

2016

READINGS FOR MERCY

In the 185th Anniversary Year of the Founding of the Sisters of Mercy, the Jubilee Year of Mercy, for the Mercy International Reflection Process and the ongoing call to the Ministry of Mercy



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We are grateful to our Mercy authors for articles which have resonated, nourished, inspired and challenged us over the course of 2016 as we sought to address 'the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor' in this Jubilee Year of Mercy.





Our Call to Weep and Act Mercifully

Today as Sisters of Mercy, our partners in ministry, and our whole Mercy family witness the sufferings of our brothers and sisters all over the globe, and see the ravages of climate change and the increasing degradation of Earth herself, we may, given our practical bent as Mercy people, want to fast forward to what we, as people called to mercifulness, can and must *do*. But is this immediate desire to “*do something*” the most fitting first response to the world as we see it in 2015-2016? Is this the proper first reply to the conversion that Pope Francis envisions in proclaiming the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy? Is this the first reaction called for by his encyclical *Laudato Si’*? Or should we not first pause and grieve?

Let us for a moment go back to a side street in ancient Jerusalem, one now called the *via dolorosa*. A bloodied man is staggering along carrying a crossbeam, helped somewhat by a suddenly recruited stranger named Simon. Some women line the route. Perhaps some of them have come here out of mere curiosity. But there are others who are weeping, not in a conventional way, but because of the acute suffering they see. The man notices their tears and says to the women: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for ourselves and for your children . . . For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:28, 31).

Today’s world is also a scene for tears and sorrow—lament for what does not have to be, for the great human and Earthly suffering caused by individual freedom gone awry. Is not grief the proper first response to what we see in 2015-2016? Is not sorrow the first human stirring we are called to feel as we watch the long trails of refugees moving all across the Earth, carrying their frightened children around their necks as they seek, on foot or in

severely overcrowded boats, *some* place of shelter, food, water, and peace upon this Earth. Some foxes still have dens, and some birds of the air still have nests somewhere, but these hundreds of thousands of God's sons and daughters have nowhere to lay their heads (Matt 8:20).

And as we read *Laudato Si'* and encounter -- if not at our own doorstep at least in televised images -- mudslides, tsunamis, raging fires, floods, epic droughts, and melting glaciers, and realize the present and worsening destruction of Creation, with all its historical generosity and cosmic beauty, ought not heartfelt sorrow well up in us first, if we have human blood in our Mercy veins?

As members of the Mercy family we know that grief and lament alone cannot be our only or final prayer or deed. Good Friday afternoon and Easter morning are one and will never be separated. In God they are one incomprehensible act of sympathetic sorrow and merciful self-bestowal and embrace. But if we in the Mercy family in the early twenty-first century do not let ourselves see and feel the agonies of the present Calvaries as they drop blood upon the ground, cast darkness over the whole land, tear the curtains of our former temples, and split the rocks, we can never become the merciful spice-bearers of Easter morning. We will never be the women, or men, who come in sympathy to anoint, only to find ourselves anointed and told "Do not be afraid."

Our mercifulness as the community and family "of Mercy" will be most persistent, powerful, and effective if it too, like God's, arises from felt sorrow, sympathy, and self-expenditure. Somehow, led by God's unsurpassable example and help, we must simultaneously be Jeremiahs, Isaiahs, and Jesus' disciples—crying out against the debilitating ignorances and insensitivities that cause such suffering and destruction, proclaiming hope even against hope, and then doing the healing, self-expending deeds of mercy and eco-justice.

Is not this the thorough conversion to which *Laudato Si'* and the Jubilee Year of Mercy urgently call us? Is not this the enflaming engagement of head, heart and hands to which the Mercy International Reflection Process (MIRP) so ardently summons us?

Neither Pope Francis nor Mercy International Association invites us to a casual academic exercise. Both invite us to *metanoia*, to know and feel, to see and act in a new and deeper way -- to let ourselves be “born anew” by grieving and embracing the destructive ignorances, sicknesses, and poverties of our historical time, even if we are now eighty or ninety years old. (Anna the prophetess in the temple of her day was eighty-four!) We are all called, by the Mercy International Reflection Process and by the Year of Mercy, to look beyond the narrow, convenient streets of our previous understandings and endeavors; to embrace the magnitude of the created, evolving, and expanding universe, our common home; to enlarge our theological realization of the scope of God’s creative presence and love; and then to kneel down, roll up our sleeves, and do what we can and must for all the wounded life in our corners of the field hospital that is the Earth.

Catherine McAuley once said of two young homeless women who came to her door, “their dejected faces have been before me ever since” (*Correspondence*, 322). As together we begin this Jubilee Year of Mercy and our Mercy year of global reflection and action on behalf of distressed Earth and the distressed sisters and brothers at our doors, may we too carry “dejected faces” in our minds and hearts as we search for and construct the healings for which such dejection is pleading.

As Pope Francis makes clear in his announcement of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, this is a *kairos* moment for humanity, for all created life on this planet, and so for the global Mercy family. A *kairos* moment is a crisis or turning point in history, an hour of grace, an appointed time in the purposes of God that demands specific decisions while the opportunity is still present. Either we engage now in integral ecological conversion—with all

the scientific, theological, social, political, and economic conversion such integrity will entail -- or further human suffering and cosmic destruction will surely lie ahead. Either we will weep now and act, or we will weep even more later.

The Mercy International Reflection Process that now begins is a gift of God to us, a sympathetic divine visitation. To be invited as an international Mercy family to experience together the global sufferings and the outright devastations of this moment and then to act together in healing ways is a merciful gift of God. Yes, it is a demanding invitation, but one in which, we may trust, God's energy, compassion, and guidance will accompany us. To participate in the MIRP in the ways we can, with whatever sacrifices of time, energy, and presence are needed, is not a casual option any one of us may easily lay aside.

Yes, Creation indeed waits with eager longing – for God's help and ours. Somehow during this coming year of the Mercy International Reflection Process, let us together walk alongside Christ as he once again rides his borrowed donkey down the hillside overlooking our poor, blind Jerusalem, and weeps: "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace" (Luke 19:41-42). As we descend with him into the agonies of our Earth and its beloved peoples, let us together offer him not old palm branches and empty Hosannas, but new repentance, and our new promise to try again to recognize the things that will make for genuine human peace. Let us as one interconnected Mercy Family beg God that through our attentive hearing of Creation's yearning and humanity's cries and through our acts of mercy and justice on behalf of Earth and its impoverished people, God's Holy Spirit will -- still groaning on our behalf -- offer us a new day of Merciful visitation.

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Mercy – Reawakening us for New Life: Mary Reynolds rsm

The Call to new life is a clarion call to hope. As we conclude the Year of Consecrated Life, we are encouraged *to embrace the future with hope* and as we embark on the Jubilee Year of Mercy Pope Francis proclaims: *Mercy is the force that reawakens us for new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope.*

In dedicating 2015 as the year of Consecrated Life, Francis expressed three aims:
To remember the past with gratitude,
To live the present passionately,
To embrace the future with hope

Within this context, he invited all who witness the good news of God's love and compassion to 'Wake up the World'.

Remembering the past with gratitude is a good place to start- why? Because it helps us to recall as the chosen people of old did that *'the Lord your God cared for you all along the way, as you travelled through the wilderness, just as a father cares for his child. Now he has brought you to this place'* (Deut. 1:31)

On first glance, *'this place'* may not be exactly where we might have hoped to arrive. The dwindling numbers and ageing profile of religious are facts well known to us, not to mention our dented confidence in our relevance and influence in society. In short, one might say that rather than finding ourselves in the *'promised land'*, we are more likely to experience where we are as a place and time of crisis so why should we recall this story with gratitude. [Timothy Radcliffe OP](#) reminds us that it is exactly in and through crisis that we are renewed. The story of salvation is peppered with events such as the fall, the flood, the exile, the destruction of the temple. The most terrifying crisis of the passion and death of Christ is at the very heart of our hope.

There are few who would deny that our church and indeed our society too is in crisis at many levels. It is therefore salutary for us to remember the role Religious Life played in Church and society at several times of crisis. The desert fathers and mothers were the ones who challenged a church, adopting the extravagant ways and life styles of the lords and kings and slipping into compromise to remember their obligations to the poor. St. Benedict responded to the crisis at the end of the Latin Roman Empire when Catholic civilisation seemed finished, the mendicant friars brought to birth a new charism in the Church of the 13th century that responded to the new needs of the cities; the divisions and confusion that followed on the

Reformation and the individualism that marked the Renaissance were responded to by the Jesuits and the Ursulines. The aftermath of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution saw a spotlight shone on the great divide between the rich and poor; the suffering and exclusion of the masses gave rise to the apostolic congregations of which most of us are members.

Recalling that crisis leads to rebirth is a cause for gratitude but it calls us to ask: 'What is trying to be born?' What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from the heart of Religious Life today?

John Philip Newell in his recently published book [Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings, the Rebirthing of God](#) states '*The walls of Western Christianity are collapsing. In many parts of the West the collapse can be described as seismic. There are three main responses or reactions to the collapse. The first is to deny that it is happening, the second is to frantically try to shore up the foundations of the old thing, and the third is to ask what is trying to be born. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?*

I suggest that the new energy struggling to be born is **compassion**. Our world is hurting, our Church is hurting, our society with its myriad scars and abuses is hurting and all long for healing and renewed life. How can we hear with a deepened receptivity and proclaim with a new conviction '*I have come that they may have life and have it to the full*'.

[Brother Philip Pinto](#), recent Congregational Leader of The Christian Brothers asks: *What do I notice happening in the world that is changing the way I live my life?* I would like to change that question slightly: *What do I notice happening in the world that is changing attitudes and perceptions of the Christian message?* I believe that both the example and the teachings of Pope Francis, who gives greater priority to the work of compassion than to the defence of doctrine, are making a major contribution to this change; that they are a key to the rebirth we desire, and that they give us good reason to embrace the future with hope. Now more than two years after his papacy began, Francis, the pontiff with the common touch and the tolerant embrace is an inspiration to both the spiritual and secular worlds, a global celebrity to those who admire his warmth and a champion to those who share his concerns about climate change, social justice, poverty and more.

It is for this reason that I would like to concentrate on the call of Pope Francis to embrace the Future with Hope. I believe that he has not only called us to this but that in this proclamation of the **Jubilee Year of Mercy** he has actually provided us with the roadmap.

Pope Francis' Bull of Indiction or announcement of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy has 5 Movements.

In the **first movement**, we are invited to ponder the great mystery of Mercy and to enter into it in this very special year.

In the **second movement**, invites us to centre ourselves in the God of Mercy.

The **third movement** calls the church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, to take up the mission of mercy and compassion entrusted to it by Christ.

The **fourth movement** sets out the practical ways in which we can live a life of Mercy and compassion.

The **fifth movement** holds out to us models to inspire us in our lives of Mercy

First movement

Francis himself learned that recognising our own need for Mercy is an absolutely necessary step before we can dare to be compassionate as the Father is.

When asked by a journalist, who is Jorge Bergoglio, he replied *I am a sinner: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.*” And he repeated: *“I am the one who is looked upon by the Lord. I always felt my motto, Miserando atque Eligendo [By Having Mercy and by choosing Him], was very true for me.”*

What he is referring to here is the Call of Matthew, as recounted in the Gospel and captured in art by Caravaggio. The calling of Matthew is presented within the context of mercy. Passing by the tax collector’s booth, Jesus looked intently at Matthew. It was a look full of mercy that forgave the sins of that man, a sinner and a tax collector, whom Jesus chose – against the hesitation of the disciples – to become one of the Twelve

So Francis continues: *‘that finger of Jesus, pointing at Matthew. That’s me. I feel like him. Like Matthew. Here, this is me, a sinner on whom the Lord has turned his gaze.’* According to many, including Paul Vallely who wrote about Francis’ life in *Untying the Knots*, Francis does have a huge understanding of his need for the Mercy of God. Part of the reason is because of how as a Provincial he handled the Dirty War situation in Argentina that led to the arrest of two fellow Jesuit priests, who were subsequently imprisoned and tortured. Vallely accepts that the two Jesuit priests were placed in jeopardy by their then superior's decision to withdraw from them the protection of the Jesuit order as part of a row over the way that the gospels should be taught.

The time Francis spent in Germany, having been sent there by his Superior after his time as Provincial, afforded him a graced moment of insight and the mercy of God in his regard.

When asked in the conclave if he accepted the vote to become pope, he replied not with the traditional *‘Accepto’* but the words: *‘I am a great sinner, trusting in the mercy and patience of God in suffering, I accept’.*

So the first invitation is to constantly contemplate the mystery of Mercy and to recognise our own need for Mercy. Francis, almost in a litany of praise leads us into the heart of the mystery, calling it a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace and proclaiming that our salvation depends on it.

Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.

Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us.

Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life.

Mercy: the bridge that connects God and humankind, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.

The Door of Mercy

Symbol can be a powerful support in helping us to move deeper into mystery and so the symbol of the Door of Mercy is very powerful. The Holy Door was opened at St. Peter's in Rome on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door became a '*Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope*'. This privilege was extended to churches and shrines around the world, including Mercy International Centre, so that grace-filled moments would be available to many, as people discover a path to conversion.

In passing, let us note the strong symbolism of crossing over or crossing a threshold in Bible stories. The first explicit crossing was when Abram crossed over the Euphrates River into Canaan to accept God's gift of the Promised Land. Moses crossed over the Red Sea, ending the enslavement of the Israelites and Joshua crossed the Jordan to reclaim the land.

Even the choice of the date of 8 December for the commencement of the Jubilee Year was significant because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, the Holy Door was opened on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive. Now, fifty years on, we are invited again into lands of new awareness and hope, bringing with us the wisdom distilled from our lived experience.

We could indeed make the following words of the invitation our prayer:

With these sentiments of gratitude for everything we have received, and with a sense of responsibility for the task that lies ahead, we shall cross the threshold of the Holy Door fully confident that the strength of the Risen Lord, who constantly supports us on our pilgrim way, will sustain us. May the Holy Spirit, who guides the steps of

believers in cooperating with the work of salvation wrought by Christ, lead the way and support us so that we may contemplate the face of mercy.

Second Movement:

The second movement invites us to **centre ourselves in the God of Mercy**. Pope Francis chooses 3 paths to lead us into this centering.

- Experience God as **Patient and merciful**.
- Recognize that the God of Mercy is our constant companion in every event of life.
- Ponder the wonderful revelation of Divine Love in its fullness as expressed in the very core Jesus' Mission

God as Patient and Merciful

The God of Mercy is a God that meets us in our poverty rather than our plenty, a God who finds easier access in our vulnerability than in our strength. In a special way the Psalms bring to this the fore *'He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy' (Ps 103:3-4).*

This merciful God brings freedom to the captives as another psalm, in an even more explicit way, attests *'He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. (Ps 146:7-8)*

In Psalm 147 the Psalmist proclaims: *'He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds ...The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicket to the ground.'*

In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a 'visceral' love or as the Hebrew word *'rachamin'* captures it – the womb love of God. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, expresses itself like the love of a mother for her child, it is full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.

2. In the second path to centering ourselves in the God of Mercy, we are called to recognize that the God of Mercy is our constant companion in every event of life and at all times.

'For his mercy endures forever': This is the refrain that repeats after each verse in Psalm 136 as it narrates the history of God's revelation. Mercy renders God's history with Israel a history of salvation. To repeat continually 'for his mercy endures forever', as the psalm does, seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love.

The challenge for us is to take up the refrain in our daily lives by praying these words of praise: 'for his mercy endures forever'.

How might we adopt this psalm to God's merciful action in our lives?

When we were faced with our own diminishment and loss of influence- 'His mercy endures forever'

When public scrutiny finds us wanting.

'His mercy endures forever'

When we wander through the wilderness of confusion and uncertainty.

'His mercy endures forever'

Thomas Merton captures this sentiment in one of his wonderful prayers:

I will trust you always. Even though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are always with me and you will never leave me to face my peril alone.

Before his Passion, Jesus prayed with this psalm of mercy. While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of God's mercy. Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the Cross.

3. The third pathway into our centering in the God of Mercy is to ponder the wonderful revelation of Divine Love in its fullness as expressed in the very core of Jesus' Mission.

The signs Jesus worked, especially in favour of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.

- Jesus, seeing the crowds of people who followed him, realized that they were tired and exhausted, lost and without a guide, and he felt deep compassion for them (cf. *Mt 9:36*). On the basis of this compassionate love he healed the sick who were presented to him (cf. *Mt 14:14*), and with just a few loaves of bread and fish he satisfied the hunger of the enormous crowd (cf. *Mt 15:37*).

