Jesus, God-with-us, to show us the face of God. In Jesus, we see the embodiment of God’s compassion. *“Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate”* (Lk.6:36). Compassion was evoked in Jesus himself, sometimes to the point of tears, when he came face to face with pain, sorrow, hunger, loneliness and bewilderment. *“When he saw the crowds, he was moved with compassion to the depths of his being, for they were bewildered and dejected, like sheep who have no shepherd”* (Mt 9:36). He witnessed the grief of Lazarus’s sisters, and *“he wept with them.”* The sight of the widow at Nain, following the body of her son out to burial, *moved his heart* (Lk 7:13). Jesus’s compassionate response gives expression to the Divine Compassion, which moved God to come among us as a self-emptying, servant God who heals our wounds and washes our feet.

Catherine McAuley knew God as the Compassionate One who loved her and provided for her. Through the events of her life, God gradually shaped Catherine into a woman overflowing with compassion. Her whole personality became a hospitable place of welcome for everyone

she encountered. Catherine knew from her lived experience that what the poor hold more precious than gold is *“the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of sorrows”*. She brought to all her dealings with those on the margins of society, an inner quality of graciousness and combined it with tender compassion. Her ability to express God’s mercy and compassion as a soothing balm to the wounds of the poor, homeless, hungry, sick and dying, and her service to the unprotected and the uneducated became the founding charism of the Sisters of Mercy. To be known by the name Mercy is to publicly commit to become ever more compassionate.

Compassion is one of the most beautiful presences we bring to the world and true compassion is born from suffering. When I have felt deep pain I am able to be touched by the suffering of others. The capacity to be compassionate is deepened or blocked by our response to the painful experiences of life. Part of the essence of being human is the suffering that comes from hurts, losses, displacements and failures. Vulnerability is precarious. If left unattended, it can solidify into negativity and destructiveness. However, if attended to and integrated it becomes a door opening into compassion. Institutions too when disconnected from their founding purpose can become destructive, and in recent years many institutions have had to engage in the bleak journey of coming to terms with that reality. However, when individuals or institutions undertake this difficult process with sincerity and courage they are guided by grace into a more merciful, compassionate way of being and engaging.

How do we cultivate and nurture this merciful way of living?

Growth into this merciful, compassionate way is nurtured by contemplation, prayer, patience and compassionate action. Prayer and contemplation expand the heart into a world-embracing space of solidarity where all humanity can be touched with the compassionate love of God. Patience involves staying with, living through, being fully present to what is presenting itself in the here and now. Compassionate action draws us outward to stand in solidarity with all who are marginalised, persecuted, and endangered in the whole earth community, to comfort those who are bereft and without hope and to challenge all that causes misery and injustice. We do this, aware that all we have to give is the love we have received.

Compassion springs from the intimate inter-relationship of all things. We belong to one community of life. We are one with the world in all its beauty and suffering. Each individual choice and action in the universe affects the whole.

In her book *Fields of Compassion*, the theologian Judy Cannato states: *“Making consistent choices out of ever growing awareness creates a spirit, a field of energy that catches others up and invites them in... Creating a field of kindness or care with intentionality produces an environment fecund with healing ...Life to the full is possible but not without our choosing it one small action at a time.”*

As members of the global Mercy community, we contribute to a Field of Mercy, from which compassion and care flow in the universe. We join with all others who are committed to this

manifestation. Each intentional compassionate action of ours contributes to the growth of this transformative groundswell of Mercy in our world.

What if in this Year of Consecrated Life, we were to consciously choose day by day and action by action to live compassionately and allow God's energy of Rachamim to transform us and transform our world?

### Questions Relating to Reflection on Compassion

1. What events in my life have enabled me to become more compassionate towards myself/ towards others
2. In what situations and towards whom have I/we found it difficult to respond with compassion?
3. What situations in our locality/ world are calling us to a compassionate response at this time?
4. What does being compassionate towards the Earth involve for Sisters of Mercy?

### Resources for Reflection on Compassion

Cynthia Bourgeault, [\*The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind- a New Perspective on Christ and His Message\*](#) (Shambhala Boston & London, 2008) \*Audiobook download \* Audio CD \* Paperback

Cynthia Bourgeault, [\*'Mystic Christianity: Encountering the Wisdom Jesus.'\*](#) Tami Simon speaks with The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, 12 February, 2014. **Radio program (54:01)**

Judy Cannato, [\*'Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life'\*](#) (Sorin Books Notre Dame, Indiana, 2010) \*Kindle \* Paperback

[\*'Conversations with...Judy Cannato.'\*](#) Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. Vol 11, no 3, September 2010. **(12 pps; PDF)**

Ilia Delio O.S.F., [\*'Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St Francis'\*](#) (St Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2011) \* Paperback

Henri J.M. Nouwen, Donald McNeill and Douglas A Morrison, [\*'Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life'\*](#) (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006) \* Hardcover \* Paperback

John O'Donohue, [\*'Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace'\*](#) (Bantam Press 2003)  
\* Kindle \* Hardcover \* Paperback \* Audiobook download \* Audio CD

Elaine Wainwright :[\*'Mercy Embodied? Embodied Mercy as Justice, Wisdom and Holiness article in" Fire Cast On the Earth- Kindling"\*](#), International Mercy Research Conference 2007. **(16 pps PDF)**

Susan Bridle, [\*'Comprehensive Compassion: An Interview with Brian Swimme'\*](#). What is Enlightenment? (WIE) Magazine. Issue 19, 2003 **(9 pps; PDF)**

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### 3. Extravagant Mercy—A New Story in an Ecological Key by Elaine Wainwright rsm

*This is the Spirit of the order, indeed—the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us—* words of Catherine McAuley which capture the paradoxical heart of the ‘call’ to mercy within the context of this year of reflection on Consecrated or Religious Life (Letter 78, February 17, 1838). And they echo the beatitude: *Blessed are the merciful for they shall be mercied* (a more literal translation of Matt 5:7). Both short texts take us to the very core of mercy that emerges from the womb of divinity and is embraced by those in the human community committed to doing and being mercy. Such mercy has characterized almost two centuries of consecrated religious life and more recently partnerships in ministry under that title.

In the Hebrew Bible, one way in which God is named as merciful is by means of the adjective *raham*:

merciful [*raham*] and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness [*emet*] (Ex 34: 6).

From the root *rh* comes the noun *rehem* which designates the womb, and the adjective *raham*/merciful. The noun *rahamim* can be translated ‘womb compassion/mercy’. This image draws on a corporeal female organ/the womb where life takes form, is nurtured and comes forth in order to express the profound compassion of God [see also Is 30:18; 49:13; Is 54:8, 10; 55:7].

The prophet of *rahamim*/the one doing mercy is to proclaim the womb compassionate one of the covenant not only by name but also by action. As the prophet Isaiah says (61:1):

The spirit of God is upon me,  
because God has anointed me;  
has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;

This is the justice or the right ordering/righteousness yearned for by the womb compassionate one (see also Is 61:3-4).

In the person of Jesus this divine womb compassion takes on embodiment or materiality— cells and membranes, flesh and blood and all that links this Jesus to Earth and Earth’s life-shaping evolutionary processes. This is captured by the Gospel of Matthew in the phrase, you shall call his name *Emmanu-el*/ God/divinity with us/the Earth/Universe (Matt 1:23) and in the words of John’s Gospel: the W/word became flesh (Jn 1:14).



The three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jesus, the fleshly/earthly one, as that of a prophet of justice and mercy. He is moved with compassion in the face of illness and death in the community (Matt 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), of their hunger (Matt 14:14; 15:32//Mark 6:34; 8:2) and their being 'harassed and helpless' (Matt 9:36). In each of these texts, the verb used is [*splagchnizomai*] meaning to be moved in one's gut, one's entrails. It is a strong and fleshly word like *rahamim* and it seeks to capture the merciful compassion of Jesus expressed in very material ways.

It is this same call to gut-wrenching compassion which Jesus bequeaths to his disciples in the last great parable of Matthew's gospel: I am the hungry who need food; the thirsty who long for drink; I am the stranger seeking hospitality; the naked without clothes; and the sick and imprisoned (Matt 25:31-46)—as you do to these... This is the call to mercy and justice that finds response among those dedicated to Mercy mission around our globe today. In the words of Sandra Schneiders which she used to describe those in consecrated religious life but which can also be said of their partners in ministry: S/he 'wants to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God' (*Finding the Treasure*, 141).

With this same listening ear, we are hearing another call, another story near to the ear or the heart of God. It is the story of the Universe that we now know evolved over 13.7-14 billion years with planet Earth and its solar system emerging only in the more recent 4.6-5 billion years and the human community of *homo erectus* only 2 million years ago. The 'book of the genealogy' into which the birthing of Jesus is placed in Matt 1:1 is indeed the 'book of the genealogy of the heavens and earth' (Gen 2:4a) and of the human community male and female (Gen 5:1-2). We are being invited to listen to and to learn the story or stories of the cosmos that cosmologists and biologists are telling and with which biblical scholars, theologians, ethicists and religious and spiritual seekers are engaging. It is a story that is emerging from near to the ear/heart of God.

From this same place we are also hearing the cry of Earth, of the planet with all its intricate webs of life that constitute its evolutionary network. It is being dealt with violently by the human community. Relentless mining and fracking is leaving tracts of arable land desolate. Carbon emissions from human industries and lifestyles are threatening arctic ice and Earth's oceans bringing rising sea levels and devastating hurricanes and storms. Myriads of species and life-forms are being made extinct at a rate unknown previously and not by natural evolutionary processes. This is the cry of a new 'poor', the other-than-human poor. It is also a cry that is intimately connected to those in the human community whose plight Jesus brought to our attention: those who hunger and thirst, lack adequate food, water and shelter and who are marginalized and imprisoned. The urgent call to mercy and justice comes now with not only a social but also an ecological ring. They cannot be separated near to the heart of God.

To follow this new pathway requires both a new way of *seeing* and a new way of *being*. As humans, we have, in recent centuries, made ourselves the centre of the universe leading us to ignore or exploit all that is other-than-human. The ecological imperative calls us to re-place ourselves among all that is material as we are—to *see* differently. With new eyes, we can read

our world anew, seeing soil and plant, desert and mountain, and all animals including the human one who has evolved to self-reflective consciousness—all these live in and contribute to the extraordinary web of being. As our eyes and perspectives shift and change, we can learn to read our sacred stories anew. We can see and hear in them the intricate webs of life that we encounter in our world. These webs link place, time and space, plants and all that is the material of the universe with which divinity is engaged—habitat, the human and the holy play anew within our sacred stories of God, of Jesus, of Mercy, of justice. This is indeed to ‘ask the beasts’ and others of life’s beings as the words of Job (12:7-8) and the title of Elizabeth’s Johnson’s recent book (*Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*) invite.

Mercy, however, doesn’t just invite us to *see*, even if it is to see anew, but also to *be*, to act differently. We are being called in this Year of Consecrated/Religious Life to “act and choose in accord with the gospel” (43). And our gospel is pointing us to a new ethic, a new pathway—ecological justice that holds together the social and the ecological. Together we will need to learn anew for our time “the true Spirit of mercy flowing in us”, the way/s of being merciful so that our planet might be ‘mercied’. And if we make that journey together then, in the words of the psalmist paraphrased:

mercy and ecological justice will meet,  
the right ordering of all things and peace shall embrace,  
ecological justice will spring up from the ground,  
and the right ordering of all justice will look down from the sky  
[A paraphrase of Ps 85:10].