What moved Jesus in all situations was nothing other than mercy, with which he read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need:

- When he came upon the widow of Nain taking her son out for burial, he felt great compassion for the immense suffering of this grieving mother, and he gave back her son by raising him from the dead (cf. *Lk 7:15*).
- After freeing the demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus entrusted him with this mission: '*Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you*'. (*Mk 5:19*).

In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy. We know these parables well, three in particular: the lost

sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two sons (cf. *Lk 15:1-32*). In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon.

In ways one is reminded of Francis himself, who prioritizes compassion over dogma much as Jesus promised compassion over law.

3rd Movement:

The third movement calls the church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, to take up the mission of mercy and compassion entrusted to it by Christ. The call is captured in the motto of the Jubilee Year itself - the command to show Mercy as Mercy is shown to us- through offering forgiveness and by being the witnesses and channels of Mercy to all without exception.

This theme is introduced to us by reference to Peter's question about how many times it is necessary to forgive, Jesus says: 'I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven times' (*Mt 18:22*). He then goes on to tell the parable of the 'ruthless servant', who, called by his master to return a huge amount, begs him on his knees for mercy. His master cancels his debt. But he then meets a fellow servant who owes him a few cents and he too begs on his knees for mercy, but the first servant refuses his request and throws him into jail. When the master hears of the matter, he becomes infuriated and, summoning the first servant back to him, says, '*Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*' (*Mt 18:33*). Jesus concludes: '*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart*' (*Mt 18:35*).

This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us - to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us, it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves

Pope Francis then reminds us that Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life and of our lives as public witnesses to the love and compassion of God.

The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. He makes what may seem a strange statement: '*Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy*'. He goes on to point out that the temptation, on the one hand, to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal i.e. Mercy.

Then he speaks of the practice of mercy waning in the wider culture. Sadly, he says that in some cases the word seems to have dropped out of use. But he cautions that without a witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a

barren desert. He quotes John Paul II in his second Encyclical, [*Dives in Misericordia*](#), who highlighted the fact that we had forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu: *'The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of Mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of 'mercy' seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it (cf. Gen 1:28). This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy...*

In the context of these two realities Pope Francis says: *'The time has come for the Church to take up the joyful call to mercy once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters'*. He appeals to those with leadership roles in the church *'to bring the healing power of God's grace to everyone in need, to stay close to the marginalized and to be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.*

He then reminds us that the Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, to everyone without exception – He says *'the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them.'* He says *'that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity'*. He sees the church as a field hospital after battle healing the wounds. Wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.

Fourth Movement

The fourth movement sets out the practical ways in which we can live a life of Mercy and compassion.

We are called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it; what Francis often refers to as **mercy-ing**.

Among the practices suggested are meditation, pilgrimage as a symbol of conversion that encompasses living non judgmentally, forgiving and giving outreach especially to those on the margins of society, renewed commitment to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, a particular focus on those who are entrapped in new forms of slavery, a return to the sacrament of reconciliation and to the 'fast' of Lent as presented by Isaiah and a mercy that extends beyond the boundaries of Christianity

Pope Francis, then in a very practical way outlines essential elements of this conversion to which we are called:

1. Meditation on the Word of God – silence, contemplation

Speaking of meditation he says: *We want to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord's words: Merciful like the Father. The Evangelist reminds us of the teaching of Jesus who says, 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36). It is a programme of life as demanding as it is rich with joy and peace. Jesus' command is directed to anyone willing to listen to his voice (cf. Lk 6:27). In order to be capable of mercy, therefore, we must first of all dispose ourselves to listen to the Word of God. This means rediscovering the value of silence in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us. In this way, it will be possible to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle.*

2. The practice of *pilgrimage* - symbol of conversion

Pilgrimage has a special place in the Holy Year, because it represents the journey each of us makes in this life. Life itself is a pilgrimage, and the human being is a pilgrim travelling along the road, making his/her way to the desired destination. Crossing the threshold of the Holy Door or the Door of Mercy symbolically represents the pilgrimage journey and the conversion to which it calls us. The Pope's own prayerful wish captures this wonderfully: *'May pilgrimage be an impetus to conversion: by crossing the threshold of the Holy Door, we will find the strength to embrace God's mercy and dedicate ourselves to being merciful with others as the Father has been with us'.*

Elements of conversion

Judge not

The God of Mercy asks us above all not to judge and not to condemn:

'Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back' (Lk 6:37-38).

Human beings, whenever they judge, look no farther than the surface, whereas the Father looks into the very depths of the soul. The Pope himself has given us a supreme witness to this. He has, for example, caused more than raised eyebrows by his endless exhortations to embrace - and not to judge - people such as the divorced and remarried, gays and lesbians, and those who, in good conscience, practice contraception. The human race is extraordinarily diverse in so many ways: gender,

ethnicity, race, class, religion, nationality, sexuality, philosophy, and lifestyle. The areas in which we differ are endless. But judgmental attitudes and discrimination on the basis of difference are the enemies of true peace and respectful, compassionate relationships. The psychiatrist and writer [Eric Berne](#) captured the disempowerment of a focus on difference: *'The moment a little boy is concerned with which is a jay and which is a sparrow, he can no longer see the birds or hear them sing.'*

Forgive and Give

But not judging is still not sufficient to express mercy. Jesus asks us also to *forgive* and to *give*: to be instruments of mercy because it was we who first received mercy from God.

The practice of mercy requires that we forgive those who have hurt us, even in terrible ways. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully and mercifully. Let us therefore heed the apostle's exhortation and a maxim very dear to the heart of Catherine McAuley: *'Do not let the sun go down on your anger'* (Eph 4:26).

Without mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, there can be no healing, for either the victim or perpetrator. By refusing to show mercy and pardon to those who have attacked or abused us, we - whether a nation, an institution, a particular group or a single individual - can too easily end up clinging to our wounds with pride and a false sense of righteousness. The only way to heal these wrongdoings is by letting go of them.

Among those who learned the secret of letting go of anger, wrath and revenge as a necessary condition for happiness was [Nelson Mandela](#). He learned, during his 27 years in prison, that unless we forgive and let go of bitterness we voluntarily waste our lives lost in the past. After he was freed he invited the man who was his jailer on Robben Island to be a VIP at his inauguration. Percy Yutar, who wanted him to be put to death, was invited to a special lunch and they later became friends. That is how a man who began as an angry young terrorist matured into a great world leader. It was his capacity to forgive that made him so.

Outreach to those on the fringes of society

In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates. How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! During this Jubilee, we will be called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the

oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! The Pope prays: *'May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference.'*

Among those that Pope Francis has particularly highlighted on the fringes are migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East and even though there is opposition to his plea, he continues to demand that Europe and North America throw open their doors to them. That includes us!

The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

Let us listen to the passionate call of Pope Francis to embrace and undertake the Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy:

'It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead'.

We know that this is the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*). Moreover, we will be asked

- if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness;
- if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty;
- if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted;
- if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence;
- if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.

In each of these 'little ones, the least of his brothers and sisters' Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: *'as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love.*

Bringing good tidings to the afflicted and enslaved

A special concern of Pope Francis is what he often refers to as new forms of slavery – among them being the trafficking of people, especially of women and children. Introducing this concern he refers to the writings of Luke who tells us that Jesus, on the Sabbath, went back to Nazareth and, as was his custom, entered the synagogue. They called upon him to read the Scripture and to comment on it. The passage was from the Book of Isaiah where it is written: *'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to those in captivity; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Is 61:1-2)*

The Pope emphasizes the proclamation of the *'year of the Lord's favour'* or the year of the Lord's **mercy**. *'This Jubilee Year of Mercy will bring to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring a word and gesture of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society, to restore sight to those who can see no more because they are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has been robbed'.*

Of special concern to the Pope are those in captivity who face lifelong prison sentences and particularly those condemned to capital punishment. He insists that prisons and other correctional facilities should be transformed into centres of rehabilitation instead of those that merely impose punishment.

Sacrament of Reconciliation and the 'fast 'of Lent

The Pope draws special attention to the season of Lent during this Jubilee Year and reminds us that it should be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. He quotes the prophet Micah and encourages us to make them our own: *'You, O Lord, are a God who takes away iniquity and pardons sin, which does not hold your anger forever, but are pleased to show mercy. You, Lord, will return to us and have pity on your people. You will trample down our sins and toss them into the depths of the sea' (cf. 7:18-19).*

He also recommends the pages of the prophet Isaiah and advises that they can also be meditated upon concretely during this season of prayer, fasting, and works of charity: *'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own*

flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, here I am. If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make you strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not' (58:6-11).

The initiative of "24 Hours for the Lord," to be celebrated on the Friday and Saturday preceding the Fourth Week of Lent, is a special time for the celebration of the sacrament the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Pope reminds us that this is the opportune moment to change our lives! Whatever it is that imprisons us, the God of Mercy, wants to free. The most difficult prison we impose upon ourselves through our own blindness – the blindness of not wanting to change, the imprisonment of not wanting to be disturbed.

The poet W. H. Auden, writing in 1948, when the world was still recovering from the catastrophe of world war 11, observed

We would rather be ruined than changed.

We would rather die in our dread

Than climb the cross of the moment

And let our illusions die

Social Sin

Pope Francis speaks not only of personal sin but of our part in social sin as well. He speaks of social sin being so widespread in our world today and says – *'If we want to drive it out from personal and social life, we need prudence, vigilance, loyalty, transparency, together with the courage to denounce any wrongdoing. If it is not combated openly, sooner or later everyone will become an accomplice to it, and it will end up destroying our very existence'.*

- One of the wrongdoings he highlights is what he calls *'the economy that kills'* and he urges us not to collude with it and to work for major reforms in this regard including the application of greater regulations on free markets. One such comment that illustrates this exhortation is *'Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.*
- In his encyclical [Laudato Si'](#) he clearly holds that the cause of climate change is closely linked with irresponsible human activity and he calls us to take responsibility for earth's ecology as God's creation and for the care of our common home.

A Jubilee also entails the granting of *indulgences*. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

Pope Francis prays: *Let us live this Jubilee intensely, begging the Father to forgive our sins and to bathe us in his merciful 'indulgence'.*

Islam & Jews

A magnanimous wish of Francis for the Jubilee Year of Mercy is that the year will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God and he prays that *'the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst'.*

It is especially noteworthy that in those troubled times for our Jewish and Islamic brethren, Pope Francis asks us to give them a special inclusion in the Jubilee of Mercy. He believes that the Roman church has no choice but to engage in dialogue with Christians who reject certain of its dogmas, with people of other faiths who don't believe in Jesus Christ, with those who do not believe in God, and even with those who are the church's sworn enemies. He says: *'There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. Israel was the first to receive this revelation which continues in history as the source of an inexhaustible richness meant to be shared with all mankind. As we have seen, the pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy, because they narrate the works that the Lord performed in favour of his people at the most trying moments of their history'. Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are 'Merciful and Kind'. This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open'.*

His wish is that that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions and that it will open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; that it will eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.

5th Movement

In this final movement the Pope recommends us to draw inspiration from Mary the Mother of Mercy and from holy men and women who devoted their lives to the service of Mercy

Mary, Mother of Mercy

He prays *'that the sweetness of Mary's countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness'*.

Mary treasured divine mercy in her heart. Her hymn of praise, sung at the threshold of the home of Elizabeth, was dedicated to the mercy of God which extends from "generation to generation" (Lk 1:50).

He encourages us to address her in the words of the *Salve Regina*, a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.

Saints who made Mercy their mission

Our prayer also extends to the saints and blessed ones who made divine mercy their mission in life. The Pope particularly names the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska. We may like to think of our own foundress in this regard and I know that Catherine McAuley will hold a special place for many of us. May she, who was called to enter the depths of divine mercy, intercede for us and obtain for us the grace of living and walking always according to the mercy of God and with an unwavering trust in his love.

Conclusion

What better way to end than in the words of Pope Francis himself: *'In this Jubilee Year, let us allow God to surprise us. He never tires of casting open the doors of his heart and of repeating that he loves us and wants to share his love with us.'*

From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people draw from it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends. The profundity of the mystery surrounding it is as inexhaustible as the richness which springs up from it. May we never tire of extending mercy, and be ever patient in offering compassion and comfort'.

Presentation given by Mary Reynolds rsm, Executive Director of Mercy International Association (MIA) on 30 January 2016 in her home diocese, linking the end of the Year of Consecrated Life with the Year of Mercy. E: director@mercyinternational.ie
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THE MERCY OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER

MARIE FARRELL rsm

ACUTELY AWARE aware of the extent of global anguish marking the 'signs of the times' of the twenty-first century, Pope Francis has proclaimed that an *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* will offer the world a pastoral response to its grief in so far as:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his/her brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and humanity, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.¹

The *Jubilee of Mercy* will begin on December 8th 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of Vatican Council II. The year of Mercy will conclude on the feast of Christ the King on November 20th 2016.

The date chosen for commencing this Jubilee testifies to God's abundant mercy in preparing Mary for her motherhood of the Word incarnate by virtue of her perfect redemption through preservation from 'original sin'. The closing celebration will include the Church's 'new' dedication of humanity and the whole cosmos to Christ's Lordship as universal Saviour. It will embody a pledge that in Christ, the visible 'face of the Father's mercy', justice will be seen to prevail amongst all nations.²

* * *

The 'thread' of Mercy

The Jubilee will continue a 'thread' commenced when in opening Vatican Council II, Pope John XXIII indicated that 'Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity' and should 'show herself a loving mother to all; patient kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children.'³

The 'thread' was taken up by Pope Paul VI whose closing speech at the Council emphasised how the model of Council's spirituality had been derived from the charity and mercy of the Good Samaritan.⁴ P. Paul VI is remembered as being the first to formulate the idea of the modern Church's creation of a 'culture of love'.

Pope John Paul II's personal experiences of the horrors of war, death camps and totalitarianism led to the 1980 encyclical, *Dives in Misericordiae (Rich in Mercy)* dedicated to the theme of the power of Mercy for healing endangered human beings. His canonisation of Sr. Faustina Kowalska has instigated worldwide promotion of her message of Divine Mercy as 'Easter's secret' and now celebrated on the first Sunday of Eastertide.

Pope Benedict XVI extended the 'thread' of Mercy in his 2006 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, and again in 2009 with *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)* in which the Church's concern for Mercy was considered within the broad context of social justice.

Pope Francis' first exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* developed Pope Benedict's vision of the 'new evangelisation' within the context of Mercy:

'The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel' (*E.G.* §114). In an interview shortly after his election, Pope Francis called upon Church leaders to be 'ministers of mercy above all' in evincing nearness and proximity in order to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful within a Church recognised as mother and shepherdess.⁵

Mercy: Biblical Aspects

Features of 'the face of the Father's mercy' are revealed throughout the Old Testament. English translations often mask the meaning of Hebrew terms affirming the depths YHWH's⁶ ever active relationship with the community of Israel: *chesed* may express God's mercy, loving kindness, compassion and steadfast love; derivatives of *rechem* express divine 'womb love'; *tsedaqah* and *emet* suggest righteousness, divine loyalty and faithfulness; *mishpat* indicates justice.⁷

Modern scholarship points to a three-fold revelation of the dynamic revelation of divine Mercy.⁸ The first is God's abiding Presence (Exodus 6:7)⁹ intimated in the revelation of the divine name to Moses, 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14) and more fully disclosed in the Covenant on Sinai (Ex.20:1-21). The second revelation is made when Moses intercedes for a stiff-necked people (Ex. 33:19) and the God of absolute sovereignty and irreducible freedom, promises mercy (*rachamin*) in giving the people a second chance to respect the Covenant. In the third instance, Moses encounters the divine presence in the midst of impenetrable cloud. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: '*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...*' (Ex. 34:6)

Throughout centuries of national crises in Israel, prophets arose time and time again to remind God's people of the promises and social obligations of the Covenant.



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It has been well said that 'Mercy is God's creative and fertile justice.'¹⁰ Prophetic warnings about the 'wrath' of God are frequently cited to suggest that YHWH was an angry God of vengeance. Such a theology is totally misguided. Old Testament 'wrath' is a way of expressing divine holiness which, of its very nature, asserts God's resistance to sin and evil. In prophetic terms, whenever divine 'wrath' is appeased, God's mercy offers yet another chance of forgiveness for infidelity; it betokens hope for a future of peace and messianic blessing:

*For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion
on you.... (Isaiah 54:7-8)¹¹*

Both prophetic writings and the psalms of the Old Testament include poignant expressions of lamentation and repentance for Israel's wanton infidelity to the Covenant. On the one hand, the genre of lamentation complains of divine abandonment and struggles to discover a merciful God in the midst of national distress (Is 34: 1-17). On the other hand, the mood of the great lamentations moves from despair to hope (Is. 51-57).¹²

The enigmatic figure of the Isaiah's Suffering Servant Songs¹³ recalled every year in the Church's Liturgy of Good Friday, carries forward a theology that YHWH enters mercifully into the suffering of the people. In keeping with this theological sense of divine omnipotence, the Church's patristic tradition

is distinct from a later scholastic metaphysical understanding of God as a-pathetic and incapable of suffering.¹⁴

New Testament scriptures reveal that in Jesus the Christ, risen and glorified, *'the Word has become flesh and lived among us'* (Jn. 1:14). The synoptic Gospels attributed to Mark, Matthew and Luke abound with narratives of the outreach of Jesus' mercy to those who suffer from all kinds of physical disability ('demons', epilepsy, leprosy, lameness, deafness, muteness and blindness), from hunger and homelessness and from mourning and grief. Jesus' mercy stretches beyond cultural taboos, in restoring life and health to a pubescent girl and a menopausal woman (Lk. 8: 40-55), in being an indiscriminate host (Lk. 14:1-12) and in his wise interpretation of Sabbath law (Mk. 2: 23-28; Mt 12:1-8).

English translations mask the fact of there being two distinct meanings regarding Jesus' ministry of mercy. On occasions when Jesus' healing is requested, as when the blind Bartimaeus shouted, *'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!'* (Mk. 10:47), the Greek verb used is *eleo*.¹⁵ However, the verb used for Jesus' action in response for 'pity' is *splagchnizomai*, implying very graphically, 'to be heaved in one's bowels'. Such was Jesus' response to the bereaved widow of Nain: *'When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'* (Lk 7: 13).

Ancient Greek culture considered the bowels to be the seat of human passions. Thus Jesus' bestowal of mercy was, and always will be a profound visceral outpouring of steadfast love.

Gospel parables integrate a love-mercy-justice continuum explicitly developed in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and reiterated by Jesus when questioned about 'the greatest commandment' (Mt. 22:34-40): *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*

Central to the Gospel of John is the evangelist's theology of 'the hour' of Jesus.¹⁶ As foretold in the Zechariah's prophetic image of Israel's *'mourning for the pierced one'* with the promise that *'On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem...'*,¹⁷ 'the hour' of Jesus reveals a perception of Mercy as an outpouring of divine love from the pierced heart of the Saviour.¹⁸

The Church, Sacrament of Mercy

The flow of blood and water streaming from the side of Jesus on Calvary has become symbolic of the origin and growth of the Church.¹⁹ While every ecclesial sacrament is a source of divine grace and mercy, we focus here on the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist. However, we note Pope Francis' hope that the Jubilee year will encourage the Faithful to return to frequent practice of sacramental Reconciliation in order to experience the grandeur of God's mercy as a source of true interior peace.²⁰

Ancient portrayals of the Church as 'Mother' and the baptismal bath as the 'womb' of Mother Church, have received fresh emphases following the renewed rites of Baptism and Eucharist in the wake of Vatican Council II. We remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being born 'of water and the Spirit' (Jn. 3:5); we recall also St Augustine's interpretation of Jesus' pierced heart as 'The door to life... from which the sacraments of the Church flowed and without which one cannot attain the life that is true living.'²¹

Australian Church architecture frequently fails to convey adequately how baptismal 'mercy' themes of sacramental birth, death, resurrection and incorporation into the mystical Body of Christ, are ritualised. Nevertheless, many churches do now provide opportunity either for baptismal immersion or have situated the baptismal font with 'living' water at the church's entrance to allow the Faithful symbolic 'passage' from the 'womb/

tomb' to the table of Eucharist.

The sacrament of Eucharist is 'the source and summit' of Christian life.²² All the other sacraments are oriented to Eucharist for here is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, the 'Real Presence' of Christ. How sublimely has this mystery been handed down by St Thomas Aquinas: 'O sacred banquet in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, our souls are filled with grace and a pledge of our future glory is given to us.'²³

Inclusion of a double *epiclesis* (invocation of the Holy Spirit) within the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass emphasises how the sacramental Body of Christ on the altar must be considered in correlation with the mystical Body of Christ, the Church. With hands extended over the bread and wine, the priest prays the first *epiclesis*: 'You are indeed holy, O Lord, the font of all holiness. Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall,²⁴ so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The second *epiclesis* completes the first: 'Humbly we pray that, partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we (*i.e.* the Church) may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit.'

The Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass concludes with the 'Great Amen'. With one voice the community expresses joyful thanksgiving for God's Eucharistic presence allowing the Church to stand firmly in the 'space' of God's favour, fidelity and boundless mercy.²⁵

St. Augustine grasped the intrinsic relationship between the 'Great Amen' of the Eucharistic Prayer and the communicant's 'Amen':

If... you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful: 'You are the body of Christ and his members' (1 Cor. 12:27). If, therefore, you are the body of Christ and his members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord's table; you receive your mystery. You reply 'Amen' to that which you

are, and by replying, you consent. For you hear 'the Body of Christ', and you reply 'Amen'. Be then a member of the body of Christ so that your 'Amen' may be true.²⁶

The Church's Mission of Mercy

The final rite of every Eucharistic liturgy is a formal but brief *missa*: 'Go forth...' ²⁷ and be what you have become in the Eucharist—a 'face of Christ' to the world. In responding 'Thanks be to God', the community accepts its role of taking the Good News of Christ from 'in here' to 'out there'.

'Mission' indicates action on behalf of the entire Church—clergy, laity (of all ages) and consecrated religious. Works of Mercy are as diverse as feeding the 'hungry', giving drink to the 'thirsty', welcoming the 'stranger', clothing the 'naked' and visiting the 'sick' and the 'captive' (Mt. 25:34-40).²⁸ These symbolic categories immediately evoke images of countless human beings dying from malnutrition and safe drinking water, displaced persons seeking asylum, the homeless, victims of persecution, abuse, addiction and torture of mind and body. Each category calls equally for one's care for 'neighbour' close to home—family, friends, associates and our indigenous sisters and brothers.

'Mission' involves commitment to the 'new evangelisation' of preaching, teaching and witnessing to the Gospel in ways allowing the mercy of Christ to become part of the fabric of society today.²⁹ Its pastoral orientation invites those alienated from God or Church to discover God as graciously near, like the Father of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:1-24), or the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The 'new evangelisation' proclaims the deepest truth about God and about our own humanity.

'Mission' involves the Church's ongoing engagement with inter-faith and ecumenical dialogue in order to foster the 'dream' of Jesus that all people may be sanctified in the truth and that all who believe in his name may become '*completely one, so that the world may*

know that you [Father] have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (Jn. 17:21-23)

Christian Spirituality and Mercy

The meaning of 'spirituality' is bandied about in all manner of secular ways today. As Christians, we understand it as 'Spirit-uality', as that 'life in the Spirit' so exquisitely described by St Paul in Chapter 8 of the Epistle to the Romans. There we find his magnificent hymn-like acclamation of God's love for us and our call to live according to the Spirit of Christ who dwells within us (Rom. 8:3-11). For Paul our minds, our bodies, emotions and daily activities are 'spiritual' if they share in our service of God in and by the Holy Spirit. 'Mercy' may therefore be recognised as a sub-text of Paul's 'Fruit of the Spirit'³⁰: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 8: 22-24).

For many centuries veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus has influenced the Church's expression of 'Mercy' spirituality.³¹ In our age of religious scepticism, the 'doubting' Thomas's encounter with the heart-wound of the Risen Christ (Jn. 20:24-29) offers reassurance of the possibility of faith in the midst of the world's denial of what lies beyond physical discovery. The Eucharistic liturgy and the Divine Office for the feast of the

Sacred Heart of Jesus demonstrate how divine Love became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus contains a strong strand of 'lamentation' or 'godly sorrow' as the Church acknowledges Jesus' words on his way to Calvary: *Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children... for if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?* (Lk. 23:28-31.)³²

In promulgating the *Jubilee of Mercy*, Pope Francis' thoughts turn to Mary as Mother of Mercy:

May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love.³³

This response to Pope Francis' Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy has been an attempt to emphasise that 'mercy' must be understood as a verb! Let us pray with Pope Francis that the Church may become the voice of every man and woman, and repeat confidently without end: 'Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been of old'. (Ps 25.6

NOTES

1. *Misericordiae Vultus (MV)* §2 (Strathfield NSW: St Paul's Publ., 2015) 1-2.
2. *MV* §§ 1, 8.
3. *MV* §4 cf. Opening address of Vatican Council II, October 11, 1962.
4. *MV* §4 cf. Closing speech Public Session, December 7, 1965.
5. Cited in Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014) 8.
6. To note: In deference to the use of the Divine Name, the new Revised Standard Version of the

Bible translates YHWH as 'Lord; & thereby uses the masculine pronoun.

7. Mark O'Brien OP, *A God Merciful and Gracious: Justice and Mercy in the Old Testament* (Alexandria NSW: Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2008) 6-11.

8. Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013) 46-49.

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A Theology of Mercy in Islam by Cheryl Camp rsm

Introduction

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, Catholics are invited to explore the meaning and experience of mercy. One way of exploring mercy is by looking at what it means to people of different faith traditions. Their scriptures and beliefs can enrich our own understandings.

To examine a theology of mercy in Islam may seem somewhat strange in today's context of what could be called a plague of terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists against both Muslims and non-Muslims in many parts of the world. However, their interpretation of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad - which forms the religious rationale for their political and military movements – does not represent the vast majority of Muslims. It could therefore be helpful to take a brief look at a different interpretation, mindful that this 'look' is from a non-Muslim.

Mercy Theology in Islam

What is the theological understanding of Mercy in Islam? This can be found in the two primary sources of revelation, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The Qur'an is the sacred scripture written in Arabic, and the Sunnah includes sayings, teachings, habits, practices and silent approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. These were verbally transmitted until later collected and recorded in writings known as Hadiths.

The Meaning of Mercy in Islam

Mercy in Islam is seen as having two manifestations – internally: a kind heart and compassionate soul, and externally: “pardoning those who slip, forgiving those who are mistaken, helping those in trouble, assisting the weak, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending to the sick, and consoling the grieved...as well as many other things”.¹

The Bismillah

The importance of the concept of mercy in Islam is seen in its use in the Qur'an. The Arabic invocation بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ (Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim) appears at the beginning of all but one of the 114 Suras (chapters). Translated, *bismillah* (or *Basmala*) means “In the name of God (Allah)”. It is also used by Muslims at the beginning of any activity and is therefore an essential element of their identity. The second part lists two of God's names or attributes, *rahman* and *rahim*, which are derived from the Semitic root r-h-m. These two terms are

¹ Abu Bakr Jabir al-Jaza'iry, *The Muslim is Merciful*. <http://sunnahonline.com/library/purification-of-the-soul/233-muslim-is-merciful-the>.

often translated into English as “The Compassionate (or Gracious or Beneficent) and The Merciful”.

Both words, *rahman* and *rahim*, are derived from the same word, *rahmah* meaning ‘mercy’. *Rahim* (*raham* or *rahm*) is also the word for ‘womb’. In the Hadith collection of Al-Tirmidhi, the Prophet reports that “Allah the Exalted said: I am Ar-Rahman. I created the Raham”. In this saying, *Raham* is related to the Arabic word *rahm* (womb).² Veronica Lawson, in her book *The Blessing of Mercy*, explains the Hebrew use of words in the Bible relating to mercy and ‘womb-compassion’: “The noun *raḥamîm*, the verb *raḥam*, to mercy or to show womb-compassion, and the adjective *raḥûm*, merciful or womb-compassionate, are all related to the Hebrew word for womb, *reḥem*”.³ The close relationship between these concepts in Islam and Judaism and their similar use in Greek in the Christian New Testament, offers great potential for dialogue and shared commitment to mercy between these three Abrahamic religions.

This womb-compassion of God is reported in another Islamic Hadith:

The Messenger of Allah [Prophet Muhammad]...said: “Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you. The womb is derived from the Most Merciful, thus whoever keeps relations with [their] family then Allah will keep relations with [them], and whoever abandons [their] family then Allah will abandon [them]. (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith no. 1924).

Wahiduddin (Richard Shelquist) sums up this idea of womb-compassion:

...the phrase *ir rahman ir rahim* is a recognition and honouring of the very source of all existence, the source of all blessings, the source of all compassion, the source of all mercy who gives endlessly to us and who also responds according to our moral integrity, our harmony with all of creation and our love of Allah.⁴

The Prophet Muhammad

In the Qur’an, God is revealed as having mercy on believers: “[God] is ever merciful (*Rahim*) to the believers” (Sura 33:43). ‘Believers’ in this context refers to those who believe in God and have accepted Muhammad as the Messenger of God, i.e. Muslims (Sura 4:136). The Prophet Muhammad was sent as a messenger of this divine mercy to his followers: “Surely, a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves; ...ardently desirous is he of your welfare; compassionate and merciful towards the believers” (Sura 9:128).

His mission also extended beyond ‘the believers’ to all: “(O Muhammad!) We have only sent you as a mercy for all worlds’ (Sura 21:107). The Turkish scholar, Cafer Yaran, concludes: “Therefore, it is possible to conclude that mercy is one of the most essential Islamic virtues and anything which conflicts with mercy does not coincide with the Prophet’s mission”.⁵

² Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman, *The Meaning and Explanation of the Glorious Qur’an* (Vol 1) 2nd Edition. London: MSA Publication Limited, 2009, 29-30.

³ Veronica Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy*. Northcote, Vic: Morning Star Publishing, 2015, 32.

⁴ Richard Shelquist (Wahiduddin), *Bismillah al rahman al rahim*. <https://wahiduddin.net/words/bismillah.htm>

⁵ Cafer Yaran, *Understanding Islam*. Edinburgh, UK: Dunedin Academic Press, 2007, 46.

When asked to pray against idolaters, Muhammad is reported as replying: “Verily I was not sent to invoke curses, but rather as mercy” (Muslim, Hadith no. 2599).

Muslims and Mercy

Muslims, as well as receiving the mercy of God, are required to extend mercy to others. The Prophet said “Allah will not be merciful to those who are not merciful to the people” (Bukhari, Hadith no. 6941 and Muslim, Hadith no. 2319). Being merciful is basic to being Muslim.

Conclusion

This brief exploration of a theology of mercy reveals an aspect of Islam that is very important to millions of Muslims. Following various terrorist attacks, many Muslim leaders make public statements condemning the actions and motivations of the perpetrators, and their message is: “They do not represent us”. Muslims in general hold strongly to their belief that Islam is a religion of peace, and being merciful is an essential element of being a good Muslim.

Being merciful is also an essential element of being Christian. This common ground between Muslims and Christians is an invitation for mutual exploration. May this Year of Mercy help us to receive and share the mercy of God, The Compassionate, The Merciful.

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EXPLORING THE BIG *M*

Those of us affiliated in one way or another with Catherine McAuley and her contemporaries are fortunate to have a number of extant primary sources, which convey across the centuries the genuine voice and the vision of those early inhabitants of 64A Lower Baggot Street Dublin. Amongst these is the correspondence of Catherine herself, which although not written to explicate her understanding of Mercy, does provide incomparable insight into her values and motivations. We also have her unique and defining stamp on the Original Rule and Constitutions, particularly the two sections she is thought to have composed. In pictorial form we have the 1840 series of sketches of the *Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy* by Sr. Clare Agnew. When we think of visual art and Catherine's early companions though, our minds are most likely to turn to the exquisite work of Sr. Clare Augustine Moore that graces the early registers and other documents.

My reflection will focus on a single decorated capital letter in which Clare Augustine Moore's art meets and accommodates Catherine McAuley's words in the context of the Gospel. This makes it a powerful locus of the Spirit. It has further significance since it is also one of the rare instances, perhaps the only instance, where Clare Augustine Moore paints a Gospel story other than a Marian episode or the Crucifixion. So, let us explore Mercy through the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) as depicted by Clare Augustine Moore in its context of words penned by Catherine herself, and see how the interplay between the three elements – the Gospel story, Catherine's words, and Clare Augustine Moore's art- might enhance and guide our own understanding of Mercy. The material comes from Clare Augustine Moore's illuminated version of Chapter 3: *Of the Visitation of the Sick*, part of the original *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*.

THE WORDS OF CATHERINE

While most parts of the document known as the original *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy* were composed around 1835, and were painstakingly adapted by Catherine from the existing Presentation Rule, Catherine is thought to have composed from scratch Chapters 3 & 4 in late 1832 or early 1833. They both deal with ministries that were outside the scope of the Presentation Rule, but that were intrinsic to the identity of the newly formed Sisters of Mercy- visitation of the sick and dying, and care of destitute women. Mary Sullivan rsm remarks "Chapter 3 is apparently, entirely Catherine's own composition." We are here very close to Catherine's vision and voice.

In her book *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Mary Sullivan outlines the document's various stages of revision and amendment, which culminated in approval of the Rule by Rome in 1841.