### Questions Relating to Reflection on Mercy and Ecology

1. **Womb Compassion:** What image/s of the God of Compassion colour our spirituality as women/men of Mercy? How do the images of ‘God’s Womb Compassion’/‘Jesus being moved in his entrails’ impact on our ministry of mercy and justice in today’s world, especially the call to ecological justice?
2. **The ‘Story of the Universe’:** What is the story of the universe that informs our life and our spirituality given today’s changing world view/s? What are the sources that are most useful in informing us in this regard? Where and how can we learn from cutting edge scientific insights that impact on our view of our Earth story (you may be able to explore some of these together)?
3. **Telling our Sacred Stories Anew:** How are we being challenged, in light of science/cosmology to tell our sacred stories anew? Where and how is this happening in your context? What can we learn from biblical scholars, theologians and spiritual writers who are undertaking this task [In particular the short articles of Elizabeth Johnson, Kath Rushton and Elaine Wainwright in the list above might assist here as a shared source]
4. **Ecological Justice:** How are you and your community/congregation/institute responding to the call to ecological justice?  
[A search of congregational, institutes’ and MIA websites could be helpful here to expand our knowledge of new ecological initiatives, centres etc]? What is our new call

to mercy and justice in the face of the urgency of climate change and the widespread destruction of habitats and species essential for life on the planet?

### Resources for Reflection on Mercy and Ecology

Edwards, Denis. [Ecology at the Heart of Faith: the Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth](#). Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006.

----- "Ecology and Incarnation: Exploring a Christian Ecological Theology." Accessed <http://vimeo.com/32557592>.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. [Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love](#). London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

----- "An Earthy Theology." America 13 April, 2009. Accessed <http://americamagazine.org/issue/693/article/earthy-christology>.

----- "Ask the Beasts: Spirituality and the Evolving Earth." Accessed <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/askthebeasts/> [Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Spirituality given at Boston College, 13 July, 2013 – 85 mins].

McLaughlin, Nellie. [Out of Wonder: The Evolving Story of the Universe](#). Dublin: Veritas, 2004.

Rushton, Kathleen. ["God So Loved the World': John 3:16-18—Trinity Sunday 16 June."](#) (2 pps; PDF)

Schneiders, Sandra M. [Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context](#). New York: Paulist, 2000 [See pp. 123-152].

----- [Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission in the World](#). New York: Paulist, 2013. [See pp. 616-628]

Wainwright, Elaine M. ["An Ecological Reading of the Gospel of Mark – Part 1."](#) Available on *Tui Motu* website

There is a wealth of excellent DVD and online resources in relation to the emerging scientific understanding of the universe e.g.:

[Journey of the Universe](#); [Our Planet: The Past, Present and Future of Earth](#); [Planet Earth: The Complete Series](#) together with programmes of [David Attenborough](#).

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#### 4. “Take from My Heart All Painful Anxiety”: Catherine’s Courage. Janet Ruffing rsm

What comes to mind when we reflect on the courage Catherine McAuley quietly embodied as the works of mercy and compassion for the poor claimed her heart and led to founding the Sisters of Mercy? Where do we find courage or fortitude throughout her life? And how did she nurture it through the spiritual practices she adopted? The theme and vocabulary of fortitude or courage is not particularly common in our mercy tradition with the exception of M. Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss’s work, but its reality is.<sup>1</sup> Catherine drew on the spirituality of the Cross, of suffering with Jesus characteristic of her times. One invocation of the “Jesus Psalter,” one of her life-long recited prayers, in the fifth petition pleads, “Jesus! Make me constant (or steadfast) in Faith, Hope, and Charity.” This is one devotion that explicitly limns one version of courage.

We might recognize Augustine’s description of courage as “love readily enduring all for the sake of what is loved,” in Catherine’s life. *Cor*, the Latin root of courage means heart, while *fortis*, the root of fortitude means strength. In Catherine’s experience and in our own what is loved is Jesus, the charism of mercy, and its expression in her day and in our own. What is it we have heart for? Bernard Haring describes courage as the virtue of boldness and “strength of soul.” Fortitude or strength is the cardinal virtue that manifests as firmness in difficulties and

constancy in the pursuit of the good. It enables us to overcome fear, even fear of death itself, and to face trials and persecutions when they arise. Joseph Pieper reminds us that “the essence of courage lies not in knowing no fear, but in not allowing oneself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept by fear from the realization of good.”<sup>2</sup> Fortitude is also one of the seven “gifts” of the Holy Spirit as well as a habit or virtue lived into over a life-time. One can be empowered by the Spirit at a critical moment of threat or challenge through grace.

With these understandings of courage and fortitude, where do you see them exemplified in Catherine’s life? There are many instances in our narratives of her life and the history of our congregation, as well as intimations in her letters that she sometimes felt anxiety or fear as she anticipated the future. Her reliance on the providence of God, and her deep trust in God saw her through these times of serious challenge. Her prayer, her “Suscipe” is one way she prayed herself into her deepest self-entrustment to God, asking God to take from her heart “all painful anxiety,” teaching us to do the same.

If we focus only on Catherine’s adult years, her decision to accept the Callaghan’s invitation to join their household first in Dublin for a few months and soon after in the village of Coolock might be one such act of courage. While this arrangement offered comfortable housing and companionship, it did not diminish the climate of anti-Catholic prejudice which continued in the Callaghan household, forbidden as she was to demonstrate any “Popish” displays of devotion. However, as Mrs. Callaghan’s deputy, she assumed the task of looking after the needs of the poor cottagers on their land and in the environs of Coolock, helping her to recognize the needs of poor people not only for the necessities of life but also for religious



instruction, kindness, and respect. There her inability to respond effectively to a servant girl at risk of sexual abuse stimulated her dream for a new way of protecting such women.

During that time, there were two other pivotal courageous decisions. When she felt unable to defend her faith when attacked at table, which often included her own Protestant family members, she sought further instruction from her priest mentors in Dublin<sup>3</sup>. After this period of instruction, Catherine developed a facility for effective “apologetic” dialogue and also chose to express her faith more publically. She asked the Callaghan’s if she could use one of the carriages to attend Catholic Mass when they went to the Church of Ireland on Sunday mornings. And again, when she invited Mrs. Callaghan to consider being baptized, she was willing to risk any possible inheritance from the Callaghan’s.

Within Catherine’s family circle, when she was staying with her brother-in-law’s family as her sister Mary was dying, she brought her sister back to the faith before she died. When Catherine told her brother-in-law that his wife had been reconciled to the Church, he was so enraged that he ran for a weapon, and Catherine ran in her dressing gown from the home down Military Road, while a maid slowed her pursuer down until Catherine was safely at a friend’s home. It took both love and great courage to return to the home when her brother-in-law sent the maid to find her, offer his apologies, and bring her back.<sup>4</sup>

Catherine had developed close relationships with key clergy in her life. She found mentors who instructed her in the faith, others who supported her dream of the house of Mercy<sup>5</sup> and provided advice and moral support, clearly understanding that she was not envisioning founding a new religious order. As women joined her and gradually began to live and look more like religious, some clergy turned against her, and the Bishop, then encouraged the lay community to become religious or else disband. While Catherine had never envisioned such a

development, at fifty-two years of age agreeing to a novitiate took great courage, especially when she was unable to ameliorate the harsh treatment of Elizabeth Harley which resulted in her death soon after they returned to Baggot Street. Catherine herself was able to benefit from her novitiate, during which she developed a clearer understanding of religious life, and what in that experience was or was not compatible with her dreams for the House of Mercy, as well as embrace the time afforded for prayer, freed of responsibilities for Baggot Street community.

Catherine was to have many more experiences with clergy who were supportive or not, responsive or not to her leadership as each new house was founded. Conflicts with the local clergy or the local bishop who had ultimate jurisdiction over each new foundation, were something she learned to adapt to for the sake of the foundation in question. On balance most were manageable for her, but she had to withdraw the sisters from Kingstown over the financial arrangements she could not resolve. The chaplaincy controversy with Dr. Meyler wore her down for years and she was never satisfied with the conclusion. Despite Catherine's exquisite social skills and attractive personality, some clergy opposed her and her project. Catherine exerted considerable energy in framing such experiences as taking place within the paschal mystery and trusting that what God really wanted to happen would. Conflicts with clerical representatives of the church experienced today are nothing new. Although the circumstances and issues have changed over time, how does courage sustain us when we are challenged in similar ways within the ecclesial community today?

Catherine was also courageous in developing innovative approaches in the works of mercy which are at the heart of the community's charism. She built her "house" next to one of the most fashionable new neighborhoods in Dublin, which brought the poor into the same neighborhood for education, for employment in the laundry which served the wealthy, and in

bringing the plight of poor women and girls into the public eye. In the light of health conditions in the poor neighborhoods where the sisters visited and cared for the sick/poor in their homes, she and the community were constantly at risk themselves of becoming ill. Death was a constant risk and reality to young and old alike in the new community which flourished, nonetheless. She clearly understood the influence women could have within their own spheres of action when educated and empowered to exert that influence.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, first Sister of Mercy*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> In Len Perry. *Transforming Self and Community: Revisioning Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Direction*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002, 85-86.

<sup>3</sup> Dean Lube and Rev. Thomas Betagh, SJ

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Vincent Harnett's account in the Limerick MS in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, 154-156.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Michael Blake and Dr. William Armstrong, and of course, Dr. Daniel Murray, archbishop of Dublin.

### Questions for Reflection on Courage

1. What comes to mind when you think about courage in Catherine's life?
2. When in your own mercy life, have you been most courageous and steadfast?
3. In this year of Consecrated Life, what courage do you need to overcome fear and anxiety in a difficult situation you are facing?

### Resources for Reflection on Courage

Janet Ruffing, RSM, "[Fire Cast on the Earth: Spiritual Implications for Mercy in the 21st Century](#)" in *Fire Cast on the Earth—Kindly: Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century*. International Mercy Research Conference, 2007, 163-175.

["The Core of Courage"](#) in Kathleen Fischer, *The Courage the Heart Desires: Spiritual Strength in Difficult Times*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 111-128.

["Legacy and Challenge of Catherine McAuley"](#) In M. Joanna Regan and Isabelle Keiss, *Tender Courage: A Reflection on the Life and Spirit of Catherine McAuley, first Sister of Mercy*, 127-152.

Mary Doak, "[Jesus of Galilee: Hope for a Globalized World in Despair](#)" In *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st century*, Orbis: Maryknoll, 2011, ed. Robert Lassalle-Klein.

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## 5. God's Healing Mercy is Forgiveness – Kathy Rule rsm

*As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison – Nelson Mandela*

This is a special time for all of us associated with Catherine McAuley's charism and the Mercy World as we are constantly being made aware of the mystery of God's abundant mercy. From the day he was elected, Pope Francis has spoken and written about mercy. The whole world has been touched by his living of mercy as he reaches out to those in greatest need. We all smiled when Pope Francis spoke of 'shepherds living with the smell of the sheep' but behind the earthy expression was the challenge to put out into the deep where bringing God's healing and comfort to others is the priority. In declaring a Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said that this Holy Year is 'the favourable time to heal wounds, a time not to be weary of meeting all those who are waiting to see and to touch with their hands the signs of the closeness of God, a time to offer everyone the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.' (1)

We are all very familiar with the words of forgiveness in the Scriptures and we are just as familiar with the struggle that surrounds forgiving and being forgiven. And, because our world is not perfect and we are still becoming who we are destined to be, it is easy to be hurt and to go on hurting others. We have all experienced the downward spiral into resentment, anger and self-righteousness. Nursing hurts and injustices leads us into isolation, while forgiving allows one to create new relationships. Our families and communities are made up of people with weaknesses and we will have to learn to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven. Forgiveness is the foundation for harmony. It is the gateway to releasing life-giving energy and restoring wholeness. It is the lifeblood that binds us together as sisters and brothers.

Thich Nhat Hahn, the well known Buddhist monk, says that Jesus' words "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" show us how to forgive. 'This teaching helps us to know how to look at the person we consider to be the cause of our suffering. If we practise looking deeply into his situation and the causes of how he came to the way he is now, and if we visualize ourselves as being born in his condition, we may see that we could have become exactly like him. When we do that, compassion arises in us naturally, and we see that the other person is to be helped and not punished. In that moment our anger transforms itself into the energy of compassion. Suddenly, the one we have been calling our enemy becomes our brother or sister.'(2)

What better example have we of forgiveness than the late Mr Nelson Mandela? As he stepped out of prison and into the sunlight, after having been subjected to every possible degradation for 27 years, he uttered the following words: *'As I walked out of the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.'* (3)

Mandela's release from prison in 1990 was both a highly anticipated and an enormously feared event. Many members of the white minority in South Africa were terrified of the kind of displacement and retribution that has historically followed revolutions and major changes in government. It was a miracle when, rather than calling for a revolution, Mandela preached reconciliation. He spoke of a Rainbow Nation and upheld the value of Ubuntu – we are human through the humanity of others. He effected reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed through forgiveness and by his own example he showed us how it could be done. On the national level, he was behind setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help heal the country and bring about a reconciliation of its people by uncovering the truth about human rights violations during the period of apartheid. At the personal level, Mandela invited his former prison guard, Paul Gregory, as a VIP guest to his presidential inauguration. In remembering Mr Mandela, Archbishop Tutu, his dear friend and fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate, said, He concluded his tribute by saying, *'Our world is a better place for having had a Nelson Mandela....'* (4)

As we grow in our awareness of the interdependence of all of life and how interconnectedness is core to our existence, Archbishop Tutu's tribute is very significant and reminds us that personal decisions and attitudes can have global effects. We do not exist in isolation. This was well understood by Etty Hillesum. Etty was just 29 years old when she died in the camp at Auschwitz in November 1943. Her diary, which is published in a book titled "The Interrupted Life" gives us a window into her courageous story and how she discovered God within her and how, despite all that was happening to her and to her people, she refused to hate. When questioning the causes of war, Etty, who held a law degree, responds with: *'Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbour. Because I and my neighbour and everyone else do not have enough love... Yet there is love bound up inside us, and if we could release it into the world, a little each day, we would be fighting war and everything else that comes with it.'* (5)

The journey inward for Etty was not an escape from suffering. It prepared her to embrace life and death with gentleness and compassion and bring peace and comfort to those with whom she was imprisoned. Her refusal to hate and her heroic forgiveness of her oppressors enabled her to be an oasis of peace in a place of desperation and misery. For she reminds us, *'Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves – more and more peace – and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us the more peace will also be in our troubled world.'* (6)

One of Pope Francis' expectations for the Year of Consecrated Life is that the spirituality of communion will become a reality. While offering the ideal of the "mystique of living together", Pope Francis is also very realistic when he reminds us that gossip, criticism and jealousy should not be part of our lives. A broken, divided world cries out for the witness and harmony of communion, and forgiveness is at the heart of this grace. In January 1839, Catherine McAuley was able to write to Elizabeth Moore,



'One thing is remarkable – that no breach of charity ever occurred amongst us. The sun never, I believe, went down on our anger.' Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could read the same about ourselves in the next edition of Mercy E-News?

- 1 Pope Francis, [Homily for Divine Mercy Vespers](#), 11 April 2015.
- 2 Widely quoted but no authentic source for this attribution is yet found. According to some sources, this quote was written by Mandela after being freed in 1990 from 27 years imprisonment.
- 3 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, New York: Riverhead, 1995.
- 4 Archbishop Desmond Tutu, [Channel 4 News South Africa](#), 5 December 2013
- 5 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life the Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork*, New York: Picador, 1996, p116.
- 6 Ibid, p267.

### Questions for Reflection on Forgiveness

1. What would happen if I truly learned to forgive?
2. Am I a forgiving person? Have I ever experienced the forgiveness of another?
3. Is there someone with whom you need to be reconciled? Who or what would help you to take the first step in this process?
4. How can we ask forgiveness for the way we are harming the planet and destroying nature's harmony?

### Resources for Reflection on Forgiveness

Chittester, Joan. [God's Tender Mercy](#). Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2010.

Hillesum, Etty. [An Interrupted Life: the Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43](#). London: Persephone Books Ltd, 1999.

Mandela, Nelson. [Long Walk to Freedom](#). South Africa: Macdonald Purnell, 1994.

Patterson, Ruth. [Journeying Towards Reconciliation](#). Dublin: Veritas, 2003.

Tutu, Desmond. [No Future without Forgiveness](#). New York: Rider, 2000.

Tutu, Desmond & Mpho. [The Book of Forgiving](#). New York: William Collins, 2014.

Woodhouse, Patrick. [A Life Transformed](#). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009.

Clint Eastwood (Director). [Invictus](#). DVD, 2010.

Justin Chadwick (Director). [Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom](#). DVD, 2014.

Xavier Beauvois (Director). [Of Gods And Men](#). DVD, 2010.

Luc Besson (Director). [The Lady](#). DVD, 2012.

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## 6. Every Grace Abundant – Sheila Carney rsm

**“God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work.” 2 Cor. 9:8**

This passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians reminds us that the loving care of our God is not simply assured us so that our personal needs will be provided for but so that, having experienced God’s loving care, we become conduits of that same care to those in need. It aptly summarizes both Catherine McAuley’s trust in the providence of God and her readiness to rely on that providence for the benefit of others.

Catherine experienced in her own life the unfailing and steadfast love of God which supplied her every need. Though her father, at his death, had left the family well provided for, those resources were soon expended and McAuley family found itself dependent on the kindness of friends and family for food and shelter. Through the welcome she received in the Conway, Armstrong and Callaghan households and, eventually, through the benefaction she received from the Callaghans, Catherine experienced God’s provident care. She responded by engendering that same reliance in her companions. “I will confide in the generous bounty and never-ceasing kindness of our beloved Saviour,” she was wont to say. (To Mary Theresa White, October 17, 1837) Her trust in God’s care for her was so great and so apparent, that she was nicknamed the Sister of Divine Providence by Dr. Murphy, the Bishop of Cork. Her trust that God would care for her in times of personal difficulty is witnessed in such sayings as “Bless and love the Fatherly hand that has wounded you. He will soon come, both hands filled with favors and blessings.” (To Frances Warde, May 15, 1838) And “This is your life joys and sorrows mingled, one succeeding the other.” (To Frances Warde, May 28, 1841) It was not that Catherine expected never to be in pain or tribulation but that she knew that God would not leave her long in suffering before coming, “both hands filled with favors and blessings.”

This belief that was her strength in times of personal distress extended to her ministries as well. “God will never see you want necessities for yourselves or for the children,” she told the sisters, (To Angela Dunne, December 20, 1937) and she encouraged them to rely “with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.” (To Mary Ann Doyle, July 24, 1841) It was this confidence in God’s care that allowed her to take the many risks that marked her life as a founder, agreeing to establish foundations where there were no resources to support the

community, no convent to welcome them, where no religious community had succeeded before. She often began foundations on shaky financial ground trusting that God would provide. She gladly sent the brightest and the best on foundations, leaving “poor Baggot Street” with “no heads left”, trusting that God would provide. She took in women with no dowry, sometimes against the advice of bishops, trusting that God would provide. This confidence is illustrated in a letter to Sisters Theresa Purcell in 1841: “I congratulate you on your happy increase, which you and I love so much that we will never frighten a candidate away for not having a bag of money. We will sooner give half our share than not multiply. The Lord and Master of our House and Home is a faithful provider. Let us never desire more than enough - He will give us that and a blessing.” (Early 1841))

The necessity for reliance on God’s providence as a requisite for a Sister of Mercy is powerfully expressed in a letter to Mary Ann Doyle at Tullamore:

“I could not think any person with very cautious wordly views worthy to be admitted to holy profession. It is not a disposition to bestow gifts, like benevolent persons in the world, but bespeaks generosity of mind for the religious state. It is bestowing ourselves most freely and relying with unhesitating confidence on the Providence of God.

When our innocent, yet very sensible Sister Chantal (McCann) was about to hand over all she possessed, making it impossible to ever command one shilling, her Mother told her she ought to have some security as many persons were of the opinion this house would not be established and said to her: ‘What would you do then?’ She answered: ‘Won’t I have my sweet Lord?’ And sweet He was to her to the very last moment. Tho’ we may not often have the consolation to meet such noble universal disengagement as hers, yet, a spirit, directly opposite, I humbly hope will never makes its abode amongst us.” (To Mary Ann Doyle, July 24, 1841)

Perhaps the most striking statement of Catherine’s trust in Providence is in her letter to Elizabeth Moore of January, 1839.

“We have now gone beyond 100 in number, and the desire to join seems rather to increase, though it was thought the foundations would retard it, it seems quite otherwise. There has been a most marked Providential Guidance which the want of prudence, vigilance, or judgment has not impeded, and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God. I could mark circumstances calculated to defeat it at once, but nothing however injurious in itself has done any injury. This is all I could say.

The loss of property has been supplied, the Death of the most valuable Sisters passed away as of no consequence. The alarm that was spread by such repeated deaths did not prevent others crowding in, in short, it evidently was to go on, and surmount all obstacles, many of which were great indeed, proceeding from causes within and without.” (To Elizabeth Moore, January 13, 1839)b

It was upon this kind of reliance on the providence of God that Catherine staked the future of her community and her ministries and this letter is one indication that her hopes were never disappointed. The “rightness” of her hope is expanded upon in “The Spirit of the Institute.” Here, Catherine reflects on the graces God pours down on those who perform the

Corporal Works of Mercy and then, adding that the Spiritual Works are even more important, asks of those who engage in these works, “What may we not justly hope?” (“The Spirit of the Institute” in Neumann, Letters of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841 p. 388. Catherine knew that her hopes would not be confounded because they were focused not on her needs or even on the needs of her young community but on the needs of the poor given into her care. She trusted that the necessities of everyday life would be provided, that she need not be distracted by them, and that freedom allowed her to pour herself into ministry.

In this Year of Consecrated Life, we might also ask, “What may we not justly hope?” Catherine was faced with the complexities of a young and growing community. We confront and aging and diminishing communities. But the suffering of the world are the same and our hopes are the same – that, through us, through our associates and partners in ministry, God’s mercy may flow across our aching world. Our hopes are expansive and confident because Catherine has taught us to trust in the provident love of our God who “is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work.”  
2 Cor. 9:8

### **Questions for Reflection on Trusting in Providence**

- The year of Consecrated Life calls on us to wake up the world. What must we do to stir our confidence in the loving providence of our God and allow that confidence to ignite the world?
- Our Mercy history is replete with examples of God’s provident care. Where do we see that same providence operative in our recent history? What do these signs of providence rouse us to do or be?
- Catherine’s trust in a benevolent, provident God enable her to risk in order to further the ministry. What risky behavior might we be called to in our day?
- Catherine was called the Sister of Divine Providence. What nickname might an observer give to us today? What is our clearest characteristic?

### **Resources for your Further Reflection on the theme of Trusting in Providence**

Catherine’s Letters to –

Angela Dunne December 20, 1837  
Elizabeth Moore January 13, 1839  
Teresa Purcell Early 1841  
Mary Ann Doyle July 24, 1841

Frances Warde February 17, 1838  
Elizabeth Moore March 21, 1840  
Frances Warde May 28, 1841  
Mary Ann Doyle September 24, 1841

[The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841.](#) Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004, ed. Mary C Sullivan.

Sheila Carney, RSM (Americas) for Mercy International Association's Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published June 2015.** [sheilacarneyrsm@gmail.com](mailto:sheilacarneyrsm@gmail.com) [www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)





## 7. Whakawhanaungatanga – Making Right Relationship – Kathleen Rushton rsm

Life is a process of establishing relationships, of relating well, of seeking right relations. In Scripture, mercy is always a relational concept. Mercy grounds both the covenant relationship of God with God's people and the relationships of God's people with one another and with creation. The concept of mercy, which is a summary of the people's understanding of God, is beyond being able to be expressed by one word. In scriptural language, mercy is like a prism with many fine cuts: different groups of words like *hesed* or *rahamim* refract distinctive aspects of mercy and at times are used interchangeably. However refracted, mercy in Scripture is always action-orientated.