Clare Augustine Moore's specially illuminated copy, not to be confused with the simple "fair copies" made by her blood sister Mary Clare (Georgiana) Moore, was produced somewhat later.

- Chapter 3 commences with the following salient words: *Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him...* Often quoted as if it ended there the sentence actually continues *has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master, who has said, Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me.* Here we see Catherine making the connection with the Gospel parable of Matthew 25, where Jesus asserts his arena of compassion and care: with the least, the most needy, the most hungry, the most ill. Further, he establishes once and for all an unbreakable dynamic between himself, the needy and the one who seeks to respond. The Christian is never just doing good to or for a neighbour: he or she is drawn into communion with Jesus Himself through such service because of the identification Jesus claims with the one in need.
- The first part of Catherine's statement is crucial for us in terms of motivation and reckoning. It is Jesus who marks out the path, it is Jesus whom we desire to follow. It is here that our desire, so often weak and distracted, finds clear and resolute direction. Jesus is the protagonist, not Catherine herself, nor any Church structure or group. Two hundred years on, we honour Catherine pre-eminently because she honoured Jesus. Mary Sullivan rsm describes Chapter 3 as "remarkably Christological" and as such it expresses Catherine's hard won and lifelong profound relationship with Jesus. The Chapter is framed by references to Jesus Christ: the famous "principal path" at the beginning, and at the end the calling home from Visitation of the Sisters to pray in the chapel before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.
- Catherine's use of the word "excited" is noteworthy, reminiscent of her much loved word "animated" and having much the same meaning. Mercy excites, that is, it stirs to action, rouses to a response, calls forth mercy from the one in whom it is acting. Mercy itself, the attribute of God, rouses mercy in us to respond to the sick and dying, and by extension, to anyone in acute need. It is worth reading the rest of this Chapter 3, printed in full in Mary Sullivan's book, to glean insights into Catherine's own firmly held beliefs about how the sick and dying need to be approached. There is the emphasis on tenderness, the insistence on gentle honesty, with both the spiritual and temporal comfort of the person regarded as crucial to their care. This is the Catherine who did her apprenticeship in these matters for twenty years, sleeping with one eye and ear open close by the bedroom door of the invalid Mrs Callaghan at Coolock House.

THE WORDS OF JESUS

A few words in general about the Good Samaritan story itself before we consider Clare Augustine Moore's artwork and what she offers in her depiction of it.

- In his commentary on Luke's Gospel, *The Hospitality of God*, Jesuit Scripture scholar Brendan Byrne reminds us that much of the impact of the story that Jesus tells is lost on modern readers, particularly given that the expression "good Samaritan" has become axiomatic with helping and kindness. To the original listeners, and the lawyer who prompted the story, the impact was quite different. The notion of a *good Samaritan* was for them an oxymoron, with the same resonance as someone today calling a terrorist well-meaning or a

murderer well-intentioned. In some ways the story that Jesus tells is complex and certainly subversive, where subversive means turning the expected norms upside down. This is Jesus at his most provocative, and it begs the question of what kind of righteous subversion we are called to as Christians today. In what ways, in what situations are we called to justifiably turn things upside down?

- In her book *The Blessing of Mercy*, Veronica Lawson rsm provides an important insight into the non-human elements of the story she terms “agents of Mercy.” She asserts, *The Samaritan befriends the wounded traveller and draws on all available resources to care for him: wine and oil to dress the wounds, fabric for binding the wounds, his “own animal” as transport, finance (coins) for accommodation, companionship at the inn, provision for ongoing care. All the Earth elements that contribute to the well-being of the man who fell among the robbers become agents of womb-compassion. (The Blessing of Mercy, p.71)*

Each of these agents is a healing force, bringing comfort. They soothe and revivify. They possess their own intrinsic properties of transformation. One may ask oneself what are the agents of mercy that comfort and revivify you?

Veronica’s claim for our acknowledgement of the non-human elements of the story as “agents of mercy” has profound implications for the way we perceive and deal with our environment, and engage with all creatures and created matter great and small. The nuances of much of this are outside the scope of this article but demand further attention: “The present ecological crisis calls us to new ways of being neighbour...” (*The Blessing of Mercy*, p.72.)

- Another aspect of this idea of “agents of mercy” is that the non-human can be for us a mediator of God. In the Good Samaritan story the horse (if it is indeed a horse, because that is not specified in the story!) is crucial to advancing the healing and restoration of the injured person. Although Jesus does not comment on the disposition of the animal, and while philosophical questions about volition and intent are again, beyond the scope of this reflection, it is true to say that many people experience peace, healing and a sense of God in their dealings with the non-human elements of our planet and beyond. I remember many years ago reading a story in the English Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, about a woman whose childhood had been so horrendous that she could not relate to the metaphor of God as Father, nor God as Mother. When she tried to imagine the utter faithfulness and unconditional love of God she would think rather of her dog. That reality, that metaphor, helped her have some appreciation of the God of love and mercy. This was not a trite, sentimental story, but an account of grace.
- One of the unspoken aspects about the story of the Good Samaritan is the theme of *interruption*. How many of us today, with our disciplined schedules and timetables and carefully and strictly allotted activities, welcome or allow interruptions? How many of us are even attuned to the potential grace of the interruption? Sometimes interruptions overtake us anyway and we have no choice but to respond and deal with serious illness or unforeseen accident for ourselves or others close to us. Certainly, interruptions can range from the bothersome and distracting to the disastrous, but they can also be an invitation to turn aside from the well plotted path, from the modern fixation to control, and respond instead to the surprising, the salutary and the elementally important. At least sometimes, Mercy waits in the incidental and accidental.
- There is a quality about the care evinced by the Samaritan that goes beyond the normal, which must have made the story even more infuriating to its first hearers. As Brendan Byrne expresses it “the Samaritan sets about fulfilling in a most extravagant way the duties of mercy

and hospitality the other two had ignored.” (p.101) One of the nuances of the Hebrew word for mercy, *Hesed*, is the doing of more than can be reasonably expected, going beyond what duty would demand. Jesus invests the despised Samaritan with that quality. The example of such largesse is of course expressed by Jesus not only in his words but in his own deeds- in the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and in the ultimate sacrifice of His life on the cross.

- The Samaritan’s hospitality may be extravagant in the best sense of *Hesed*, but it is not a meretricious or short lived kind of gesture. He follows through, he makes provision for the recovery of the injured man, he comes back to see how things are going. It reminds me of the disposition of St. Exupery’s Little Prince- “you are responsible forever for what you have tamed...” Once you have entered into a truly mutually salvific act with someone, it cannot be discounted or rendered unimportant. Even if the Samaritan, his horse, the inn keeper and the injured man never meet again, they are bonded in the spirit.

THE ART

We come finally to examine Clare Augustine Moore’s depiction of the Good Samaritan story. (See *Figure 1. p.7*)

Our attention is first seized by the large decorated initial M which leads into the calligraphy of that pivotal phrase “*Mercy, the principal path*”:

- It is to the Good Samaritan story that Clare Augustine Moore turned for inspiration in decorating the large M of the word Mercy, and as already stated this was a unique choice. In her customary work we see myriad flowers, and those excruciatingly slowly executed leaves that Catherine bemoaned. (See Catherine’s letter dated March 5th, 1841, for one such example.) In Clare Augustine Moore’s canon of work we find numerous depictions of the Madonna and Child, and Crucifixions, a panoply of saints and martyrs, and a brilliant touch of feminist theology which has three Sisters of Mercy appearing as the Magi at the crib. But as far as I can ascertain this is the only instance of a Gospel story, a story told by Jesus, that she chose to render into art and on those grounds it begs for serious consideration both as art and as theology, particularly as it is giving visual accompaniment to words penned by Catherine McAuley. Whether or how Catherine and her early companions influenced the choice is unclear and seems impossible to prove one way or the other.
- At a fundamental level we can acknowledge that the story provided strong, immediately recognisable elements for Clare Augustine Moore to engage with- there’s blood and injury, a “visit” of sorts and responses that can be easily rendered into images. If you look carefully you can see the bottle of wine and the oil in the foreground. But the Good Samaritan story was not the only possible choice, and it has some provocative elements that go beyond helping and healing, as we have already commented, and which pose very confronting questions to those of us in the 21st Century.
- Consider the letter M itself firstly. (*Figure 2.*) It is overarching, organic lettering, vivid in blue, red and green and highlighted in the white filigree effect that forms the double arch and lends a certain life and movement to the frame, reminiscent of the rubrication method employed by the Celtic manuscript artists of the 8th century. The touch of gold lends depth and preciousness befitting the subject. The large M functions as a traditional diptych, the two parts embraced within the arches of the M. We need to examine the work closely to appreciate the detail and meaning Clare Augustine Moore infers and let our own imagination engage with her work.

- The most obvious aspect of the work is that the two parts of the story, the two possible responses to the situation, are clearly separated, which strongly depicts the disparity between the Samaritan helper and the priest and Levite who choose not to help. There is a wall between them, a great divide formed by the central column of the letter M. They operate in different landscapes and value systems. The priest and the Levite have justifiable religious reasons for not stopping. As Brendan Byrne points out, contact with the dead or imminently dead would prevent them performing their anticipated religious duties because of defilement under the Law. And yet if we listen to the definition of neighbour provided by Anna Burkes, in her book of short reflections on Mercy, we are compelled to call into question their lack of response and to examine our own status as neighbour. Neighbours... *are the people who put personal danger, reputation and cultural habits on hold. Neighbours jump in for us; they reach through the danger and search through the fumes. (The Quality of Mercy, p.22)* Reaching through the danger, searching through the fumes, whether metaphorical or literal, is a very risky and demanding undertaking. Most of us would surely be tempted to run from danger and to avoid the potential toxicity of fumes.
- Despite the disjunction between the responses of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, they are all nevertheless held within the embrace of the M, which suggests that no-one, no action, no lack of action, is outside the remedial grace of Mercy. It is never too late for Mercy, even for the priest and Levite who missed the opportunity to assist. They themselves are still held within the frame of Mercy, within the arch of Mercy, even if they do not yet know their need of it. As Pope Francis said in his announcement of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, “no one can be excluded from the mercy of God.”
- The way the artwork functions has the Samaritan, and indeed the horse, looking solicitously at the injured man. The Priest and Levite have their backs to him and do not meet his gaze. They saw him but they chose to avert their gaze rather like those who could not bear to look upon the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. This whole notion of looking, of seeing, is intrinsic to the story. All three travellers “see”; two of them respond by walking on. The third, the Samaritan *truly* sees and responds. To see truly is to respond truly. To be seen truly is to experience Mercy. Both the injured person and the Samaritan are seen for who they are by the other, and this enables the dynamic of Mercy to ensue.
- The right hand side of the diptych shows space and distance in a negative sense despite the apparent felicity of the landscape and the finely towered city the two are heading towards. There is distance even between the two figures. (See Figure 4.) They are solitary in their choices, their hands by their sides. By contrast, the Samaritan and his horse are gathered into a very intimate scene with the injured man, both of them reaching down and out to him. The three of them are bound together in this special episode of need and compassion. They are in close physical proximity, contiguous. (See Figure 3.) The two who walked on are small and isolated in the landscape. By definition the word *compassion* leads to connection, since etymologically it derives from the Latin “to suffer with”. The Samaritan is not just a helper, a rescuer, a provider. Those aspects of the story are important, but they are not the heart of the story. By stopping and getting involved, by allowing compassion to rise in him, he shares in a genuine way in the suffering of the injured man.
- Clare Augustine Moore renders the scene behind the Samaritan and the injured man dense with trees and overhanging rocks, and there is no discernible path. The path the priest and Levite are treading is, conversely, very clearly defined and well worn. It is the path of piety and respectability, valid in its way but inadequate to the need presented in the story.

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about the Good Samaritan story the day before he was assassinated. He pointed out that in the time of Jesus, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for its danger and difficulty, and was known as the "Way of Blood".

And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

However, King continues:

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

So, the Samaritan takes a serious risk in responding as he does, by focusing on the needs of the injured person rather than protecting his own safety. He could be placing himself in danger; he might be falling into a trap. But he takes the risk. The other two play it very safe, and part of us can appreciate their prudence, their caution. For the Samaritan the call to mercy overrides all other considerations. What was is it Catherine McAuley is reputed to have said? *It is better to relieve a hundred imposters, if there be such, than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty. (Familiar Instructions)*

The great prophet Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Communities, writes often about the vulnerability that ensues when one engages with the vulnerable. The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies this starkly in terms of the risks the Samaritan takes. It is a delicate and complex matter, risking hurt and misunderstanding, risking exploitation and abuse:

An encounter is not an exercise in power. Nor is it a demonstration of generosity through which we seek to "do good to" the other. It demands real humility and deep vulnerability. To be present to the other, to listen to and regard him or her with respect and attention, allows us to receive in our turn. This is a communion of hearts, a reciprocal gift, freely given. (Jean Vanier, Signs)

Conclusion

My aim in this reflection has been to explore what is revealed to us about mercy in the context of the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan, and to explore the dynamic between the Gospel story, the words of Catherine McAuley, and the artwork of Clare Augustine Moore.

Where has it taken us? Hopefully, to insist that we are called to give the benefit of the doubt, over and over. We are called to take the inadvisable risk, at least sometimes. And we are called, over and over, to use Martin Luther King Jr's expression, to reverse the question.

When we look at Clare Augustine Moore's decorated letter of Catherine McAuley's word, we are invited to affirm that all is held within the grace and space of that Big M for Mercy. All of us, the injured, the helper and healer, the creatures great and small, the indifferent and the stony hearted, the robbers and the inn-keeper, the risk-taker and the risk-avertter, are included in the extravagant largesse of Mercy. Along with the oil, the wine, and Jesus himself, who first told the story.

Mary Wickham rsm
2016.

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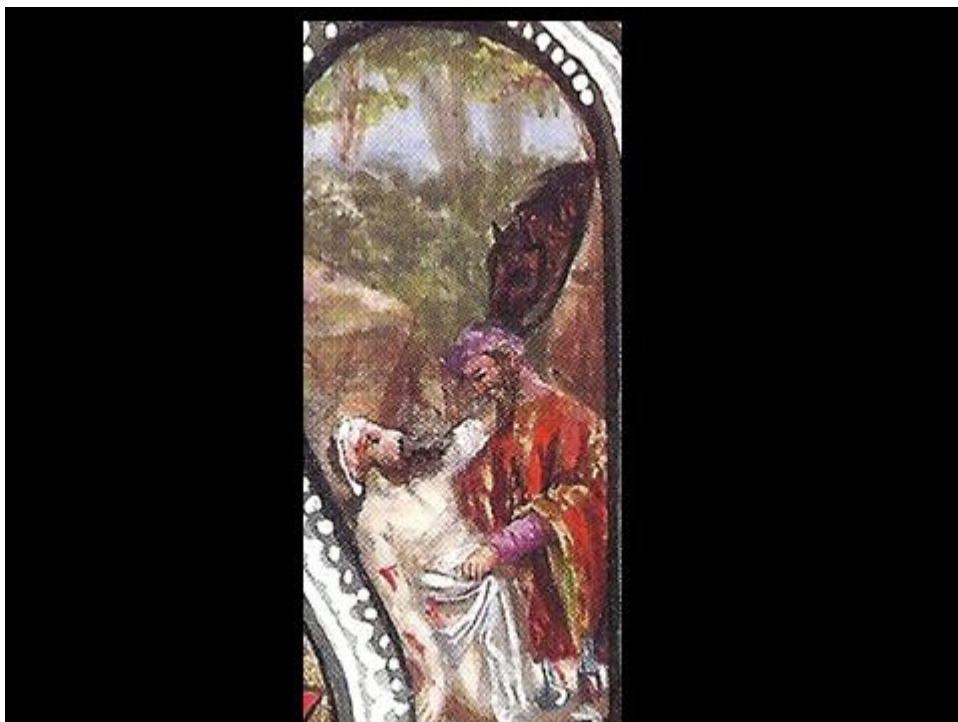
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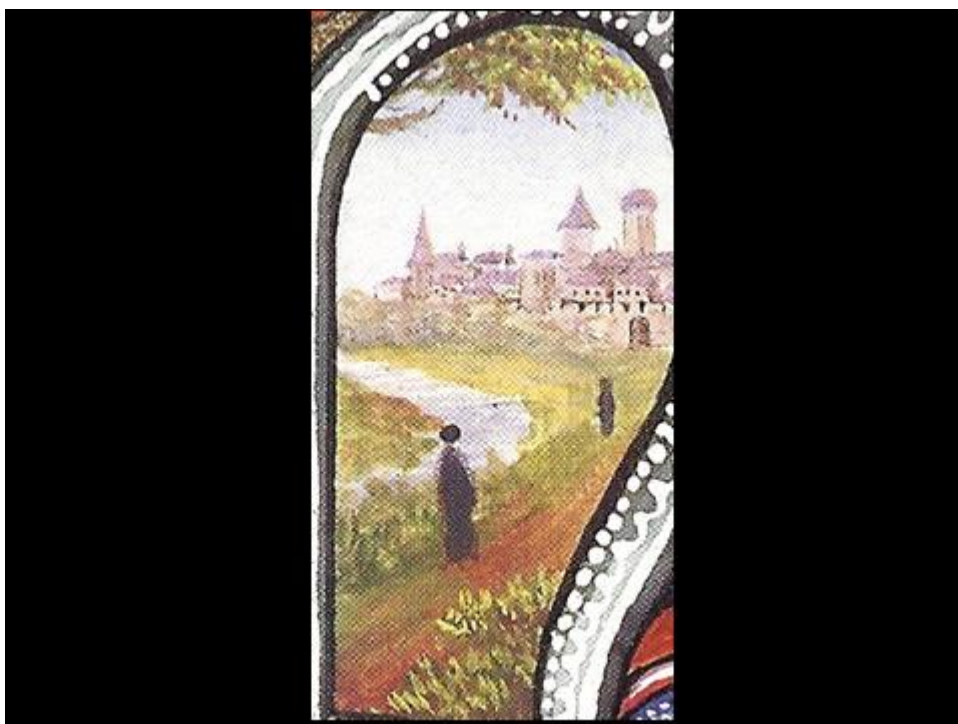
(Figure 1.)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3.)