Relational and action-orientated mercy, then, is best expressed as a verb, a doing word, as in the beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall be mercied" (a more literal translation of Matt 5:7). This sense of being "mercied" and "mercying" is in our Mercy DNA for the works of mercy led Catherine's action-orientated founding band to be known as the walking sisters. Right relation, too, is best expressed as a verb or a doing word rather than as a noun or a naming word. Maori, the first people of Aotearoa New Zealand have a wonderful expression in verbal form, *whakawhanaungatanga*<sup>1</sup> which in three interconnected sets of making right relationship offer insight into the making-right- relation core of biblical mercy. This verb comprises a noun and a causative prefix.

The noun, *whanaungatanga* (right relationship), as theologian Henare Tate explains, is "the complex totality" which "holds the multi-faceted identity we inherit from our *tupuna* (our many ancestors) and *matua* (parents) ... The further we go back in *whakapapa* [genealogy] ... the richer is our identity." Being connected in this way "also connects us to their spiritual *taonga* (treasures) of *te reo* (language), *tikanga* (culture), *matauranga* (knowledge), and *tapu* (sacredness) and *mana* (spiritual power and authority)."<sup>2</sup> This set of right relationship arising from genealogy in the

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced *facka-far-noe-ngar-ta-ngar* (ng counts as one consonant and is pronounced like "gn" in the word "singer.")

<sup>2</sup> Henare Tate. "Stepping into Maori Spirituality." In Helen Bergin and Susan Smith. Eds. *He Kupu Whakawairua Spirituality in Aotearoa New Zealand: Catholic Voices*. Auckland: Accent Publications, 2002, 41-43.

generic sense of *tangata* (the human being, the people) begins in another set of relationship with *Io-Matua-kore* (the parentless one), God (*Atua*) the source of all *whanaungatanga*. The third set of right relationship with *whenua* (land), in all its physical and spiritual dimensions, brings a person into intimate relationship with God and the universe.

*Papatūānuku*, the traditional personified name for Earth, and *whenua*, the common name, encompass all its geographical and physical features. The sky and the heavens, the stars, the sun and the moon, the winds and the like are understood to have an influence on the *whenua*. Plants, trees, birds, animals, sea creatures and all living organisms “find their place within a providential ordering of creation.”<sup>3</sup> The one word *whenua* means both the land and the human placenta. In Maori consciousness, then, these three sets of right relationship – with people, God and land – are interrelated systematically and dynamically. If one enhances or diminishes one’s relationship with God, one’s relationship with the people and with the land is also enhanced or diminished.

In this understanding, right relationship is a verb. The causative prefix, *whaka* suggests “making” and turns the noun, *whanaungatanga* (right relationship) into the verb, *whakawhanaungatanga* meaning “making right relationship” in a series of interconnected relationships with God, creation and people. Consequentially, in the Maori world, a speaker begins a *mihi* (speech) by acknowledging God, creation and the people to situate themselves within their *whakapapa* (genealogy). A speaker greets the land on which one stands and identifies oneself by naming one’s tribal mountain and river. Family and tribal affiliation are made with people present. In the recitation of genealogies or stories about the physical and spiritual world, people celebrate and deepen their identity.

These interconnected relationships of “making right relationship,” particular to the Maori worldview and sustained among them over a changing story, is found in indigenous people worldwide. This worldview, for example, in the face of colonial, economic and environmental injustice in Kenya inspired the Green Belt Movement founder and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai to empower women to plant trees for fuel, shade and food. An international movement of indigenous peoples, First Peoples Worldwide states: “we are descended from the pre-colonial/pre-invasion inhabitants of our region. We maintain a close tie to our land in both our cultural and economic practices. We suffer from economic and political marginalization as a minority group. A group is considered Indigenous if it defines itself that way.”<sup>4</sup>

Genealogies preface the stories of biblical characters (Gn 5-9; 11:10-32). If the story of Jesus did not begin by asserting his identity through his genealogy, Matthew’s original readers would have been surprised for their interest in ancestry flowed from their tribal origins as God’s people. Matthew’s first two words, *biblos geneleos* may be translated as “the book of the genealogy.”

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<sup>3</sup> Henare Tate, *He Puna Iti i te Ao Mārama: A Little Spring in the World of Light*. Auckland: Libro International, 2012, 39, 58, 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> First Peoples Worldwide <http://firstpeoples.org>

These words are together in only two places in the Greek Bible where they suggest the beginning of the heavens and the earth (Gn 2:4) and signify the genealogy of the descendants of Adam (5:1). Thus, Matthew places Jesus in God's renewal of creation and inserts him into a history and people. Some ancestors are less than savoury signalling that Jesus will choose sinners over the just. Unknown characters anticipate the reign of God where the insignificant and unknown become disciples. Socially, economically and culturally marginal Gentile women outsiders ensured the lineage which from Jesus will be born continued and foreshadow his mission.

In this Year of Consecrated Life, religious are invited to: "Wake up the World." Celebrating and deepening our identity is at the heart of this call. To articulate our identity with people, God and creation through genealogy is a means of making right relationships.

Catherine McAuley insisted that her sisters be centred in God. The tender mercy of God and the love that exists among sisters and those with whom they minister and live permeated her life and instructions. Catherine insisted that local sisters knew their local area and its particularities best. Place is extended now to environment and creation which were arguably implicit when she prayed psalms such as Ps 136 where creation comes into being through God's steadfast love (*hesed*) which endures forever. *Hesed* is often associated with hospitality especially in the sense of meaning right relationship between host and guest. This richly layered concept which holds layers of grace, justice, fidelity and compassion is expressed in various words by translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Among these is the word for justice (*dikaiosumē*) which often translates the Hebrew word for justice (*sedeqah*) in the sense of right relationship.

Relational, action-orientated mercy draws me into my genealogy to deepen my identity by *whakawhanaungatanga* /making right relationship with God, people and creation in a local and global context. I come before my God of mercy ... I greet the land which lies before me... I greet the living universe... I acknowledge Kai Tahu (local tribe) ... I am Kathleen. I am Pakeha<sup>5</sup> descended from Irish and English ancestors who came to Aotearoa in the 1860s-70s ... I acknowledge those who have gone before me ... My Nga Whaea Atawhai Sisters of Mercy genealogy began in this land in 1850... Prior to the arrival of my ancestors, the founding document of our nation Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) was signed in 1840 ... I continue ... I invite my reader to begin ...

### Questions for Reflection

1. Pa Henare Tate recalls: "The further we go back in *whakapapa* [genealogy] ... the richer is our identity." Reflect on the interconnection of your genealogy. Consider the following relationships:

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<sup>5</sup> Describes a New Zealander of European descent.

- a. my biblical mercy relationship with God
- b. my relationship with the physical and spiritual dimensions of land and universe
- c. my relationship with people – family, mercy, female

You may find it helpful to weave these into a speech (*mihi*) to share in your reflection group.

2. How does reflection on my genealogy draw me into “making right relationship” with God, people and creation in my context?

*I acknowledge Tui Cadigan RSM and Gabrielle Huia who read my work.*

- Pa Henare Tate recalls: “The further we go back in *whakapapa* [genealogy] ... the richer is our identity.” Reflect on the interconnection of your genealogy. Consider the following relationships:
  - a. my biblical mercy relationship with God
  - b. my relationship with the physical and spiritual dimensions of land and universe
  - c. my relationship with people – family, mercy, female

You may find it helpful to weave these into a speech (*mihi*) to share in your reflection group.

- How does reflection on my genealogy draw me into “making right relationship” with God, people and creation in my context?

### **Resources for Reflection on Whakawhanaungatanga – Making Right Relationship**

First Peoples Worldwide <http://firstpeoples.org>

Lawson, Veronica. RSM. 'Mercy the enduring and liberating love of our womb-compassionate God', can be [viewed online here](#) (1:20:39). A web-ready version of the booklet can be [downloaded here](#) (11pps; PDF)

Rushton, Kathleen. RSM. “[Whakapapa of Jesus.](#)” *Tui Motu InterIslands*. December 2014, 26-27.

Rushton, Kathleen. RSM “[But she said...: A Female Genealogy](#)” (Matt 15:21-28). *Tui Motu InterIslands*. August 2011, 26-27.

[http://issuu.com/tuimotu/docs/tui\\_motu\\_2011\\_august1?e=0](http://issuu.com/tuimotu/docs/tui_motu_2011_august1?e=0)

Tate, Pa Henare. [He Puna Iti i te Ao Mārama: A Little Spring in the World of Light](#). Auckland: Libro International, 2012, 38-40.

Tate, Pa Henare. “[Stepping into Maori Spirituality.](#)” In Helen Bergin and Susan Smith. Eds. *He Kupu Whakawairua Spirituality in Aotearoa New Zealand: Catholic Voices*. Auckland: Accent Publications, 2002, 37-53.

Mohi, Hinewehi - Lines in the Sand

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=HcQ4UITMyaA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=HcQ4UITMyaA)

Wainwright, Elaine. RSM [Extravaqant Mercy—A New Story in an Ecological Key](#)

*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* <http://takingrootfilm.com/>

Maathai, Wangari. *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Doubleday Image, 2010).

[http://apalicp.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/9/3/13937794/replenishing\\_the\\_earth\\_14.pdf](http://apalicp.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/9/3/13937794/replenishing_the_earth_14.pdf)  
<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/books>

Dirt! The Movie Trailer 2 minutes <https://youtu.be/iWaabJ2JxUM>

Dirt! The Movie (FULL) 1 hour 20 minutes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvrww8iMI-A&spfreload=10>

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Kathleen Rushton RSM (Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand) for Mercy Internal Association's Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published July 2015.**  
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## **8. *"It is a SPECIAL FAVOUR of God to be made SERVANTS of his suffering poor"* ("Sayings") by Helena O'Donoghue rsm**

That was the deep conviction, mission and joy of Venerable Catherine McAuley. So strong was her awareness of this call-blessing that she had to be re-assured by Archbishop Murray before making her profession in George's Hill that she and her companions would be able to continue their ministry out on the streets. It was an imperative for her, an articulation of 'charism' - Mercy charism, a compelling urge of pure love to push the boundaries and go wherever need called.

The term 'service' is common in our vocabulary. It has many connotations, some wonderful and some painful. Sadly, it can still refer to oppression, menial tasks, second-class citizenship, and even perfunctory activity. Power and humiliation often accompany it. Such 'service' at best is without dignity or hope, and at worst is close to negation and even slavery. 'And Jesus wept' at his city's hard heart.

Mercy service is delivered by people of good will and compassion, who set out to bring healing, liberation, enablement and inclusion wherever possible. Catherine McAuley was one such person, imbued with the Spirit of Jesus whose touch made the 'blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the poor get good news'. Of himself Jesus said "The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve, and give his life for the ransom of many" – self-donation and sacrificial exchange are the primary elements of 'mercy' service. Catherine said it her way - "all I ever wanted was to serve God and his poor ones". She gave her all as 'ransom' from poverty and sickness for many, providentially opening Baggot St on the feast of Our Lady of Ransom!

Mercy service eliminates the dichotomy between 'master and servant'. In the 'Washing of the Feet' scene at the last Supper, Jesus, the Lord and Master, acts as the menial servant. With towel and basin he effectively turned the tables as he made himself the servant, and the disciples (or anyone in need) his masters. They were tired and dusty, yet he took their feet in his hands performing a very personal and comforting task. He tells them to do likewise, indicating that the role of master and servant in God's realm must always be interchangeable. Wherever need calls, then that need, whether from within the human family or from our earth-home, becomes our master, and we are drawn to serve in humility and compassion, personally and immediately. In her final moments, conscious of the immediate grief and uncertainty she would leave behind, Catherine suggested a 'good cup of tea' be provided to comfort the Sisters after she was gone. Over the tea they would talk, weep, tell stories, build their communal relationships and prepare for the future. Not unlike Jesus at the last Supper, she wanted to tend to their very basic and mournful pain. That 'human touch' so characteristic of Catherine, would always be a shining quality in any Mercy service. From the choosing of the 'seven deacons' in the Acts, to the visit of

Pope Francis to Lampedusa we know that the ‘widow and the orphan’ are always God’s special concern and may not be set aside in the midst of other pressing activities.