(Figure 4.)

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Catherine McAuley and Earth:

“Ecology” was not a term with which Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) could have been familiar. However, many of her sayings and comments reveal the basic principles underlying her sense of the “world” (as she understood Earth), her attitudes toward it and all life on it, and her commitment to the personal efforts and sacrifices entailed in “ecological conversion and spirituality” (to use Pope Francis’s thoughtful expression).

1. Catherine’s understanding of the “world”:

- Catherine conceived of the world and all life on it as the Creation of a generous, merciful, and provident God.
- She regarded human beings not as the owners of this earth and its resources, but as “strangers and pilgrims” traveling in it, “every day preparing to enter our own country,” a “blissful eternity” in the presence of God (*PS 22-23; Correspondence 365*).
- She was humbly aware that in the universal scheme of things she was “‘but dust, and unto dust will soon return,’ after passing through these few years of pilgrimage” (*Correspondence 365*).
- She felt deep “gratitude of the heart” for God’s “many favours in this life and His great promises for the life to come” (*PS 14*).
- She recognized that God’s gifts in Creation are widely dispersed: “God has never bestowed all His blessings on one person” or one group of people (*PS 3*).

- Among the natural resources of Earth she most cherished fresh air and pure water which she regarded as a “free beverage,” to be available to everyone whenever they wished. She spoke particularly of the “pure sparkling spring water” of Birr (in the Irish midlands) and of its curative effect: “I never liked anything better than I now like a good drink of water” (*PS 28; Correspondence 347, 349*).
- Given her extensive experience in the Dublin cholera epidemic of 1832 and in the various typhus epidemics that assailed Ireland in the following decade, Catherine knew firsthand the widespread death that is, as we now understand, the result of contaminated water, inadequate means of hygiene, and environmental filth.

2. Catherine’s attitudes toward the life and resources of Earth:

In light of her sense of the created world as she knew it, Catherine espoused many attitudes about how human beings should respectfully live in it:

- She believed that we should live in solidarity with one another, especially the poor, the so-called “least”, the most vulnerable, and devote ourselves to seeking the common good, not just the good of the already privileged. Of herself she said:

“I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford” (*Correspondence 164*).
- She believed that “examination of conscience is a duty which no one can perform for you. . . . They cannot take your mind into their possession and say, ‘I will settle this matter for you.’” Were Catherine on Earth today, she would surely extend this personal examination to one’s treatment of Earth, all its life forms and resources (*PS 22*).
- She believed that since “the Lord and Master of our House and Home,” our dwelling in Creation, “is a faithful provider,” we should “never desire more than enough. He will give that and a blessing” (*Correspondence 366*).

- Consequently, “everything purchased for the use of the Sisters was of the poorest and plainest kind, and she would never allow a large provision of anything to be laid in, saying it was not according to poverty to have those kinds of stores” (Bermondsey Annals, in *CMcATM* 114). Thus she opposed greed, excessive consumption, and the accumulation of unnecessary things at the expense of others.
- She felt that lifestyle changes and reductions were inherently called for if one wished to live in a manner favoring Earth’s most vulnerable. Hence she gave up the comforts of her inheritance, her pleasant life in Coolock, and her own conveniences, even her own bed at times, recognizing that such self-denial for the sake of others was often necessary.
- Finally, she believed that decision-making should, whenever possible, occur at the local level, among the people most affected by the decision.

3. Catherine’s efforts and sacrifices:

A key principle of Catherine’s conduct, as she might today apply it to our understanding of the evolving universe, its care, and eco-justice, was the following: “While we place all our confidence in God—we must act as if all depended on our exertion” (*Correspondence* 323). This conviction led her to actions such as the following:

- walking instead of riding in her former Swiss carriage;
- embracing personal poverty and sacrifice for the sake of others’ good;
- prioritizing her own “convenience” well below that of others;
- bestowing *herself* in preference to material gift-giving;
- accepting the “crosses” offered by historical circumstances;
- choosing simple pleasures (music, dancing, poetry) rather than extravagant ones acquired at the expense of others;

- facing her own ignorance and deficiencies, and being willing to learn what she had not previously known;
- shunning “trifles” and being clear about what was truly “requisite.”

Although these “exertions” of Catherine McAuley and the early Sisters of Mercy were not consciously intended to address 21st century concerns about universal care for the life and gifts of Creation, they nonetheless point to conceptions, attitudes, and actions that directly and indirectly relate to a proper, present-day understanding of Earth and one’s required behavior on it. We do not live in a “house of plenty,” as Catherine recognized, and this fact necessitates self-education and self-examination as well as humility, prudence, large-mindedness, and generosity—all virtues that she and her companions valued and strove to embody.

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Mercy

Helena O'Donoghue

Mercy is often seen as an 'extra', an optional addendum to justice, and not really required for moral conduct. Commonly, it is seen as weak, sentimental, and even a place of peril. To be at the mercy of the elements, or of the ECB or of intruders is not a comfortable place to be. We live in that culture and are tainted by it. While we know that mercy is not a short cut to quick forgiveness, nor an easy escape from accountability, we can often see it as a sharing of surplus resources or a light response to wrongdoing. We think of it as a kind attitude, a particular gift, or a characteristic of a good person or even of the good God. But mercy is more than all these concepts; it is divine size, and is the personal face of the only God we know, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the very 'glory' of God shining on the face of Christ.

The first written articulation of who God is comes to us from our Judean roots. While roaming as a shepherd, Moses is startled by a mysterious bush fire and hears the words: 'I have seen the affliction of my people ... I have heard their cry ... and I mean to deliver them' (Ex3). God's first self-disclosure is that of seer and healer of affliction. Moses seeks further identification and the voice answers: 'I am Who I am ... God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and steadfast love' (Ex34). These are God's credentials – an identity and name by which empathy and action are interwoven into one. No other elaboration like power, perfection or judgement is given. Rather the Hebrew text uses the word '*rachamim*' (literally womb-love) which translates as brimming over with tenderness, compassion, abounding in kindness – in one word, mercy. This is not just the 'feminine' side of God for there is nothing in a womb without a father. God's whole self, whole heart, personally carries the misery – *miser cordia* – of those in slavery, indignity and sin, and makes a safe path to freedom, joy and communal identity. 'I myself will shepherd them and lead them to new pasture. There is no other God than the God who is/am mercy'.

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To know this mercy in some way is to be drawn into that space where the ache of God meets the ache of humanity and all creation. It is to stand on holy ground as we sense this dynamic nexus, this communion of aches, the burning bush where God's personal restoring love imbues, sustains and transfers into the weak bush – a template for what happens whenever we encounter the living God.

The Incarnation is the apex and fullness of that intercommunion, an awesome solidarity. Deliverance is not just the removal of pain and sin, it is also the event of birth. The divine ache meets the human ache in the utter smallness of a new-born child whose given name means 'saviour', deliverer. He is to become the shepherd who seeks out the lost, the strayed, the injured, the sick, to heal and bring them back to good pasture. He is the one who draws the sinner, gives rest to the burdened, feeds the hungry and becomes himself the bread of life. The same God who sent Moses on his mission of exodus from slavery, is the One who sends his Son, emptied of his Godhead, to be in on our reality and stand for the weak and oppressed with his very life. This solidarity, this prodigality of com-*passion*, is the very purpose of revelation, the essence of mercy. It is the 'glory of God'.

In the mystery of the Resurrection, the God and Father of Jesus pours forth that Spirit of compassion-love into disciples and apostles in all ages to be the burning bushes of their times, to be witnesses of God's abiding shepherding from generation to generation. 'Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful' Jesus tells us; 'feed my lambs and feed my sheep'. St Laurence O'Toole stands prominently among those disciples. People like him, like Venerable Catherine McAuley, saw it as a special favour of God to be carriers of mercy and defenders of the suffering poor. They, and countless others, were marked by *misericordia* to the core of their beings and their lives bore the watermark of compassion and deliverance.

In his letter announcing the Jubilee year, Pope Francis describes mercy as the 'summary of the Christian faith ... the mystery of the Trinity ... the bridge between God and man', 'the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us' (MV2). These are very large claims and warrant our deep reflection and humble openness to receive. They are reflected in the actions of Pope Francis where he makes the work of compassion – Lampedusa, prisoners, travellers in mourning – take precedence over the defence of doctrine. Cardinal Kasper, whose book on mercy had such influence on him, tells us that 'compassion is the ultimate ethic', and that mercy is the attribute of God which envelopes and infuses all the other divine attributes. Mercy is not a piece of God

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beside other pieces, it is God-size. Meister Eckhart says that we can call God good, we can call God love, but the best name for God is mercy. This is a far-cry from the narrow, wimpy, disparaging notion of mercy which often prevails among us.

What about justice? Mercy includes and subsumes justice because it goes beyond it to healing and restoration, and not just to the re-balancing of the justice scales. Mercy leads us on a journey from repentance, to atonement, and eventually to gratitude and a deep desire for wholeness. No one and no circumstance is beyond the transforming, liberating power of mercy. St John Paul II in his great encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* tells us that God's other name is mercy, and that 'mercy is the very content of our intimacy with God' (DM4). It is in this intimacy that I can authentically know myself as a sinner, as it registers acutely my turning away or avoiding the need of another. This intimacy burns away our selfishness and indifference. This is what we mean by salvation, by the emergence of a kingdom of forgiveness, fraternity and transforming love. God's graciousness then engages us as co-partners and missionaries of mercy, to reflect the shining glory of Jesus.

The cry of Hebrew slaves released the flood of mercy in Moses' time. Today, the cry of the migrant, the persecuted, the abused, the hungry, the homeless and our polluted earth home, call out for deliverance too. The works of mercy are an imperative from which we believers cannot excuse ourselves. Even our smallest efforts become evidence of the 'unstoppable power of the Resurrection Spirit' to quote Pope Francis in Cuba.

For me one powerful expression of mercy is intercession. We know what it is to pray for others, especially for someone who is very close to us. At first we are outside the pain or grief and we pray, get others to pray, we make efforts to get relief. But if we care enough, if we are disturbed enough, our intercession deepens as we try to engage with the pain, take it to ourselves, share it, and from out of our heart rises a passionate entreaty for relief, often taking us into the public domain. To truly intercede we must to some degree enter into, own and live out of the suffering of another. Such intercession, motivated by burning compassion and solidarity, releases not only the desire but the capacity to respond, to innovate, and open up new avenues of intervention towards forgiveness, healing, consolation and hope. It may be slow, it may be hard, it may be frustrating work, but the steadfast love of God urges us not to be despondent. Intercession always relies on the pilgrimage presence of the living God – a cloud by day, a fire by night. It banishes any sense we might have of being merciful out of our own abilities. We are but earthen vessels. In intercession we

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meet the liberating closeness of the God of the Exodus, the death-confounding paschal journey of Jesus, and the fire of the Holy Spirit making us shepherds, missionaries of mercy throughout the world. As the Father sent me, so I send you.

Francis tells us that 'Mercy is the force which reawakens us to new life'. The Extraordinary Jubilee Year, a year of the Lord's favour, is a fresh invitation to explore the height and depth, the length and breadth of God's merciful love for us and all creation. It is a year to reclaim mercy and proclaim the glory of God. The word jubilee comes from the Hebrew word for trumpet – *jobel*. Deliverance from affliction, however small, is a cause of joy, and so with the psalmist we can repeatedly sing 'his mercy endures forever; and the mercies of the Lord are new every day'. Let us give thanks and be servants of God-sized mercy for people and planet today.

Abrahamic Celebration of the Year of Mercy
An Abrahamic panel on Mercy in our Sacred Scriptures
JoEllen Duckor (Jewish), Sister Elizabeth Julian (Christian) and Sultan Eusoff (Muslim).
Date: Wednesday 18 May 2016
Venue: Pearce Room, St Joseph's Church, Mt Victoria

Mercy: The Beating Heart of the Bible
Elizabeth Julian RSM

My poor feijoa tree! When I looked at its miserable crop recently – 12 feijoas in total – I decided that once I had picked the fruit I would enlist my brother's help to dig the tree out and throw it away. My patience with it over the past couple of years had run out. Once again it had flowered magnificently at Christmas time and the signs were all there for a bumper harvest but its promises amounted to nothing. What a waste of space in my crowded Newtown backyard! 'Enough is enough!' I thought. Fortunately however, I was reminded of the parable, unique to Luke (13:6-9), about a fig tree soon to be pulled out because it had been unproductive for three years. The gardener complained, suggesting to the owner to be more patient. He wanted another year to look after the tree and fertilise it. Even an unproductive one deserves another chance. So in a couple of weeks' time my feijoa tree will be pruned, re-potted and fertilised – not destroyed. Watch this space as they say! The point of the parable is, of course, that God's mercy is never exhausted. There's always another chance. As Pope Francis said announcing the Jubilee Year of Mercy, 'No one can be excluded from the mercy of God.' And in his wonderful document of proclamation, *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Pope begins by saying that Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. So mercy is basically a description of God's nature, God's central attribute. God cannot be other than merciful. Everything in Jesus' life speaks of this mercy. All his actions and words witness to, reflect what mercy is. And Jesus says to us, 'Be merciful as God is merciful.' So we have to imitate God's mercy. As Ronald Witherup explains so simply, Like father, like son, like disciple.

Pope Francis says that the mercy of God is the beating heart of the Gospel (MV12). I would like to suggest that it's the beating heart of the entire Bible. Our hearts too must echo that beating, that pulsing of mercy. We have to develop a rhythm of mercy – a continuous habit that is as natural and as regular as our own heartbeat. We're usually unaware of our heartbeat but if we take our pulse we can feel it. If it should stop then we could be in big trouble.

Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831, lived such a rhythm of mercy. She said:

Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular

manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master, who has said, Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me.

So Jesus must be the beginning, middle and end of all our endeavours as we strive to do mercy for 'the lost, the last and the least' here in Wellington — Bishop Justin Duckworth's phrase.

Pope Francis in his Lenten Message, 'The Works of Mercy on the Road of the Jubilee', urges us to practise what the Church's tradition calls the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. These works are not just pious feelings. They are concrete actions – we'll get messy, we'll get our hands dirty, but these works will keep our heart beating with mercy. So mercy is a verb, an action, mercy is something we do.

In this presentation I will first outline a key understanding of mercy from the First Testament; second look at the biblical underpinnings of the works of mercy; and third give a New Testament perspective on mercy.

First Testament

When we turn to the First Testament, God's mercy, not God's wrath, is writ large throughout. Basically there are four Hebrew words which in English, translate as mercy (with various nuances): *rahamîm*, *hesed*, *hanan*, and *hus*. This presentation will refer mainly to the first term.

The root word *rhm* (to show mercy) refers to the tender love of parents towards children and of God toward humans. Generally the noun *rahamîm* (mercy, compassion, love) denotes a quality of God. It is the completely gratuitous, unconditional, merciful love that we cannot explain rationally. The word *rehem* (womb), comes from *rhm*. Thus, the adjective *rahûm* (compassionate, merciful) describes womb love, the kind of attachment a woman has for a child. It is only ever used of God. So the prophet Isaiah says:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Isa 49:15).

Throughout the First Testament we see the God who creates, saves and judges but underlying all God's activity is a God who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exod 34:6). The first two adjectives – merciful and gracious – never describe people but they describe God in a great variety of settings. For example, the entire formula is found in individual petitions for deliverance and as motivation for national and divine repentance:

Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,

for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing. (Joel 2:13)

Scripture scholars constantly remind us, that all biblical language about God is metaphorical. The description of God as 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger rich in steadfast love and faithfulness' is considered to be a controlling metaphor since this fundamental character informs all of God's actions throughout the First Testament. We first find this moving proclamation in the Book of Exodus (34:6-8):

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,
'The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation.'
And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped.