In this *Year of Consecrated Life* we take encouragement from Catherine’s status as Venerable. Through this honour we are assured that her life of ‘service’ is of the very ‘stuff’ of holiness. She was filled with “an ardent desire to be united with God and serve his suffering poor”. The dominant element of that holiness is her selfless commitment to the ‘least’ of God’s people in 19<sup>th</sup> century Dublin, Ireland and England. She ‘wept’ at the neglect of poor children, the plight of vulnerable young women, and the distress of the sick. All her resources, opportunities and decisions were about serving them, in small ways and large, breaking new ground, making life better for them. She would rather be ‘cold and hungry’ than that the poor in Birr or Limerick, in Dublin, Cork or London would be deprived of any consolation she could give. She was at one with a tender God who revealed his nature to Moses – “I have seen their affliction ...and I mean to deliver them” – and at one with Jesus who said ‘you did it to me’ whenever another was helped.

The call to service is always heard in the context of time and place. Mercy Sisters have provided a wide range of creative and prophetic services for almost two hundred years. We have crossed ethnic, cultural, economic, religious, political and ecological boundaries. With readiness and yearning, in time of war and disaster, in places of poverty and neglect, Sisters and co-workers have served immigrants, prisoners, those trafficked, and many others, whether at the sophisticated frontiers of human development or among the ‘poor ones’ discarded along the way. This ‘service’ has been transforming as Sisters with a ‘nose for pain’ set out with an urgent sense of purpose to restore dignity and well-being. Mercy service is the concrete, visible outflow from a heart shaped by the kindness of our inclusive God. Such service is missionary, is evangelical, is prophetic and is at the core of Christianity and especially of Consecrated life. It brings together the capacities of individuals and communities to enhance the quality of all life in our human and ecological existence. It is truly a privilege to be enabling God’s salvation – healing, growth, inclusion - be fulfilled.

However, we have also learned to our deep regret that culture can be extraordinarily blinding, and that our service can be marred by a lack of reflection and critique as to its quality. Just as earlier centuries accepted slavery, so our own blindness to the hurtful ‘lay sister’ pattern within, and our failure at times to adequately protect vulnerable women and children in our care, were devastating lessons in recent times. In these instances our service was found wanting – not truly imbued with compassion for the weakest – and so our ‘mea culpa’ will be an accompanying thread of humility in the years ahead.

Yet, Catherine’s ‘special favour’ is still the characteristic of practical Mercy service: ‘the poor need help today not next week’. Catherine saw no other meaning to her life or that of her companions. She devised and built new possibilities for those disadvantaged around her and motivated others to be involved. As if to ensure no ‘religious fervour’ should ever close off direct service to the ‘poor, sick and uneducated’ she established it as essential to our core identity by the adoption of a ‘fourth vow’. In spite of strong monastic influences over the succeeding decades this vow remained in place, warding off enclosure. After Vatican 2 the very nature of apostolic religious life was deemed to include concrete service as described in *Perfectae Caritatis*, and to be inherent in the profession of the evangelical counsels. Today, the ‘fourth vow’ is still explicit in many revised Mercy Constitutions and implied in others.

Mercy service tomorrow will differ from that of yesterday. The massive flocks of destitute migrants, the wasteful pollution of our earth, the crisis of homelessness, and other deep scars, will draw forth new and surprising ways of re-enacting God's mercy in our midst, in collaboration with others. Even in our diminished state we can express this 'special favour', this 'ardent desire' to serve the 'least of our brethren' in small ways. The insistent inner bell of Mercy charism will not to be muffled, but with loud ringing will move us afresh, in the words of Pope Francis, to 'wake up the world' to the repeated cry of God's beloved poor and the new cry of our suffering earth.

Helena O'Donoghue RSM (The Congregation) for Mercy Internal Association's Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. Published **August** 2015.

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## 9. Respect - A 'Looking Again', an Enlarging of Love by Jo O'Donovan rsm

*Respect* – the ground of the word is the Latin, *re-spicere* which means 'to look again'. We naturally look to others for the comfort of likeness. We are less threatened when the personality of another person, their race, skin colour, in short, their narrative, fits in with ours. But the pluralism of our world today invites us beyond such boundaries. After the two world wars of the twentieth century, the Jewish philosopher, Levinas, tells us that the real face of our period has to be 'the face of the other', and it is that face that commands, 'do not kill me'; that insists 'do not reduce me or anyone else to your narrative.' The haunting personalist philosophy of Levinas and his colleagues has laid the groundwork for the pluralism that is the mark of our times. If we are to avoid wars, if we are to live in peace in our time, and simply be human we must allow the many and different others to have space in our lives. And we need not be afraid of difference. Even in ordinary everyday relationships, we do not understand unless we *understand differently*, that is, unless we are changed in some way by our meeting with and knowing of the other. This advice of David Tracy is given in the context of inter-religious dialogue. He implies that we cannot relate to other believers unless we look again and again at the other, unless we make room for them in our lives, and even risk having our self-understanding radically transformed. In short, our relationship with others is always a 'looking again', an enlarging of love, a practice of respect.

But to get a sense of the broad spectrum of how to put respect into practice, I now turn to Jonathan Sacks, recently retired Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth. Sacks' family came to England from Poland after the second world war. A distinguished British philosopher and spiritual writer, his writings are concerned with difference, with pluralism, with community and respect for the other. In an influential book in which he analyses the social developments he has experienced in Britain, he asks how can we build a home in society today? Indeed, reading Sacks one is also moved to ask, how can we also build a home in the community that we as religious sisters are committed to today?

Sacks' thought is structured around three models of social relationship: *The Country House, the Hotel, the Covenant Home*. Britain has always been welcoming to strangers, and his family, like so many others found shelter there. The British were kind, but in the early period of immigration, the distinction between the English hosts and guests was taken for granted. Immigrants were expected to assimilate to English ways, but

they were still looked upon as outsiders. Sacks summed it up as a relationship of hierarchy and patronage in which the prevailing identity was that of the host.

However, the unprecedented influx of immigrants to the country meant that the *Country House* model of relationship could no longer contain them. In good faith and responding to what was now fast becoming a pluralistic society, Britain extended itself to allow for and welcome the actual newness of other identities, but somehow in doing so cut its many guests loose from the prevailing system. Rather hopefully, the new approach was called *multiculturalism*. Sacks calls it the *Hotel Model*. One does not give up identity in order to live in a hotel. One pays the price and gets a room. One is free to do what one likes so long as one does not interfere with the other guests. But one does not really belong, as there is nothing to belong to, nothing to be loyal to. Since there is no overarching meaning, neither is there any shared language and conversation becomes impossible. Sacks sees the *Hotel* as a bleak place of non-communicating rooms, a place of individualism and indeed of loneliness. Here one is respected as an individual, but since one does not belong, elements of intolerance can make themselves felt, more so than in the *Country House* where at least one belonged as a guest.

Belonging and relationship are essential to being human says Sacks. Here he draws upon his Jewish upbringing as sourced in the Hebrew Bible. He says it is only under the space of the Transcendent God, in whose image we are made, that we are free to truly belong in a way that respects human freedom and difference. And so he proposes that the renewal of western society in the face of pluralism today will only come about in realising that our fundamental belonging to one another is sourced in our belonging to God who is covenanted with us and before and with whom we are covenanted with each other. He says that it is within this space of the divine ambience that earth becomes what it is meant to be, to cite Pope Francis, 'our common home', and our societies will have a universality in which diversity may flourish. Thus, a Home in this sense is a place where, he says, it is possible to truly belong and yet be different. A Home is held together by the contributions of all to its over-riding task – *the common good*. A Home does not have to sort out interpersonal issues between members. Its primary task is to promote the *common good*. And the common good is promoted by the integral working together of all the members through their contributions and gifts. Thus, the space of the Home is a larger one than 'me' and 'mine.' Each person as covenanted with God and each other is entitled to live in this larger space. In such a space they will flourish. And in such a space they will find respect.

Respect is what Catherine McAuley wanted for the poor and marginalized of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dublin and beyond. She wanted them to be brought in to some belonging in society and to experience being in the world as a Home. It is interesting to note how her biographer, Mary C. Sullivan, punctuates the life of Catherine around three major decisions, each in a way having to do with making a Home for the poor, for women and

children who through poverty and lack of education were excluded from society. The first Home and basis for her work of mercy was with the elderly couple, the Anglican Mr O'Callaghan and his Quaker wife. The word 'ecumenism' did not exist in Catherine's time, but she moved easily in ecumenical circles, having Protestant relatives herself, and even experiencing from them diatribes against her 'popish practices.' The greater good which was her vision of mercy freed her to cross boundaries and to bond with others, even the unlike, simply in their goodness and humanity. Thus her presence was a source of blessing for this elderly couple, as was theirs for her. In the O'Callaghan home she came to love the Bible, something that had been neglected in her Catholic upbringing and using their gate lodge and financial help she launched into her first project of mercy. As we know, her second Home was the Baggot St premises and House of Mercy which she founded with the fortune left to her by the O'Callaghans. During this period Catherine showed herself to be a skilled public relations person and development officer. Her third was the Congregation of Mercy Sisters, which as we know was destined to become an ever expanding Home.

Catherine would tell us we can be undaunted in the face of diversity today. Chaos is not the primary word, she would say, but rather the providence of God. For Jonathan Sacks we live in the space of the covenanting God; for Catherine we live in the domain of divine providence. 'The Lord and Master of our House and Home is a faithful Provider. Let us never desire more than enough. He will give you that and a blessing.' Thus, it was her confidence in the providential mercy of God that enabled her to graciously welcome and accommodate the needs of those who were different from her. She distrusted systems and decisions taken by committees remote from concrete experiences. 'The poor need help now,' she said. Always moved by this larger love and indeed risk-taking love, her model was Jesus in the gospels. We get the sense from her letters that she did not have to depend on the high dogmatic truths in order to know that in Christ God was self-emptied in the human. Possibly because of her merciful heart, gospel incidents, such as the 'bent over' Saviour washing the feet of the disciples (Jn 13:2-11) spoke to her not only of the presence of divinity in Christ but also of the humility of divine way of relating to others. This way is also one of risk; It is the larger love, a way of 'respect', 'looking again' to see more because always there is more to see in our diverse world.

### **Questions for Reflection on Respect**

1. Reminisce personally or together on your experience of religious life. Has it been for you variously *a Country House, a Hotel, a Home*?
2. The larger domain of Home / Community is possible only within the domain of divine presence. What possibilities does this larger view open up for living in community?
3. The primary task of the Home – Community is the common good. What does this mean?
4. How does diversity flourish in a Home / Community?

### Resources for Reflection on Respect:

Mary C. Sullivan rsm. [\*The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley\*](#). Washington D.C. The Catholic University of America Press: Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012.

Mary C. Sullivan rsm. [\*Welcoming the Stranger: The Kenosis of Catherine McAuley\*](#).  
Keynote address at Xavier University of Chicago, June 15, 1996. Published in MAST, vol 6, no 3, Summer 1996. (8pps; PDF)

Jonathan Sacks, [\*The Home We Build Together\*](#). Continuum, 2007.

Jonathan Sacks, [\*The Dignity of Difference\*](#). Continuum, 2003.

David Tracy, [\*Dialogue with the Other: the inter-Religious Dialogue\*](#). Louvain: Peeters, 1990.

Jo O'Donovan rsm, [\*Understanding Differently: Christianity and the World Religions\*](#).  
Dublin: Veritas, 2012.

Jo O'Donovan RSM (The Congregation) for Mercy International Association's Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published September 2015.**

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## Mercy Craving Realisation by Lynda Dearlove rsm

Imagine bedding down every night sheltered from the wind and rain only by a ragged make-shift tent. Imagine having to sleep in groups of six in that tent, huddled together out of fear of being sexually assaulted during the night. Imagine, upon waking, having to use the same few filthy toilets that are shared by thousands of others. Imagine this magnified by circumstances such as menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, the responsibility for children. Imagine, then, having to queue hours for food to ease your hunger. Imagine, if you can, living with the constant fear of violence, whether from the authorities who wish you were not here, or from the prostitution rings and smuggling gangs which are becoming more prevalent with every passing day. Imagine, finally, having to live this life whilst still dealing with the almost unspeakable horrors that you experienced on your journey to get here

For many of the between 200 and 400 women at any one time living in 'the Jungle' refugee camp in Calais, they need not imagine, for this is their reality. Sexual abuse and violence are used as strategies to deprive women and girls of their civil rights. During their dangerous journeys, many women and young girls are exposed to sexual violence, rape, prostitution and trafficking. Women and girls are being forced into sex in exchange for food and housing.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, for all of the media attention these past few months on the refugees living in Calais, these women have been largely absent. We have become used to the images of the many young men who live in the camp, and who themselves have experienced traumas that we can barely comprehend, but the coverage has overlooked the very particular experiences of women living in the camp, which is only 20 or so miles from British shores.

On September 24<sup>th</sup> this year, our feast of "Our Lady of Mercy" found me in 'the Jungle' camp as part of a Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) delegation.<sup>2</sup> It coincided with the feast of Eid – so there was a sense of celebration as we waded through mud between the small encampments of makeshift tents sitting in the midst of waterlogged scrub. As we passed people, we acknowledged them often repeating back the greetings of "Eid Mubarak" and smiling in response to the proffered sweets. Around me, I saw for myself the conditions in which these women are now being forced to exist. With space only for 80 in the Jules Ferry centre (a facility funded by the French government which, in addition to providing accommodation for 80 women and children also provides one hot meal per day, as well as some showers and toilets), most women in the camp are being left without the support which they so clearly require. Those who are unaccompanied by male family workers are huddled in small clusters either within cultural/national groups "protected" by the collective (men) or in more secluded places – such as the small encampment I saw behind the church and library!

In a camp where, we were told, a significant proportion of people have trauma-related mental health issues, no psychological support is available aside from access to one psychiatrist once every month. For women who have fled war, torture and persecution, or who may be the victims of sexual or physical violence, this is not sufficient. Whilst there is a medical clinic in the camp run by Medicines du Monde (Doctors of the World), resources are limited and the incredible efforts of medical workers in the camp cannot mask the fact that women (some of whom, we were told, have become pregnant in recent months) are being left without the essential and particular medical support that they

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/missing-women-of-the-mediterranean-refugee-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> <http://enews.mercyworld.org/e-news/100-1bf833a1/editions/196-6c91d0d7/user-assets/files/Sr%20Lynda%20-%20Calais.pdf>

require. The simple lack of drinking water causes kidney problems for many pregnant and nursing women. For this to be the situation for women in Europe in 2016 is as shocking as it is shameful.

At a recent protest held by women in the camp, a sign read: "*The Jungle is not for us. The Jungle is for animals.*"<sup>3</sup> For the women I met and saw in Calais, life in 'the Jungle' is unsustainable. Without access to the most basic amenities, without the most basic support which they require, and stuck in a transitory, inhumane and dangerous existence on a patch of wasteland outside Calais, hope of a better life will soon fade.

In contrast, at the same time the previous week I was also in the midst of a memorable experience, however this time I was sitting within the sumptuously decorated Clement VIII audience hall in the Vatican awaiting the arrival of Pope Francis. It was the culmination of the five day International Symposium on the Pastoral Care of the Road/Street, organised by the Pontifical Council for the Care of Migrants and Itinerant People to develop and propose to the Church a Plan of Action in response to increasingly challenging phenomenon of women and children earning a living and/or living on the roads and the streets, and their families.

The symposium was made up of delegates from 42 countries plus 12 Catholic Institutions and religious congregations, tasked to produce the plan in the light of the Teachings of Pope Francis, the conclusions of the 8 international and continental meetings on the same reality which many of the delegates had also taken part in (I had been involved in the European conference) and their current expertise and experience.

Pope Francis is well known for his simple two roomed apartment in a Vatican guesthouse rather than the more lavish papal apartments and his desire to be an ordinary pastor despite the enormity of his task. It was this ordinary pastor that our group of 42 church social action leaders came meet and greet albeit we were a bit overawed by the sumptuously decorated Clement VIII audience hall. The Vatican's grandiose buildings give testimony to a time when Popes lost their way and became powerful princes with armies and sumptuous palaces rather than followers of Jesus, carpenter's son who had experienced a migrants life with his family when they fled through Egypt, an itinerant moral teacher, a person of the "road" travelling about without status or worldly power and who challenged a nation's leaders to have mercy, compassion and do justice for the wretchedly poor people of God. Pope Francis is trying to revive a prophetic voice in the Church on behalf of the downtrodden and the marginalized and challenge the rich and powerful. Sadly too many of prelates, bishops and clergy have sided with the rich rather than the poor in the world today and Pope Francis is not their favourite. But by his example he will entice them back to follow and imitate Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter.

When the side doors of the hall opened a group of elderly distinguish visitors, of high status, dressed in morning suits and tuxedos emerged in solemn procession. They had been present in the previous audience, which also included the Italian president, and were making their exit through the hall where we were waiting. Everything was choreographed exquisitely. They were distinguished looking elderly elites. They passed in silence wearing gold chains; medals and ribbons. A squad of colourfully dressed papal guards lined up in front of us to form a ceremonial guard of honour for them not us. Then they were all gone.

A few minutes later Pope Francis came in to meet us. He looked weary and why wouldn't he after listening to some boring speech or conferring some award perhaps on the previous delegation. They are unavoidable duties of Vatican protocol. From our group of simply dressed folks there came a spontaneous applause to greet Pope Francis and immediately he lit up, smiled instead of taking his chair he came over close to where I was sitting and he happily greeted Cardinal Veglio (the head of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of migrants and itinerant people) who was standing nearby.

Then Francis took his seat and the cardinal gave an introduction. There was a joke, Francis gave a cheerful laugh, and then he listened seriously as our work defending the dignity of the exploited and abused children and women was explained. But it was clear he knew it already. This is a mission that is close to his heart and in the past on several occasions he made statements and has done a lot of action behind the scenes to make church, government leaders and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-324770/What-life-REALLY-like-migrant-women-children-trapped-Calais-Jungle-camp.html>

officials wake up and challenged them to address the crisis of many millions of displaced people, migrants and refugees and put ending human trafficking on top of their political and social agenda. Within in this he has called for an end to human trafficking and exploitation of children and women who live on the street, recognising that they are the most vulnerable to human traffickers and exploitation through prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis was well briefed and prepared, his engaged body language and non-verbal responses during the Cardinals presentation of the fruits of our labours indicated his understanding and agreement, and his address to us left with no doubts of the concern he had for women and children on the streets plus his commitment to the churches imperative to address those needs.

We knew from his words, looks and gestures that this rare and unusual meeting with us was a direct endorsement and support of our mission coming straight from the Pope himself. Getting the backing of this man of God and people with immense popularity and influence was the greatest gift for women and children whose lives are tied to the streets. His words came from the heart more than from the text. He spoke to us with appreciation of commitment “to care for and promote the dignity of these women and children” and encouragement to persevere in our work with “confidence and apostolic zeal” and “not be disheartened by the difficulties and challenges encountered”. He waved his arm, he gestured strongly and his face and voice rang with conviction and the power of love and compassion for the plight experienced by women and children earning a living and/or living on the roads and the streets:

*“The often sad realities which you encounter are the result of indifference, poverty family and social violence and human trafficking. .... every child abandoned and forced to live on the streets at the mercy of criminal organizations is a cry rising up to God, who created man and woman in his own image. It is an indictment of the social system, which we have criticized for decades but we find hard to change in conformity with criteria of justice. .... Street children and women are not numbers, or “packets” to be traded; they are human beings, each with his or her own name and face, each with a God-given identity. We can never refrain from bringing to all, and especially the most vulnerable and underprivileged, the goodness and the tenderness of God our merciful Father. Mercy is the supreme act by which God comes to meet us; it is the way which opens our hearts to the hope of an everlasting love.”*

He ended his address to us with the following blessing “I entrust you and your service to Mary, Mother of Mercy. May the sweetness of her gaze accompany the efforts and firm purpose of those who care for street children and street women. Upon each of you I cordially invoke the Lord’s blessing.” After which we were all greeted personally.

Yes, the connections between the two events are very obvious in terms of the plight of the most vulnerable of women and children. But perhaps more so for us as sisters of mercy as we move between the year of Consecrated life and the Holy Year of Mercy, the Mercy link between these two events is more notable. To explore this further I need to turn the clock back further to Catherine McAuley.

When Catherine was asked for the necessary qualities in a person seeking to become a Sister of Mercy, she began her reply with “an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor”.<sup>5</sup> Thus nuances of the interplay between a contemplative heart and compassionate spirit within our Mercy Charism were already embraced within these dozen words long before the term “contemplation in action” was coined! When taken alongside other words from Catherine e.g. from her Retreat Instructions “What advantage are our works to God? But our working hearts He longs for, and her pleads for them with touching earnestness”,<sup>6</sup> “Need is our Cloister”<sup>7</sup> and within the “Spirit of the Institute” “We ought to have great confidence in God in these discharge of all these offices of mercy, spiritual and corporal – which constitute

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<sup>4</sup> In his address to the members of the General Assembly of United Nations on 25 September 2015 Pope Francis said “Our world demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical and constant, concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences: human trafficking, the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labour, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism and international organized crime. Such is the magnitude of these situations and their toll in innocent lives, that we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism which would assuage our consciences. We need to ensure that our institutions are truly effective in the struggle against all these scourges.”

<sup>5</sup> Letter 38, p 77, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>6</sup> p.73, Sister M. Teresa Purcell RSM (ed.) The Retreat Instructions of Mother M. Catherine McAuley (1952)

<sup>7</sup> Reference unknown

*the business of our lives*<sup>8</sup> it would seem to me that Catherine has left us a number of clues regarding how to navigate new and emerging needs, particularly as they relate to women and children.

Catherine's own actions give us further evidence of how we might discover within us a Mercy response to need that cannot be ignored. In her vows Catherine takes the bold step of amending the usual formula of the day by spelling out that we are "established for the Visitation of the Sick Poor, and charitable instruction of poor females"

Catherine stood out from the other philanthropists of her day primarily because of her ability to imagine life differently. In her article from Listen focused on "The Business of Our Lives", Mary Reynolds rsm states "*Many of her contemporaries were prepared to provide handouts but could not imagine or even desire a society where those who were oppressed, marginalised or excluded would find a central role and a sense of belonging in that very society. Catherine's genius was that she could stand as a bridge between the rich and the poor, employing whatever advantage her own background and her connection with people of influence afforded her in the relief and advancement of poor people. She had a particular ability to address immediate need in a practical and loving way while at the same time addressing the systemic issues that underpinned those needs.*"<sup>9</sup>

Catherine's expression of living out her vows in relation to the "Visitation of the Sick Poor" moved her from the private sphere of bringing food and comfort to people in their own homes into the public sphere of workhouse hospitals, within they were initially treated with contempt and refused access to sick "not of their own persuasion". The care shown to the sick must have become recognised within a very short time though because only months after their founding, when the devastating epidemic of cholera struck Dublin in May 1832, the Health Board appealed to Catherine for help. Her immediate approach to Dr Murray for leave to attend the Depot Hospital, as described in Clare Moore's letter from Bermondsey in 1845, gives a clear example of Catherine living out her own words "*The poor need help today not next week*". Once given, for seven months the Sisters of Mercy worked in four-hour shifts at a makeshift cholera hospital set up on Townsend Street, in a slum area. During its peak hundreds died each day, within hours of being stricken. Catherine herself was there all day. Late one night, she carried home in her arms the new-born baby of a poor young woman who had just died of cholera. Catherine had "*such compassion on the infant that she brought it home under her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed in her own cell.*" But as no-one in Baggot Street could nurse the baby, "*the little thing cried all night, Revd. Mother could get no rest, so the next day it was given to someone to take care of*" – presumably a wet-nurse!