This key text is located in a section (Exod 32-34) which describes how the Israelites under Aaron sinned against God by making a golden calf, how God punished their infidelity by sending a plague, how God forgave them, and how Moses acted as mediator in the restoration of the covenant. The theophany or experience of God which the passage describes is not so much a description of physical attributes as one of divine characteristics (merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness). And because God is merciful God spreads out the punishment over three or four generations. Even though Moses doesn't ask for God's name as he did earlier when he had the burning bush experience (Exod 3:13-15), God gives it anyway! God's name 'Lord,' is a revelation of God's essential being, God's essence and is clearly identified with God's mercy and graciousness. This identification suggests that mercy is constitutive of the very nature of God. This passage (Exod 34:6-8) supplies the language Israel will use to speak to God and to speak about God. The rich array of terms – merciful, gracious slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving, becomes Israel's most characteristic or typical speech about God. This language will be used repeatedly to describe God both in hymns of praise about God (e.g., Ps 111:4-9):

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;

he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.

and in prayers of complaint to God (e.g., Ps 86:14-15):

O God, the insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.
But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Verse 15 appears in different versions in different contexts with different functions throughout the First Testament. It is speech to which Israel turns repeatedly in moments of crisis.

As well as the golden calf episode, two other crises evoke God's mercy and everlasting love: the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE characterised in terms of a marriage and divorce metaphor (Hos 2:2-23); and the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE characterised again by divorce imagery (Isa 54). The divine oracle in response to each crisis (Hos 2:19-20; Isa 54:7-10), the speech that resolves each crisis uses the same language as the first oracle: *rhm* (mercy) and *hesed* (everlasting love).

The moving proclamation becomes a creedal recital throughout the First Testament, e.g., Ps 103:8; 145:8; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Joel 2:13. And Jonah, the reluctant prophet, must have really had the phrase drummed into him. He tries to flee from God precisely because, as he says, 'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Jonah 4:2)! Jonah was devastated to learn that the dreaded Ninevites had experienced this merciful God. To Jonah's way of thinking, surely such a God belonged only to Israel!

Thus Exodus 36:6-8 is a key text in helping to articulate the very character of God throughout the First Testament. It is deeply entrenched in Israel's memory and used time and time again in different circumstances. This merciful God is the God who over and over again gives people another chance. Although the word 'merciful' is not

found in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, God's mercy is writ large there too: God makes clothes for the first couple to protect them after their expulsion from the garden; God marks Cain the murderer for his own protection; God makes a new beginning with Noah after the flood. But again the people forget who they are and alienate themselves from one another and from God. Yet the God of mercy never abandons them, instead gives them another new beginning by calling Abraham and Sarah. This merciful God, the God who over and over again gives people another chance is captured beautifully in Deuteronomy:

Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. (4:31)

And in the Book of Wisdom:

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things,
and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent. (11:23)

The prophet Hosea provides a moving portrait of a distraught, almost heart-broken but fiercely determined God:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (Hos 11:8-9)

The First Testament for Christians ends with Malachi's promise that God would send the prophet Elijah (4:5). Thus God's mercy has not ended.

Works of Mercy

It is in the First Testament, too, that we find the biblical underpinnings of the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, giving drink to the thirsty and burying the dead. ('Corporal' means 'of or belonging to the body'.) The corporal works of mercy then refer to acts of mercy that relate to physical needs.

The prophet Zechariah repeats a message found throughout the First Testament:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (7:9-10)

The author of Sirach writing to encourage Jews to maintain their traditions in an increasingly Hellenistic world (4:1-5) advises:

My child, do not cheat the poor of their living,
and do not keep needy eyes waiting.
Do not grieve the hungry,
or anger one in need.
Do not add to the troubles of the desperate,
or delay giving to the needy.
Do not reject a suppliant in distress,
or turn your face away from the poor.
Do not avert your eye from the needy,
and give no one reason to curse you.

Some of the traditional works of mercy are found in the prophet Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them? (58: 6-7)

In this passage then we find three: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked. We find the other works practised by various people. Perhaps they had developed a mercy beat, a mercy rhythm to their daily lives? In the Book of Genesis we find Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel giving drink to the thirsty Isaac at the well outside the city of Aramnaharim (Gen 24:18). In the days of the divided monarchy King Ahaziah of Judah visits the sick King Joram of Israel who is recovering from battle wounds (2 Kings 8:29). And we can find an example of visiting the imprisoned. The second time the prophet Jeremiah is imprisoned he is thrown into a muddy cistern (Jer 38:6). Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian servant, successfully pleads with King Zedekiah of Judah for Jeremiah's release. He visits him and throws some old clothes and rags down into the cistern for Jeremiah to put between his armpits and the ropes and pulls him out of his prison. The seventh work of mercy, burying the

dead is found at the end of First Book of Samuel. The inhabitants of Jabish-gilead bury Saul and his three sons under a Tamarisk tree after they are defeated by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31:11ff). Burying the dead is also found in the Book of Tobit together with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Finally we have the beautiful account in Genesis of a weeping Abraham, a stranger in a foreign land trying to buy land from the Ephron, the Hittite, to bury his wife Sarah. Abraham is unwilling to accept the field of Machpelah with a cave and trees as a gift from the people of the land and insists on buying it for 400 shekels of silver (Gen 23).

We find six of these corporal works of mercy in the well-known Parable of the Sheep and Goats towards the end of the Gospel of Matthew. The king says:

for 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.' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matt 25:35-36, 40)

Pope Francis, like Catherine McAuley before him in 1833, reminds us that these are the criteria upon which we will ultimately be judged.

The spiritual works of mercy are less well known. We are urged to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead. Such practices will foster our mercy rhythm of life. Again we find their underpinnings in the First Testament. The prophet Isaiah tries to counsel King Ahaz of Judah to remain firm in faith. The king is under intense pressure to join a coalition against the dreaded enemy, Assyria (Isa 7:1-9). The faithful King Jehoshaphat instructs the ignorant in all the cities of Judah (2 Chron 17:7) about the meaning of God's law. Brave Samuel admonishes Saul for failing to obey God (1 Sam 15ff). The prophet Jeremiah comforts a sorrowful and exhausted Baruch, his friend and secretary, with a message of hope (Jer 45:1ff). Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers and forgives them for trying to kill him (Gen 45:1-5). David bears wrongs patiently when Shimei, son of Gera, repeatedly curses and throws stones at him for trying to take back the throne usurped by his son Absalom (2 Sam 16:5-14). Finally we see Abraham praying for the living and dead of Sodom (Gen 18:22-33).

By this stage some of you will be saying, 'Elizabeth, what about the women of the First Testament? Surely they were engaged in works of mercy? Apart from Rebecca you have mentioned only men!'

Well! Who can forget those remarkable women who played such a crucial role in Moses' very survival (Exod 2:1-10)? It was the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, Moses' mother, Jochebed, his sister Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh who sheltered, clothed and fed him and admonished those trying to kill him. Without their works of mercy Moses would not have survived. It was Huldah, the prophet from whom Hilkiah, the high priest, sought counsel to verify the Book of the Law found when cleaning up the Temple (2 Kings 22:13-16). It was Deborah, the prophet and judge to whom people would come for advice (Judges 4:4-5). It was Tamar who admonished Judah, her father-in-law for failing in his duty (Gen 38). It was Judith who chided the rulers, for putting conditions on God. She reminded them of God's actions in the past and exhorted them to trust in God. (Judith 8:11-13). These are but a few examples of explicit works of mercy. Many more implicit ones could be found. For example, I am sure there would have been much 'comforting of the sorrowful' by and among Naomi, Ruth and Orpah in the Book of Ruth on the deaths of their husbands and sons.

And if we jump forward at this point to the New Testament we meet the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus asks for a drink (John 4:7) and the feisty Canaanite woman who admonishes Jesus (Matt 15:21-28). It is the faithful women, who early in the morning take the oil and spices they have prepared, to anoint the body of Jesus (Luke 24:1). Finally we have the story of the Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles (9:36-43). The only New Testament woman called a disciple she is remembered for works of mercy – she makes clothes for the widows of Joppa. (Her ministry must have been respected by the whole community not just the widows because at her death two men are sent to get Peter.)

(In this morning's Dominion Post there is a very moving account of burying the dead. Duncan Garner describes the email he received from Chelsea Tautala, a funeral director, who cared for baby Moko Rangitoheriri after his care-givers' brutal beating and torture. She collected his body from the hospital and assured Duncan that from that moment he was never left alone.)

On Saturday many of you will be engaged in the corporal works of mercy and perhaps some of the spiritual ones too. With the current ecological crisis we have to ask what does it mean to do these works of mercy in the light of care for our earth? The prophet Hosea writing in the 8th century BCE paints a horrifying picture of environmental degradation resulting from human behaviour which could very well describe our current situation:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,

and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (4:1-3)

Perhaps the land, the animals, the birds and the fish are part of 'the lost, the last and the least' today, asking for mercy from us. Throughout *Laudato si'* Pope Francis challenges us to broaden our horizons to include the natural world, our common home.

(Recalling here my feijoa tree, some of you will have noticed that I was discussing the tree purely in terms of what it could produce for me rather than recognising its intrinsic value as a tree. Perhaps it is trying to tell me that it is too cramped in its current pot, that it is hungry and thirsty, and that it would really like a feijoa friend close by. I need to be merciful to my tree.)

Throughout the First Testament then, mercy is a very rich concept indeed. It is closely associated with womb love, compassion, loving kindness, faithfulness, tenderness, grace, favour, steadfastness, forgiveness, loyalty and pity. While it is a divine attribute or quality, those receiving God's free gift must in turn be merciful to others especially to those most in need, 'the lost, the last and the least' in all of God's creation.

New Testament

For Christians the clearest model of mercy is, of course, Jesus. His actions often speak louder than his words because he expresses mercy in specific, concrete actions. We see him eating with sinners and prostitutes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, welcoming all manner of outcasts, teaching his sometimes obtuse disciples, and patiently answering questions. Jesus' mercy is remarkable for its inclusiveness. He heals and comforts all-comers without distinction, Jews and Gentiles. Of the ten lepers who cry out, 'Jesus Master have pity on us, the one who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan, an outsider (Luke 17:16). In the Gospel of Matthew it is a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:22), a social and religious outsider, who calls out to Jesus as Son of David for mercy. Similarly, Jesus tells his listeners that the tax collector, who prays, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' went home justified (Luke 18:13-14). Thus Jesus' personalises his mercy. It's never generalised but clearly demonstrated in his daily encounters with specific individuals and groups across society.

As poet James K Baxter puts it:

‘Truth’ - he said, and - ‘Love’ - he said,
But his purest word was - ‘Mercy’ -

Two words in particular are used in the New Testament to denote mercy or compassion: *eleos* (mercy) and forms of the verb *oiktiro* (to be sympathetic). These words describe the compassion of God, as well as the compassion that Christians should have for one another. Thus Jesus says ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36). Neither *eleos* nor *oiktiro* is ever used with reference to Jesus. The word that the New Testament writers use to describe the compassion of Jesus is *splanchnon*. Originally it referred to the lower part of the body, especially the womb or the loins. Later it came to refer to profound feelings or emotions. Except for its use in three parables, when it is used as a verb it is only ever used of Jesus. Thus Jesus is moved with compassion (we might say ‘gutted’) at the plight of the blind men (Matt 20:34), the leper (Mark 1:41), the boy with the demon (Mark 9:22) and the harassed and helpless crowds (Matt 9:36; 14:14). Out of compassion Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes (Matt 15:32) and raises the widow’s son from the dead without her even asking (Luke 7:13).

The verb form of *splanchnon* is used in the well-known parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:27). In the first parable God is characterised as compassionate. The second parable provides a model of how Christians should treat one another while the third parable refers to both God and Christians (18:33). The Samaritan ‘sees’ and is ‘moved with compassion’ in the same way as Jesus ‘sees’ and is ‘moved with compassion’ for the widow of Nain (Luke 7:13). It’s an overwhelming, gut wrenching, passionate emotion that comes right from the very depths of his being. Compassion (*splanchnon*) then is a divine quality that, when present in human beings such as the Samaritan, the hated enemy enables them to feel deeply the suffering of another and furthermore, to do something about it. It never remains just at the feeling level – there is always action. However, as Veronica Lawson points out, ‘The present ecological crisis calls us to new ways of being neighbour...’ (*The Blessing of Mercy*, p.72.)

The word most often used in the New Testament for compassion or mercy is *eleos* indicating emotion aroused at the undeserved suffering of others. When this word refers to God it signifies steadfast love or covenantal fidelity. For example, Mary in her *Magnificat* praises God whose ‘mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation’ (Luke 1:50, 54). Similarly Zechariah’s *Benedictus* praises God who ‘has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant’ (Luke 1:72). Later in this canticle God’s mercy is described as ‘tender’ (1:28). The Church uses these two beautiful hymns in its evening and morning prayer respectively. Ronald Witherup describes them as bookends of mercy consecrating each day in remembrance of God’s merciful actions. *Eleos* is also used to describe

God's attitude to sinners and implies new life or rebirth (e.g., Eph 2:4; Titus 3:5). The author of the First Letter to Peter puts it this way:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Pet 1:3)

Those who were sick begged Jesus for *eleos*. The early Christians included the word in some of their formulas for greeting and blessing (Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2).

In Luke's three memorable parables of a lost sheep, coin and son (15:1-32), Jesus shows us a God with a 'lost and found' department. With reference to these parables, the NZ bishops remind us in their recent pastoral letter, 'Be Merciful' that indeed nothing in creation is to be excluded from God's mercy: animal, mineral, or human.

Mercy is not a private matter. We need to tell others about the mercy we have experienced. After freeing the demoniac Jesus entrusts him with a mission: 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you. (Mark 5:19). The Lectionary will remind us on Friday that 'the Lord is compassionate and merciful' (James 5:11).

Jesus' command 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36) is basic to an understanding of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Likewise the beatitude 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matt 5:7) clearly connects the receiving of mercy with being merciful to others. Jesus wants works of mercy rather than piety (Matt 9:13; 12:7). We see this most clearly in the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:21-46).

Paul's letters provide us with a wonderful portrait of a man utterly and passionately convinced of God's mercy in his own life. This mercy came through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From the moment of his call described like a First Testament's prophet's call in Galatians (1:15-16), Paul is alive with God's mercy. He describes how God's mercy sustains him and his co-workers in their ministry (2 Cor 4:1), how inclusive God's mercy is (Rom 10:12), and how we must be ambassadors/agents of God's mercy (2 Cor 5:18-19). He urges us to do works of mercy with cheerfulness (Rom 12:8). He explains to Timothy that because he has received God's mercy for his past persecution of Christians he can be an example for others (1 Tim 1:13-16). If he can receive mercy for his former deeds then anyone can. Paul acknowledges that it is God's mercy that saves us, not something that we do (Titus 3:5).

Finally, Paul's understanding of God's gift of mercy and our responsibility to be merciful is beautifully captured here:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (2 Cor 1:3-4)

As we have seen then, God's mercy is writ large through the whole Bible. Indeed it is the beating heart of the Bible. As the psalmist prays:

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.(Ps 25:6),

may that be our prayer too. And may 'Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him... excite' (CMcAuley) i.e., inspire you, call forth mercy in you tomorrow, as you respond to the needs of 'the lost, the last and the least' (JDuckworth) here in Wellington.

Let the beat go on!

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HEARING THE VOICE OF EARTH IN THE LUKAN PARABLE OF THE POUNDS¹

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Context informs any reading of a biblical text. My reading of the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke (19:11–27) is informed by seeing and hearing the desperate plight of so much of the Earth community.² Suffering and brokenness within the Earth community is widespread and diverse. In this article, I seek to bring two examples of this suffering and brokenness from within the current Australian context, namely the fracking of Earth and human trafficking, into dialogue with the Lukan Parable of the Pounds. What insights do we glean or questions do we raise from weaving together this context and the Lukan text? In line with the ecological hermeneutics developing out of the Earth Bible project,³ my reading of the parable will also utilize hermeneutics of suspicion, identification and retrieval in order to bring to the surface the pain of Earth represented in the Lukan text, and to allow the voice of the other-than-human Earth community to be heard, albeit implicitly, in the words of the third slave.