In the second area "charitable instruction of poor females", evidence shows that Catherine's "*approach to education was an offshoot of her ideals to empower the poor by providing them with necessary opportunities and to assist the emancipation of women through the medium of education.*"<sup>10</sup> We know from the Original Rule that Catherine the education of women as central to the mission of mercy: "The Sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found."<sup>11</sup> Additionally we know from archives and Catherine's writing that there is clear evidence that she set out to fully explore appropriate system of education prior to the establishment of the religious order, she visited France in 1825 whilst Baggot Street was being built and considered the French systems she saw alongside of what she saw in the Kildare Street Schools which were operating out of a British system. From within these she developed her own version of ministerial system through which senior pupils became salaried monitresses, in effect as assistant teachers. Baggot Street quickly thus gained status of a monitress training centre which provided assistant teachers to other establishments wishing to educate girls, which eventually led to Baggot Street being formally recognised as Ireland's first teacher Training School for Female Teachers in 1877. In addition to this in

<sup>8</sup> The Spirit of the Institute, p462, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>9</sup> The Business of Our Lives. By Mary Reynolds rsm. Listen, Vol. 27 No. ". 2009. P22

<sup>10</sup> The Business of Our Lives. By Mary Reynolds rsm. Listen, Vol. 27 No. ". 2009. P24

<sup>11</sup> Catherine McAuley – Original Rule and Constitution, Chapter 2, Article 5



1834 Catherine had the foresight to see that placing the poor schools within the evolving National School system would not prevent religious instructions and open up the possibility of the children gaining recognised qualifications whilst at the same time bringing in a guaranteed stipend per pupil of £40 per year! Alongside of this, within the House of Mercy, the young women who came for shelter were equipped with practical skills that would enable them to gain economic independence whilst also being enabled to grow in their faith.

And when in 1837 and 1838 the sacramental needs of the poor girls in the school on Baggot Street and the women in the House of Mercy were unmet because Father Walter Meyler, the vicar general, refused to assign them a regular, full-time chaplain, Catherine told John Hamilton, the archbishop's priest-secretary: "for ourselves we ask for nothing—but [for] our poor young women"—who now have to go into the city for Mass, and are not yet strong enough to resist the city's alluring solicitations. She grieved that they "are still about the streets, taking advantage of the irregularity which has been [unjustly] introduced among them".

Additionally in the Original Rule Catherine wrote of the centrality of the education of women as follows "The Sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found."

Catherine could have ignored the cries of the poor "invisible to rich of her day", she could have declined to found the Sisters of Mercy, she could have ignored needed works of mercy beyond the streets of Dublin, she could have said she was too old to venture such things, she could have turned down new foundations because, as she said, "*We are very near a Stop . . . a full Stop—feet and hands are numerous enough, but the heads are nearly gone*".<sup>12</sup> She could certainly easily have avoided volunteering to nurse for seven straight months during the cholera epidemic of 1832—on the grounds that there were only ten, mostly young, women in the Baggot Street community at that time, and they were already running a school for hundreds of poor girls and a House of Mercy for at least thirty homeless women. But she didn't.

It seems to me that her bold step of amending her vow formula which in legacy is our fourth vow, in my own vows professed as "to be of service to those in need", is not only the bridge between the Year of Consecrated Life and the Holy Year of Mercy, but is also our moral imperative to engage with biggest refugee crisis and movement of displaced people the world has ever experienced. Both women and men are victims of war and conflict, and are fleeing their homes but it often hits women and children the most. Climate change hits the poorest and most vulnerable people the most, a majority of which are women and girls. Fewer women make their way to a safer place. As already stated women and girls do not have the same opportunities as men and boys to cross borders and are more often left behind in conflict areas or refugee camps. A gender perspective has to be included in all refugee policies, and the issue has to be met in the Agenda 2030. Clearly UN Member States therefore have to allocate more resources for women's necessities in refugee camps and war zones. We can and should engage with this escalating humanitarian crisis at all levels. Initially by doing what we do best, responding to need in practical ways in our local area but more than that we can work collectively and across borders to ensure a gender perspective in all refugee policies, actions in conflict zones, refugee camps and movement of displaced people, plus during asylum processes and service provision within our own counties.

I think the words of Sister Joan McNamara rsm (deceased), encapsulate the challenge to us, to endeavour in the coming Holy Year of Mercy, to risk fully embracing of our fourth vow by following Catherine's example of becoming engrained with the smell of the sheep<sup>13</sup> through "mercy-ing"<sup>14</sup> to the needy in her midst.

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<sup>12</sup> Letter 94, p 151 The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis - March 28 during the chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis - During an interview in 2013, Pope Francis reflected that the first word of his Latin motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo*, didn't translate well into Italian or Spanish. To capture the sense he desired, the Pope coined a new word in Spanish—*misericordiando*. "Mercy-ing" in English.

## Joan McNamara rsm – Mercy Craving Realisation - “I can make all things new,” says the Lord”

I can lift you up  
out of the crumbling fragments of older days,  
free you from binding routine of past ways.

I can make all things new  
but not without pain –  
pain in you.

I cannot give you the new  
unless you loose your hold  
on safe, trusted ways of old.  
And between letting go and receiving,  
loss and grief give ground to faith and hope  
engendering loving risk and patient exploration.

I cannot fill your hands  
until you empty them.  
Then I can lift you up  
as I was lifted up  
(averse to it all,  
in loneliness, failure and pain  
on a cross of shame)  
into life’s fullness.

The process is old,  
old as the fruit-bearing grain.  
The fruit is always new.

Why do you loiter (without clear intent)  
in half-filled houses of a land  
where homelessness is crying pain?  
Why do you cling to serving yesterday’s need  
when the here and now anguish for Mercy?  
Why do you shore up the status quo,  
silent before inequality and pain  
when my fierce Word  
burns to be heard?  
Why do you patch, mend and maintain  
what is past effective repair  
when dismantlement is the only way  
to new possibilities demanding exploration  
and Mercy craving realisation?

Come, follow me, with open hands.  
I will lift you up and make you new

I give the final words to Catherine who exhorted us to keep on keeping on, because as Sisters of Mercy.....  
**We can never say "it is enough".<sup>15</sup>**

Lynda Dearlove RSM (Institute of Our Lady of Mercy) for Mercy International Association’s Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published October 2015. E:<mailto:lynda.dearlove@watw.org.uk>**  
[www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine McAuley - Familiar Instructions, p. 2



## 11. The Feminine Face of the God who does Justice by Sheila Curran rsm

Justice, as a term evokes a desire for order, fairness, equality, honesty, equity, integrity and even lawfulness. The prophet Isaiah tells us that justice is rooted in the very nature of God (40:14). The work for justice involves working for systemic change in the world order and in our church. When we engage in doing this we “wake up the world”. Catherine McAuley’s pursuit of justice for poor women and children led her to open the house of Mercy on Baggot St. She met resistance from the homeowners on Baggot Street as well as some clergy, notably Matthias Kelly, who said, “Who did this “upstart,” this “parvenu,” think she was?<sup>1</sup> Catherine’s persistence in seeking justice for the poor led her to found a congregation that today is present in forty-four countries and six continents. She certainly did “wake up the world” of her day. Just as in Catherine’s time, women today, across our world, are still crying out for justice in society and in our church. In writing this reflection on justice for the year of Religious Life I decided to focus on my condition as a woman, and that of others, poor women, in an effort to reflect on our persistent quest for life and the restoration of justice for the liberation of all of humanity. The biblical text that came to mind is that of **Luke 18:1-8** which I will use as the basis for my reflection.

This narrative gives us two main characters, namely the judge and the widow. The plot involves conflict resolution among other matters. The widow is seeking justice. It is obvious from this text that this judge is self-serving and obviously corrupt. How many times do we find ourselves in a similar context?

The story begins “in that city there was a widow who kept coming before the judge and saying “Grant me justice against my opponent” (Lk:18:3). The details of her case are not given. What we do know is that she is persistent. She continued to return to him and she was seeking justice. Persistence for justice brings truth to the forefront. It takes time and a lot of conviction, patience, and determination. The more people protest and insist that their voice be heard, the more people begin to listen to them. The only thing we know from the text is that she was eventually granted justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy The Life of Catherine McAuley*, (Dublin: Four Court Press 2012), 68.

This widow defies the notion of a defenceless woman. She is presented here as a strong and persistent woman. How many times she had to come before the judge we do not know. She was on her own. She would have had no status compared to that of the judge with whom she pleads. The woman's public demand for justice in front of the judge could be seen, in the society of the time, as a shameless act. But even so, she did not ask the man to speak for her, she had to recognise the power of her own voice. One wonders if it is her experience of the everyday reality that provokes her to seek justice. The desire to seek justice was so deep inside her that she was prepared to go for it alone. This would have been unusual, but so real, as even today many women seek justice alone. Obviously no one was prepared to help her. She had found her voice and she used it repeatedly to berate the judge in pursuing justice. No one is doing it for her. She becomes an agent of change. She discovers a deeper claim to have her equality as a human being recognised.

Luke refers to widows more frequently than other Gospels (2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 18; 3,5; 20:47; 21:2-3), often in passages that presuppose their economic helplessness in a male-dominated society.<sup>2</sup> But then again, we look at Anna who is a widow, an old woman but a prophetess, whom we are told spend eighty-four years prophesying in the temple. Just like Anna's persistent role as prophetess in the temple, the widow is persistent in her pursuit of justice. There is no age limited for being passionate and persistent about justice! The interesting thing is that people would have seen her come and go to the court as the text tells us that she kept returning to the judge (Lk:18: 3). Those in the court would have heard her. Yet she remained alone. This is often the case of those who pursue justice. While many may agree with an issue, very often onlookers do not see the issue as part of their problem. Therefore, the text is all the more impacting as this woman had an ability to keep on persisting even if it meant going it alone.

So how is her behavior viewed in the context? I am sure many thought she should keep silent or that she would give up sooner or later. After all she was challenging the judicial power system by demanding justice. The judge had not taken her request seriously otherwise he would have granted her justice immediately. Yet, perhaps because she did not keep silent, she was able to expose an unjust system while others had not the courage to do so. Institutions, which stand for justice, are often unjust. The widow's persistence highlights the need to see institutions that promote justice rather than treating the institutions themselves as manifestations of justice.

Given that it is the widow who seeks justice and is persistent until she finds it, sounds more like the image of God that we know from all of the biblical texts. So this woman is like the women in the parables of the yeast (Lk:13:20-21) and the lost coin (Lk:15:8-10) all of whom can be seen to represent God. This is an unexpected twist in

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Schaberg, "Luke" in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed Carol A Newson and Sharon H. Ringe, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 367.

the parable.<sup>3</sup> Not only do we have a feminine image of God being presented, but one that is also challenging unjust structures. This can be difficult for many people to accept. It can be less challenging to stay with the parable as a text for persistent prayer, where one must plead and beg God to act, because in that way one does not have to assume responsibility to change unjust situations. We can just sit back and wait until God acts. This text challenges us as it challenged those hearing the parable by showing that injustice is difficult to eradicate in human society. It also challenges our image of God. This woman embodies an image of God that takes the side of those who are poor and oppressed, a God who became flesh, a God who is inserted in a reality of life where justice is needed.

Many women throughout the world repeat the widow's persistent search for justice today. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkoh Karman received the Nobel peace prize in 2011 for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights. They had spent many years in this struggle and while their work has been recognised, their struggle for justice continues. There are the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires in Argentina, who started in 1977 to march every Wednesday around the pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo until justice is served. While there have been some advances, they still continue to march today. In fact they have been marching for so long now that they are known as the *Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo*<sup>4</sup>.