The brokenness caused by fracking is the first of the examples upon which I draw. As in other parts of the world, gas companies in Australia are mining to access large reserves of coal-seam gas and shale gas. For all shale gas extraction and cases where coal-seam gas is difficult to extract, the mining technique incorporates the process of hydraulic fracturing or fracking to extract the gas. Fracking is the high-pressured injection of a mixture of water, chemicals and sand into a well in order to fracture the rock and obtain access to gas reserves that are otherwise difficult to tap.⁴ One of the greatest concerns with regard to contemporary fracking is the long-term

1 This article is an expanded version of a paper that I presented at the SBL Meeting, San Diego, November, 2014.

2 I am using the term “Earth community” to refer to the planet Earth with its more-than-human (i.e., human and other-than-human) constituents.

3 See Norman C. Habel, “Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 3–5.

4 Damian Barrett, “What is Fracking?” ABC Science, <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2013/12/04/3861669.htm> (accessed February 13, 2015).

effect on the sustainability and wellbeing of Earth. The wide-ranging effects of the gas mining, and fracking in particular, on Earth, both below and above the ground, can be devastating but the welfare of the Earth community does not appear to be the major concern of those driving these fracking projects.

In April 2013, the ABC screened a *Four Corners* program entitled “Gas Leak!” which investigated Government approval processes for some of Australia’s largest coal-seam gas developments, as well as detailing some of the effects of these gas projects on the land where they are carried out and the communities located there. The program revealed the damage and dangers to the land and the water reserves resulting from inadequate and flawed process: “The documents detail an approval process that was rushed, made with insufficient information, and put commercial considerations above environmental ones.”⁵ Earth’s resources have been open to exploitation by gas companies for economic gain, but at what environmental and social cost?⁶

The second example upon which I draw is that of human trafficking which is a lucrative enterprise having global effects. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it is not possible to give a reliable estimate of the global number of trafficked persons because of the “hidden populations” of those trafficked.⁷ The end results of human trafficking, a modern-day form of slavery, continue to be evident in Australia, a destination country for trafficked persons. The motivation of the human traffickers is monetary gain: “Different trafficking operations have one key element in common: the business around the exploitation of the victims. With a few exceptions ..., the vast majority of trafficking is aimed at obtaining economic benefit from the labour and services extorted from the victims.”⁸

5 “Gas Leak!” ABC *Four Corners*, April 1, 2013, obtained from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayhPNCUoQ7I> (accessed February 12, 2015).

6 In Victoria, there is currently a moratorium on coal-seam gas exploration and fracking as the Victorian Government reviews the recommendations of a parliamentary inquiry into the matter. Fracking continues in areas of Queensland and New South Wales. A January 2015 news article reveals the environmental issues caused by recent fracking. See ‘AGL Suspends Operations at Gloucester Coal Seam Gas Project after Discovery of Potentially Toxic Chemicals’, ABC News, January 27, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-27/agl-suspends-operations-at-gloucester/6049922> (accessed February 13, 2015).

7 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*, 30, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/GLOTIP_2014_full_report.pdf (accessed February 11, 2015).

8 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking*, 46.

These two contemporary examples of fracking and human trafficking reflect a similar dynamic of a person/company with power exerting control over other humans and/or the Earth itself and exploiting their bodies, labour and produce for maximum profit. Both situations cause pain and brokenness in those exploited. The pain is not isolated to the exploited, however, with the suffering being experienced by wider communities. Images of parents searching for their trafficked children, for instance, give insight into the anguish of entire families and communities who grieve for the “lost.”⁹ Another instance is the devastation to some farming communities caused by coal-seam gas mining, as highlighted in the ABC *Four Corners* program, “Gas Leak!”¹⁰ The interconnectedness of the Earth community means that the suffering of one affects the wellbeing of many.

Moreover, in both examples, the brokenness caused by exploitation is not always immediately obvious. On the surface level, much of Australian society operates with little or no recognition of human trafficking. Many Australians are either unaware of or choose not to see “the hidden population” of trafficked persons within Australia. Similarly, on the surface level, landscapes can appear peaceful while the underground damage to water and land caused by mining activity becomes evident only at a later stage.¹¹ These examples of contemporary violence and exploitation raise issues and questions which can be brought into dialogue with a reading of the Lukan Parable of the Pounds.

The Parable of the Pounds (19:11–27) is placed in a key position within the Lukan Gospel. It occurs immediately after the story of Zacchaeus, a rich man who gives half of his possessions to the poor (19:1–10),¹² and in the previous chapter, Jesus challenges a rich ruler to distribute his wealth to the poor (18:18–25). Several times the Gospel of Luke presents warnings about

9 See, for instance, the November 2, 2014 report in ABC News of the fate of more than two hundred schoolgirls who were kidnapped in Chibok, Nigeria, and then forced into marriages. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-02/boko-haram-leader-claims-kidnapped-girls-have-been-married-off/5860332> [accessed February 20, 2015]).

10 “Gas Leak!” ABC *Four Corners*, April 1, 2013.

11 Drawing on the violent reality underlying the Pax Romana, Leah Schade has coined the phrase “Pax Methana” to refer to the perception of a peaceful landscape which hides the violence inflicted on Earth by fracking. Leah Schade, “Is Rom 8:9–15 Truly a Green Text? An Ecofeminist Critique,” paper presented at SBL Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 25, 2014.

12 While a number of translations give the words of Zacchaeus in 19:8 in a future sense, the verbs *didōmi* and *apodidōmi* are in the present tense.

the accumulation of wealth (for example, 6:24; 12:13–21; 16:19–31). The reader is therefore attuned to be suspicious of any character who is intent on getting richer at any cost.¹³ The parable is the last story before Jesus enters Jerusalem (19:28–40).

In the traditional reading of the Parable of the Pounds the third slave is criticised for his inaction and is contrasted negatively with the first two slaves who act according to their master's expectations.¹⁴ Approaching the text with a hermeneutic of suspicion, it is evident that the traditional reading of the parable is anthropocentric. The focus in such a reading is on the one identified as "of noble birth" (*anthrōpos tis eugenēs*), his slaves (*douloi*) and the citizens (*politai*) who oppose the nobleman. Earth's other-than-human community is given little or no attention.

When we read in the Parable of the Pounds that a nobleman travels to a distant country or land (*chōra*) in order to receive or take hold of (*labein*) a *basileia* for himself and is successful in that aim (19:12, 15), the history of Herod the Great and Archelaus each travelling to Rome to gain approval to rule is evoked.¹⁵ This, in turn, triggers our hermeneutic of suspicion. Like Herod the Great and Archelaus, the nobleman assumes that he can take possession of a *basileia*, all the Earth community contained within geographic boundaries of human determination. He displays no awareness of the intrinsic value of the Earth community, rather it is something to be ruled over and exploited.

The parable presents a contrast between the *basileia* of the nobleman (19:12, 15) and the "basileia of God," a key term at the beginning of this text (19:11), and throughout Luke's Gospel.¹⁶ Our contemporary context also

13 Such a reader would also be suspicious of contemporary individuals or mining companies whose wealth comes at the expense or wellbeing of others, human and other-than-human.

14 See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible 28, 28a (New York: Doubleday, 1981, 1985), 2:1232–33; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 700–701; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 309; R. T. France, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 302–5; David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 230–31. While David E. Garland's interpretation of the parable differs from a "traditional reading," he nevertheless still describes the third slave as careless and afraid. See David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 754–64; also John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 380–82.

15 So Josephus, *Ant.* 14.370–89; 17.219–22, 299–303.

16 The term "basileia of God" occurs 32 times in the Gospel of Luke: 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60, 62; 10:9, 11; 11:20; 13:18, 20, 28, 29; 14:15; 16:16; 17:20(x2), 21; 18:16, 17, 24, 25, 29; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16, 18; 23:51.

invites us to draw a contrast between the ethic of the *basileia* of God and the motivation of those who seek to build an empire or *basileia* for themselves through violent and exploitative means, such as fracking and trafficking. Anne Elvey describes the Lukan *basileia* of God as “divine gift,” displaying the “hospitality of God.”¹⁷ From a snapshot of the uses of the term in Luke, we see that the *basileia* of God is good news (4:43; 8:1) and is welcomed graciously by those who do not exercise power over the Earth community (6:20; 18:17), as opposed to those who claim property and riches for themselves (18:24). While some aspects of these descriptions of the *basileia* of God are anthropocentric, there are also aspects which allow us to imagine a broader vision for the *basileia* of God, one that incorporates the entire Earth community.

During his Galilean ministry, for instance, Jesus is described as proclaiming the *basileia* of God in and through the cities and villages (for example, 4:43; 8:1). Here, the words *polis* and *kōmē* are usually understood as the human inhabitants of a city or village, but we can expand our vision to include other-than-human elements. The entire Earth community in that region hears Jesus’ proclamation. In the Gospel of Luke, as Elvey notes, the winds and the water (8:25) and a mulberry tree (17:6) are characterized as obeying commands. The verb *hupakouō* incorporates the verb *akouō*, to hear. Thus, these Earth elements hear and obey. In 19:40, we also learn that “the stones would shout out.”¹⁸ Both voice and hearing are ascribed to other-than-human members of the Earth community in the Gospel of Luke. It is possible therefore, to envision Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of the *basileia* as inclusive of the entire Earth community.¹⁹

In the same way we can envision Earth which is the subject of fracking as hearing and having voice. With such an understanding, a range of images and questions come to mind: What does Earth hear in the fracking process? Is the voice of Earth heard amid the violence wrought on it? Perhaps Earth

17 Anne Elvey, “Storing Up Death, Storing Up Life: An Earth Story in Luke 12.13-34,” in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski (Earth Bible 5 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 103. For a discussion of the theme “hospitality of God” in the Gospel of Luke, see Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), esp. 4–5.

18 See Anne F. Elvey, *The Matter of the Text: Material Engagements between Luke and the Five Senses*, *The Bible in the Modern World* 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 128, 132–33.

19 This is also suggested by Michael Trainor: “God’s *basileia* is not exclusively anthropocentric but inclusive of all creation.” Michael Trainor, *About Earth’s Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, *The Earth Bible Commentary* 2, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 130.

cries out in the voice of toxic waste products?²⁰ Who hears this cry and what is the response?

In 6:20, part of the Lukan Beatitudes, the *ptōchoi*, the poor, destitute and powerless,²¹ are told the *basileia* of God is theirs. It is the Lukan *ptōchoi*, therefore, whose relationships within the Earth community model the values which epitomize God's *basileia*. We learn about these values early in the Gospel of Luke (4:5–7) when Jesus refuses the offer of *tas basileias tēs oikoumenēs* made by the devil (*diabolos*).²² Jesus rejects the opportunity to assume power over Earth. God's *basileia* is characterised by right relationship amongst the Earth community, and this is what is modelled by the Lukan *ptōchoi*.²³ In 4:18–19, the *ptōchoi* are linked with captives, the blind and the oppressed as being the targets of Jesus' mission. The oppressed are literally “the shattered or broken” (*tethrausmenous*). Jesus proclaims and embodies release, so that they can flourish. Again, while the *ptōchoi* and the oppressed are usually understood in relation to humanity they can be understood with respect to all the Earth community.²⁴ As we will see, the *ptōchoi* and the oppressed in the Parable of the Pounds are more-than-human.

Within the parable, the first voice of resistance to the nobleman's actions comes from his citizens (*hoi politai autoi*) who protest that they do not want

20 While the direct injection of toxic BTEX chemicals by mining companies in the fracking process is now banned in some states in Australia, the fracking process can itself produce these dangerous chemicals. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-27/agl-suspends-operations-at-gloucester/6049922> (accessed March 4, 2015).

21 See definitions in Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 339.

22 The word *oikoumenē* can refer generally to the whole Earth, but is also used to refer to the Roman Empire, such as in Luke 2:1 where Caesar Augustus decrees that all the *oikoumenē* should be registered. See Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker [BAGD], *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 699. Note that the BAGD, as with several other lexicons, gives the definition “inhabited earth,” where the inhabitants are understood as humanity. I have used the term Earth, so that it can be inclusive of all the Earth community.

23 My understanding here has been influenced by the work of Elaine Wainwright. In a study of the Matthean beatitudes (Matt 5:1–11), Wainwright reads the “poor in spirit” as those who are in right relationships in the Earth community: “the poor in spirit’ know who they are in the simplicity of their being, which is gift, and how they are in relation to all Earth's others.” Elaine Wainwright with Robert J. Myles and Carlos Olivares, *The Gospel According to Matthew: The Basileia of the Heavens is Near at Hand*, Phoenix Guides to the New Testament (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 66.

24 So also Trainor, *About Earth's Child*, 112–13.

the nobleman to rule over them (*basileusai eph' hēmas*, 19:14). The use of *epi* with the accusative here, following the verb *basileusai*, denotes the notion of “power over,”²⁵ rather than a relationship of interconnectedness. This reinforces the depiction of the nobleman viewing the *basileia*, not as a gift to be welcomed, but as a possession to be aggressively taken for himself. The use of the unqualified definite article (*hoi politai autoi*) allows us to understand that it is all the citizens who are protesting, not just some of them. This evokes the cries of protest from many Australians against the aggressive taking of land by gas companies for mining purposes.²⁶ Will their cries be heard? Will their protest cause the companies to reconsider their actions?

As some have previously noted, the nobleman’s instruction to his slaves to trade (*pragmateuomai*) with their *mna* (see discussion below) until he comes back (19:13) has overtones of exploitative practice.²⁷ We discover later that the first two slaves make outrageous profits of 1000% and 500% from their trading (19:16, 18). This would seem to bear out the notion that these slaves have engaged in exploitation so that some of the Earth community will be impoverished by their actions.

The money given to each slave (19:13, 16, 18, 20) is a *mna*, translated as a “pound” in the NRSV. While it is commonly agreed that a *mna* is the equivalent of a hundred denarii or drachmae, Mark Allan Powell identifies the *mna* as a silver coin, while Everett Ferguson states that the *mna* is a monetary amount rather than a coin.²⁸ While each slave receives a *mna* (19:16, 18, 20), the nobleman refers to his money in general as *argurion* in 19:15, 23. This term suggests that the money consists of silver, whether one coin or not. Silver is a precious metal and Earth element, and for the nobleman and his obedient slaves, more silver is to be obtained at all costs. Just as the nobleman is portrayed earlier as taking a *basileia* for himself (19:12, 15),

25 See BAGD, 365.

26 The Lock the Gate campaign is one such response, based on peaceful protest. See http://www.lockthegate.org.au/missions_principles_aims (accessed February 13, 2015).

27 See Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James D. Ernest, 3 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 3.:51; Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 678–79; and Elizabeth Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke*, LNTS 324 (London: T&T Clark International, 2007), 85.

28 See Mark Allan Powell, “Coins Mentioned in the New Testament,” Hyperlink \$1.9, in *Introducing the New Testament* Esources (Baker Academic, 2009), <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/introducing-the-new-testament/264690/esources/themes/15> (accessed November 8, 2014); and E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 93n49.

he now seeks to “own” this precious Earth element for himself, assuming Earth’s resources are his to exploit.

Another voice of protest to the nobleman’s behaviour comes from the third slave. This slave, like the previous two slaves (19:16, 18), addresses him as *kyrie*, which can be translated as owner, lord, master. The nobleman understands himself as the owner and master of this part of Earth and its peoples, especially slaves. While *kyrios* is often used in the Gospel of Luke to refer to God or Jesus,²⁹ the *kyrios* of this parable can be aligned to neither. The slaves call him “master,” the one who “owns” them. The slaves are considered possessions, having no intrinsic worth. Their produce and labour are exploited for the sole purpose of benefitting the nobleman.

As the fracking and trafficking examples show, pain and brokenness spill over into the wider community. Human structures of power and exploitation affect the entire Earth community. The artificial human construct of power enables the nobleman to exploit his slaves, and this attitude of “power over” extends to the exploitation of Earth’s elements so that the entire Earth community is affected. This widespread brokenness, however, is the hidden underside of the parable. Taking a stand against this exploitation, the third slave defies his master’s expectations by wrapping his money in a cloth (19:20). The cloth is an Earth product made from natural Earth fibres. The third slave uses the cloth to protect the silver that he has been given. He is in right relationship with the whole Earth, both using Earth’s produce and caring for Earth’s elements, while refusing to exploit any part of the Earth community for profit.

The master, on the other hand, describes the third slave as *ponēros* (19:22) which is often translated as “wicked,”³⁰ but can also be translated as “worthless,” “useless,” or “unprofitable.”³¹ For the master, the worth of the third slave is dependent upon how much profit he will generate for his master. Like the *basileia* appropriated by the master, the third slave is considered an object, a possession whose worth is dependent on his profitability to the so-called “owner.”

The third slave accuses the nobleman of two things: “You take up (*aireis*) what you did not lay down (*ethēkas*), and reap (*therizōn*) what you did not

29 See James Dawsey, *The Lukan Voice: Confusion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 9–10 and Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound*, 87.