But the struggle for justice does not come without a price. One well-known example is that of Sr. Dorothy Stang, an American Notre Dame sister, who was murdered in 2005. She was well known for her deep mystical commitment to the integrity of creation. This led her to become an advocate for the rights of poor women and to defend the imperiled rain forest of Brazil. Dorothy was killed in the clash between two great projects affecting life and the economy. Before she was murdered Dorothy said to a friend, "I have learned that faith sustains you and I have also learned that three things are difficult: as a woman, to be taken seriously in the struggle for land reform; to stay faithful to believing that these small farmers will prevail in organising and carrying their own agenda forward; and to have courage to give your life in the struggle for change."<sup>5</sup> Dorothy is just one example of the many women across our world that lost their lives in the pursuit of justice. Those of us who do a theology that leads to political action or that threatens the security of the powerful run the risk of being threatened and even killed.

There have also been women theologians like Sr. Elizabeth Johnston, Sr. Ivone Gebara and Sr. Carmel McEnroy, to name a few, whose scholarly work "woke up the

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Reid, *Choosing The Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Minnesota: Collegville: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 192.

<sup>4</sup> Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo

<sup>5</sup> Roseanne Murphy, *Martyr of the Amazon : The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 2007) 122.

world” but each of them paid a price for lifting up women’s voices within our male dominated Church.

The interpretation given above of the parable of the persistent and courageous widow defies the image of a weak woman or the idea of persistent prayer as outlined by a number of scholars. This interpretation opens up the whole other image of who God is. The image of God as a woman who exposes an unjust system through her persistence can motivate and sustain many of us who are trying to do just that.

As Mercy woman we have to embody the church and make visible her cry for justice, peace, reconciliation and mercy within the church and society. It has to be concrete and effective, marked by our daily experience of being women, making use of our own spirituality and theology. As the book of Proverbs tells us “Drink the water from your own cistern, fresh water from your own well”(5:15). In being faithful to this we will “wake up the world” and the Church also.

### Reflection Questions Relating to Justice

- How does reflecting on the '*Feminine Face of a God who does Justice*' change the way you understand God?
- How can we in Mercy challenge our Church to become a “community of equals”?
- What concrete actions or attitudes will “wake up our world” today?

### Resources for your Further Reflection on the theme of Justice

Kavisha Mazzella: [Love and Justice Women’s Anthem](#). Song (06:38)

[They Killed Sr Dorothy](#). Short documentary clip (03:28)

[Homenaje a Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo](#). Documentary in Spanish (51:38)

Colleen Fulmer: [Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo](#). Song (02:38)

A message from Mary Robinson on [Women's Leadership on Gender and Climate Change](#) (02:36)

Barbara Reid, OP: Lecture on [Janet McKenzie's Women: Mother’s, Midwives and Missionaries](#) (40:02)

Aquino, María Pilar. [Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America](#). New York: Orbis Books, 2002.

Gebara, Ivone. [Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation](#). Augsburg Fortress, 2002.

Malone, Mary T. [The Elephant in the Church: A Woman’s Tract for our Times](#). Ireland: The Columba Press, 2014.

McEnroy Carmel. [Guests in their own House: The Women of Vatican II](#). New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

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## 12. Is there anything more extraordinary than the ordinary? Brenda Dolphin rsm

The ordinary is the bedrock of our daily lives. We associate the ordinary with the day to day, the usual, the normal, the commonplace. To quote Madeleine Delbrel (1938) who lived her life as a lay woman in the suburbs of Paris and who wrote eloquently and convincingly about the presence of God in the ordinary. “This is where we find God, among the ordinary people we meet with on our streets, among ordinary men and women, who have ordinary lives, ordinary illnesses, ordinary bereavements, ordinary houses and who wear ordinary clothes”. (*Nous autres gens des rues* O.C. t.7, 23-24).

The ordinary is what provides a safe anchoring space which holds and steadies us especially at times of crisis in our lives or in the lives of those around us. On all levels of our being we can only sustain short periods of intensity and difference. Sooner or later we will get back to “the ordinary”. After the tension and stress of a funeral in a family, there is nothing more comforting than to sit quietly with loved ones and drink a cup of tea together.

For many people there is nothing more “ordinary” than eating a piece bread. So that there can be bread there is the need for light, heat, water and land. There is need for human intervention to prepare the ground and plant the seed. Then when the grain ripens it must be harvested, taken to the mill to be ground into flour. Then the flour is taken to the bakery (or the home) where it undergoes a process of preparation and cooking until finally the bread is ready to eat. How ordinary is this whole process? If we take the example a step further, there is nothing more ordinary than a white wafer of bread; there is nothing less ordinary than Eucharist.

Living the ‘ordinary’ is the foundation stone that enables us to appreciate and open up to the ‘extraordinary’.

### **Ordinary Time Good News**

In the Liturgical Year, which gives a structure and rhythm to our deepening and developing relationship with God, the longest period of time is given over to *Ordinary Time*. The Church in her wisdom uses ordinary time over the three year period of the liturgical cycle to give us a chance to get to know Jesus intimately through a comprehensive reading of the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. *Ordinary time* then facilitates a quiet steady deepening of our relationship with Jesus through regular contact with him in the scriptures. This is what makes it possible for us to celebrate with joy the extraordinary moments of the liturgical year like the birth of Jesus as a human being at Christmas and his suffering, death and ultimate rising from the dead at Easter.

In the gospels themselves Jesus constantly uses ordinary images and examples to explain what he wants to say. He makes reference to sparrows and flowers, fig trees and vines, clouds and winds. He talks about searching for something lost and cleaning a house. He talks about sowing seed and caring for animals; he protects a child and he cooks breakfast. The gospels are so ordinary that a child can understand what is being taught and described. Yet, the gospels are so extraordinarily profound that not even the wisest in many lifetimes can plumb their depth.

### **Simplicity, Gospel ordinariness**

Gospel ordinariness and simplicity are synonymous with fundamental realities like humility, poverty, meekness and gentleness; simplicity in the sense of unaffectedness, as the absence of complication, as frankness, straightforwardness and integrity. To the extent that simplicity is removed from the gospel context, to that extent it loses something of its freshness and ordinariness. Evangelical simplicity in a word is characterized by childlikeness, unpretentiousness, plainness and ordinariness (***Simplicity and Ordinariness***: Cistercian Studies Series no. 61, 14)

### **Ordinary people**

People who live this gospel simplicity communicate tranquility, gentleness and strength in their ordinary day to day lives. Tranquility, gentleness and strength carry them through “the changes in the weather, the ups and downs of a journey, the inequalities of family and community life, emotional and professional disappointments, the sudden intervention of bad fortune or bad health, the rise and fall of our religious temperature”. (Evelyn Underhill, 1999, 73)

Catherine McAuley was one such ‘simple’ person. She liked the ordinary, the unobtrusive and is quoted as saying; “*How silently the great God works. Darkness is spread over the earth and light comes at dawn, yet there is never a sound of curtains being drawn or shutters being closed*”. This insight of Catherine is mirrored by Adrienne Von Speyr, in her book, ***The Handmaid of the Lord*** (1985, Ignatius Press, 43) where she notes that more excitement was generated around the conception of John the Baptist than about the conception of Jesus, emphasizing that God’s greatest miracles happen in silence and unobtrusiveness.

It is through her letters that Catherine McAuley’s ordinariness and gospel simplicity are revealed clearly and unequivocally. In one letter (Jan 4, 1841, to Cecelia Marmion) Catherine, with great good humour recounts the simple fact that they had “*to keep hot turf under the butter in order to be able to cut it*” because the weather was so cold in Birr in the winter of 1841. Her letters are full of anecdotes of ordinary everyday happenings; concern for somebody who is sick, rejoicing at someone’s success, sharing titbits of information and advice, commenting on someone’s behavior, delighting over a gift, and being devastated at the news of illness or a death. What makes her letters so attractive and readable is their unaffectedness and the warmth, friendliness, care for others and interest in the detail of the other person’s life that is evident in every line that she wrote. If, as J.H. Newman says, “a person’s life lives in his/her letters”, then Catherine’s letters portray a life of simplicity, warmth, humour, realism, love of people and an unswerving faith and trust in God.

It is through her very ordinariness that her strength of spirit and her holiness become visible. Her approach to living the corporal and spiritual works of mercy was simple and straightforward, as was her understanding of what it means to be merciful in the world in which one lives. She was aware that the poor need help today and



not next week. *“I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor of Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford”* (Letter to Mary Teresa White, November 1, 1838). If she saw someone in need, then she did what she could to help that person even if this meant inconvenience for herself as when she brought the homeless Mrs. Harper to live in Coolock and cared for her until her death.

Thérèse of Lisieux and Catherine McAuley are very alike in their ordinariness and simplicity. What C. de Meester says of Thérèse, can also be applied to Catherine; “by clinging to faithfulness in little things – the favoured ground of the poor, the simple, the realistic – she rescues holiness from the prejudice surrounding it” (*‘Actualité de Thérèse de Lisieux’, Carmel*, no. 16). Like Catherine McAuley before her, Thérèse knew “that the mercy of God would accompany her forever”. The last line of the last letter Thérèse wrote was, “He is Love and Mercy ... that is all! Thérèse like Catherine realized that if we do not love mercy for its own sake we will never choose it. If we do not want mercy independently of the benefits we hope from it, we will never choose it. These two women, the one in the intensity of the interior life enclosed in a Carmelite convent and the other in the practical application of a similar insight walking the streets of the poor areas of a city, both women in very different circumstances arrive at the same understanding that Mercy lies at the heart of the Gospel and reveals the new face of God; both women were acutely aware that it was for Mercy that Jesus choose to die.

### ***Mercy – a legacy of ordinariness***

What is the legacy of Catherine McAuley’s ordinariness to those who share in the charism of mercy that is hers? Something of Catherine’s ordinariness has grown into the DNA of mercy women. Being ordinary and down to earth, the mercy woman is not squeamish about what life asks of her. Usually a mercy woman is someone who, in any day to day situation will “tuck up her sleeves” and do what has to be done. The charism of mercy calls her to care for the poor and needy and she does not recoil from “getting her hands dirty” by scrubbing, washing, cooking, doing the messages, cleaning a room, bathing a person. This has always been a hallmark of the woman of mercy and continues to be so today even as the expression of mercy takes other forms like caring for the poor earth, the homeless, the trafficked, the migrant, lobbying for justice and peace, being a voice for the voiceless.

One of the effects of being present to the day to day ordinary round of life for the mercy woman is that she grows into simplicity, serenity and strength. She recognizes that our small and changing lives are part of a greater mystery, they are part of the life that is related to God and known by God. Slowly by slowly, like Catherine, like Thérèse her trust in God deepens. She becomes strong in her conviction that she and all the other souls that she loves so much have their abiding place in eternity where the meaning of everything she does and bears is understood. She accepts that God is greater than her heart, than her work and she remains serene in this certainty, “as a weaned child in its mothers arms” (Ps.131).

Being ordinary is possibly one of the most secure places from which to open out to life and to persevere in doing so, as it implies accepting oneself as one really is before God neither more nor less. Being ordinary in this way means that the human tendency to compare self with others takes a back seat. Being ordinary in this way allows the soul to live serenely and with hope and so energy is focused on loving, returning love for the Love that is first offered to us. Being ordinary in this way helps us to find God present in the clink of the teacups, the everyday beauty of the daisy, the cheeky chirp of the robin, the laughter of a child, the mischievous wisecrack of the octogenarian.

May we never allow false expectations to divert our attention from the abundance of grace that is to hand in the ordinary? May we embrace and live to the full our ordinary everyday lives sure that there is no better way to love God and be the channels of his Mercy.

### Reflection Questions relating to Sr Brenda's article on Ordinarity

- Recall and share some of your own experiences of how the ordinary has opened your life to the extraordinary.
- Recall and share about some of the extraordinarily ordinary people you have known in your lifetime. What was it in them that touched your heart?

### Resources for your Further Reflection on the theme of Ordinarity

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Brenda Dolphin RSM (The Congregation) for Mercy International Association's Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published December 2015.**

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