30 So, for instance, the NRSV translation.

31 See definitions in Miller, Friberg and Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 322; and H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1447.

sow (*espeira*)” (19:21). The nobleman repeats the accusations without refuting either of them (19:22). It would seem that he accepts them as accurate descriptions of his actions. The first accusation is that the nobleman takes up what he did not lay down. An injunction against such action appears in various forms in a range of ancient writings. Thus it can be viewed as part of the common wisdom of ancient times (at least in the expanse of the Greco-Roman world).³² To breach this principle and exploit for one’s personal gain is to disregard the interconnectedness and intrinsic worth of Earth.

The second accusation of reaping what he has not sown indicates that the nobleman is exploiting Earth, disrupting the relationship between sower and land. To be fertile, the land needs to be nurtured and regular fallow periods utilized. The sower who cannot reap the crop, because it has been taken by another, either goes without or sows an additional crop to make up for what is lost. There is the risk that this crop will also be reaped by another. There is further risk that the land will be over-worked and lose its fertility. The inter-relationship of the sower and land is disrupted. The nobleman’s actions affect the sustainability of the land. Earth’s produce is taken by one who has not sown and worked the land himself. While Earth is portrayed in the parable as the generous provider of minerals and crops, Earth is also portrayed as a victim of the nobleman’s exploitation. Earth, therefore, is included in the *ptōchoi* that is exploited and suffers as a result of the nobleman’s actions.

While the other-than-human voice of Earth is not explicitly heard in this parable, the words of the third slave to his master expose the master’s actions in relation to the land and its produce. The other-than-human voice of Earth is implicitly heard in the slave’s accusations: “You take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow” (19:21). The pain and lament of the land is implicit in these statements of exploitation. While the third slave’s words allow us to hear implicitly the protest of the other-than-human, it is at the same time problematic that this voice is mediated by a human character in the story. While the land mourns, we do not directly hear the lament. Neither is the reader informed explicitly of the pain experienced. In Hosea 4:3, we learn that the land mourns and all of creation

32 See C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 671–72; and Garland, *Luke*, 761. See also Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 250n31. Josephus, *Apion* 2.216, identifies taking what you do not deposit as an action allotted severe punishment.

languishes, though we do not hear directly from the land. In Luke 19:40, as previously mentioned, we are told that “the stones would shout out.” Thus, in the Lukan pericope directly following the Parable of the Pounds, stones are portrayed as having voice and agency.³³ Such explicit voice and agency is not accredited to the land in the Parable of the Pounds, however.

While the words of the third slave do draw the reader’s attention to the effect of the nobleman’s actions on the land and the pain and exploitation that it suffers, the voice of the land is only indirectly heard in the parable. In the contemporary context, trafficked persons often have little or no opportunity themselves to cry out against their enslavement. It is the voice of those who protest on their behalf which resounds to those who choose to hear. Similarly, the voice of fracked Earth is mainly heard through the farmers and environmentalists who identify and express Earth’s pain. One of the effects of the various forms of exploitation is the silencing of the exploited. Commentators who critique the parable’s third slave for inaction,³⁴ do not appreciate what he has actually done. He has deliberately chosen not to follow his master’s instruction in order to take an active stance of resistance against exploitation and unethical practice, just as many do today.

The call by the master for the third slave’s *mna* to be taken from him and given to the first slave triggers another cry of protest, this time from the bystanders—“Master, he has ten *mnas*” (19:25). Their protest highlights the inequity in the sharing of resources. For those who are aware of the interconnectedness of all creation, such inequity is dire, but for those, in contrast, intent on profit at any cost, the discrepancy is of no consequence. This latter attitude is reflected in the nobleman’s ensuing words: “I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (19:26). Similar words have appeared earlier in the gospel in 8:18, though in a different context and with Jesus as the speaker. Here in the Parable of the Pounds, the saying reinforces the reality that some are getting richer at the expense of the poor—both human and other-than-human.

The destructive nature of the nobleman’s relationships is confirmed in the last verse of the parable (19:27) when he calls for those who had opposed his attempt to take a *basileia* to be slaughtered. This group are the protesting

33 See Elvey, *The Matter of the Text*, 136.

34 So, for example, Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 2:1232–33; and Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 700–701.

citizens of 19:14 who are resisting the assumption of power by one who has no regard for his interconnectedness with the whole Earth community. It is these same citizens whom the nobleman calls to be slaughtered in front of him. Reading this in dialogue with the contemporary context raises the issue of the fate of those today protesting the acquisition of land by mining-companies and the fracking of Earth. Will these protestors also be “slaughtered” by the actions of the companies and by government regulations?

As I have demonstrated, the third slave in the parable speaks the words of protest of the oppressed Earth community. Within the Gospel of Luke, words of protest and the exposure of oppressive acts of those who have power or authority are also spoken by John the Baptist (3:19–20) and Jesus (for example, 11:42–46; 20:45–47), who will both lose their lives for speaking out (9:9; 19:47–48; 20:19).³⁵ The third slave and the oppressed Earth community are thus aligned with John the Baptist and Jesus.³⁶ The words and actions of the third slave and the oppressed Earth model the right relationships at the core of the *basileia* of God. As the resurrection vindicates Jesus, so too are all who live in right relationship vindicated. The nobleman in the parable, however, models values which are the antithesis of the *basileia* of God, highlighting that the *basileia* of God is not present in its fullness. Jesus’ parable therefore addresses the expectation expressed in 19:11 that the *basileia* of God would appear immediately.

Having read the Parable of the Pounds in dialogue with contemporary examples of exploitation, fracking and human trafficking, it is clear that many of the elements of this parable are being lived out in our midst. As these two examples highlight, the dynamic of the Parable of the Pounds, with the poor (both human and other-than-human) having anything they have taken away from them is a present reality within our Earth community. Against the traditional reading, the nobleman of the parable who seeks a *basileia* for himself and who displays no awareness of the integrity and interconnectedness of all creation cannot be likened in any way to an image of God or Jesus. The nobleman exploits Earth, slaves and others for his own

35 For a detailed discussion of John the Baptist and Jesus challenging oppression and suffering the consequences, and links between the third slave and Jesus, see Dowling, *Taking away the Pound*, 112–15.

36 For a comparison between the third slave and Jesus, see Merrill Kitchen, “Rereading the Parable of the Pounds: A Social and Narrative Analysis of Luke 19:11–28,” in *Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill*, ed. David Neville (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), 234–35.

economic profit, and uses extreme violence against those who challenge his assertion of power. In the same way, human trafficking, dangerous fracking of Earth and all exploitative practices counter the ethic of the *basileia* of God. As the parable reminds us, the fullness of the *basileia* of God will not be experienced while such practices continue.

MERCY AND ITS WORKS:

IF THINGS FALL APART, CAN THEY BE PUT RIGHT?

MARGARET A. FARLEY, R.S.M.

Introduction

I borrow here the title of one of Africa's greatest novels, *Things Fall Apart*, written by one of its greatest novelists, Chinua Achebe.¹ I do so because these are the words that have come to my mind all too frequently in recent months and even years: "Things fall apart." Though set in different times and places from our own, this novel has long offered a paradigm for seemingly intractable conflicts between human individuals and within human societies. In our own times and places, we hear the stories of shattered lives, vicious assaults, enmities in all spheres of human interaction. Narratives like these are intimately accessible to us in a globalized world—whether focused on economic and environmental injustices, racial and ethnic fears, vast inequalities of all kinds, unending forms of violence and oppression. These narratives constitute a kind of "book of pain"—one that we must continue to read, and to read in the light of, or against, historical and religious old and new chapters.

This year we live *into* a designated extraordinary year of Jubilee. Like the Jewish Sabbath years, a Jubilee year is to be a year of spiritual renewal, with a reawakening of compassion and peacefulness within human society. It is a year in which, if things have fallen apart, they are to be put right—for example, by letting the land lie fallow for a year, freeing those enslaved because of poverty, rectifying injustices that have crept into the social arrangements of our time. It is a year, above all, during which we are simply to stop long enough, as on an extended Sabbath, to remind ourselves that all things belong ultimately to God, who calls us to help in putting things right, no matter our own complicity in their "falling apart." It is a year not only of "stopping" but of acting, in response to the divine command to discern the ways ahead of us marked by justice and mercy.

But is this possible? Do we not experience the winds of our time blowing ineluctably in directions that are the opposite of what is called for in a Jubilee year? Not long ago, I heard someone say: "World order has been broken." And so it seems to me; it is broken in significant respects. We have wars within wars and ever expanding new killing fields; economic chasms between some parts of the world and others, despite the promises of global unity; civil unrest around the globe; millions displaced and homeless; illegal occupation of stolen lands; terrorism practiced as a virtue; kidnaping and enslavement of children; rape used not only as a weapon of war but as fodder for pseudo-religious rituals; conscription of women and girls into the front lines of suicide bombers; murder of civilians by anonymous drones; countless crimes against humanity aimed especially at the most vulnerable of persons and groups. Mercy and justice seem to recede into the darkness.

If world order is broken, it could be said that our own national order is not far behind, not far from falling apart in important ways. Mirroring the loss of world order is, for example, our tolerance of what has been called a "gun epidemic" in our nation.

¹Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

We harbor guns in our neighborhoods that are weapons of war, designed to kill with brutal efficiency and speed. Deliberately marketed for vigilante use and even insurrection, they can just as well be used for deranged killings of school children. We have not managed, as a nation, to outlaw these kinds of guns, even as bodies continue to pile up, and the tears of the living pour forth unchecked.

But our nation knows other forms of threats and actual brokenness, some of them greater than manufactured weapons or even terrorists from abroad. For many years, we have fostered serious polarization among our people and within our institutions. The drawing of hard economic and social lines among us has yielded a deepening national dysfunction. The roots of polarization and dysfunction are complex, but they blossom into forms of anger and hatred, exclusions and scapegoating—whether of the wealthy or the poor, immigrants or Wall Street bankers, national leaders or those on the outside offering simplistic analyses of “big government.” Respect for other persons erodes as individuals are attacked by personal insults thrown at them, and longstanding group grievances continue to fester. Attitudes reminiscent of Max Scheler’s concept of *ressentiment* (or “resentment”) grow among us, with cumulative feelings of impotence, envy, repressed rage, and desire for revenge.² In an election year, these developments among us all too easily awaken a yearning for leaders who promise “greatness” to match their own (real or imagined); prosperity if only the people will follow the loudest voice; permission to “punch others in the face” because they have been judged to deserve it; freedom to demean all so-called “losers”; and access to the kind of power that proclaims and sustains its own treasured forms of dominance.³

Even in the Roman Catholic church, there is significant evidence of things falling apart. Just about everyone, including Pope Francis, speaks of the church as a “wounded church:” its children are injured; some of its leaders have been irresponsible; and many of its members are on the brink of bitter disillusionment. Never before, perhaps, has the situation in the Roman Catholic church so closely paralleled the situation in the sixteenth century, just prior to the Protestant Reformation—a situation marked by scandals of sexual immorality, failures in humility and honesty on the part of church leaders, and fear of new insights in developments of doctrine. Today, Catholic co-believers are not so interested in starting a new church, but they do walk away, drift away, in ever sobering numbers. The Spirit, we believe, is within the church, and God will not fail to assist God’s servants. But what kind of cleansing, forgiveness, and new life there is to come, is not yet completely clear.

The question I want to pose, however, is whether a year of Jubilee can really help to remedy what is broken in the orders of the world, our nation, our church. This is a rhetorical question, of course, since I am not asking whether or how all of the world’s suffering can be wiped away by our living a Jubilee year. Nor am I asking for formulas or specific strategies that we might develop in the face of our own and others’ profound human limitations. We know perhaps too much about the almost impossibility of living together in deep and lasting peace, the futility of trying to

²See Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, ed. Lewis A. Coser, trans. William W. Holdheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

³Some of this analysis is taken from Jeff Sharlet, “Bully Pulpit,” *The New York Times Magazine* (April 17, 2016): 40-47.

erase all human greed, the systemic evils that lie hidden behind business as usual. I take it that Pope Francis, in declaring a Jubilee year, was not naively suggesting a utopian program that could somehow keep everything from falling apart. He asked simply for a year focused on mercy, a holy year of forgiveness he calls it, a focused way of understanding the words of Jesus: Be you merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:36). His *hope* for the Jubilee year, however, is nothing short of a conversion of our minds and hearts by daring to take on the suffering of others, helping to put things right, and freeing and being freed by the mercy of God. Our path to conversion is not only to survey our seemingly infinite problems, but to see clearly that the ways of breaking orders and hearts are the opposite of the ways of mercy.

Mercy's Works and Ways

I turn then to explore the works and ways of mercy—both human and divine. I will attempt to do this through three lenses: (1) Mercy as a Form of Love; (2) Justice and the Shape of Mercy; (3) A Work of Mercy Particularly relevant for the Twenty-first Century.

Mercy as a Form of Love

I begin with a caveat: Mercy has multiple meanings, across world religions, generations of philosophical schools, and even legal frameworks. Despite sometimes contradictory interpretations and confusing practices, most religions have a central place for pondering and valuing some notion of “mercy” needed for individuals and groups. I cannot pursue these here. Rather, my focus will be largely on Christian understandings of mercy. Similarly, I make no effort here to sort out multiple general philosophical and psychological terms closely related to “mercy”—such as pity, sympathy, compassion, and empathy. These are important, but here again, I am primarily focused on Christian theological and ethical meanings for mercy, both human and divine.⁴

In many of its key Christian usages, mercy is, at its core, love for those who are in need. It is the *form* that love takes when the beloved is in need. If mercy is love for the beloved in need, then it is a love that tries to alleviate the need as well as to share the burdens and the sufferings of the beloved. Hence, we cannot understand mercy unless we understand need—suffering, pain, and the misery of the ones we love—and unless we take these understandings into our hearts (*miser cordia*).

To repeat: mercy is love for those who are in need. It is the *gift* that fulfills, or tries to fulfill, the need of one in misery: as bread is mercy to the hungry, warmth to someone who is cold, a word of comfort to the lonely and abandoned. Mercy is also the *action of giving* the gift, the action, for example, of preparing nourishing food, finding shelter for the homeless, tendering forgiveness to those in need of it. Mercy is, therefore, love, gift, and giving, but the gift and the giving are expressions of the love, and they gain all of their meaning from the love. Since mercy is first of all love

⁴ See my efforts, however, at a wider study of religious and philosophical meanings for compassion in Margaret A. Farley, *Compassionate Respect* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 45–65.

for one in need, and all that mercy gives is an expression of that love, then love itself is the most needed of all mercies, without which we are all most miserable.⁵

I use the term mercy, however, not only for intimate relationships, but for a broad set of human and nonhuman needs. Where the range of miseries or needs is understood too narrowly, the range of mercy will be restricted as well. There is a sense in which all creation is actually a needing creation. Misery does not always take the form of dramatic bodily or psychological pain. *To be* in need can be to lack something even if one is unaware of the need. Someone who has never experienced awe in the face of beauty or learned to desire wisdom is missing something—whether knowingly or not. There is even a kind of need that persists after it is met, after what is missing or broken is filled and made whole. This is the kind of need that permeates created being; it is the kind of need that makes a creature precisely a creature. It is a subsistent need, the need to be held in being as well as in wellbeing, constantly responded to by divine mercy, and participated in by human mercy.

To know the length and breadth and height of the mercy of God is to see it stretch from one end of the universe to the other, from past to future, from the edge of nothingness to the heights of creation, down to the very depths of every being. It is in the love and power of such mercy that human mercy shares. There is a problem, of course. That is, if God is all mercy, then we must admit that there is a dread mercy as well as a joyful one. God is light, and nothing but light can come from light. God is all love, and nothing but love can come from love. Yet there is a darkness beyond which our minds cannot penetrate. Illumined by faith, we may catch a glimpse of the light that appears as darkness, and see that there is a misery that is itself mercy.

I have maintained elsewhere that every great love is a crucified love, and every great joy may be a crucified joy.⁶ I am willing also to say here that all genuine mercy is in some way a crucified mercy, that is, mercy aimed at goodness and light, willing to walk in the way of the cross; mercy accepting a cup of suffering that is first a cup of love; mercy carrying in its heart a desire to mend what is broken and sustain what has been healed; mercy that is other-centered and capable of deeper and deeper conversion of heart. By itself, human mercy is not capable of the fullest forms of mercy, but it can partake of and participate in the mercy of God revealed in the mercy of Jesus Christ—a mercy that empties itself, shares all burdens, and yearns ultimately for the healing of all creation.

⁵ Much of what I am describing here about mercy and misery adopts a kind of phenomena-logical analysis which I have used before—in, e.g., *Compassionate Respect*, but also in essays such as Margaret A. Farley, “One Thing Only is Necessary,” *MAST JOURNAL* vol. 2 (Summer, 1992): 17–23.

⁶ See, for example, Margaret A. Farley, *Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 210–15.

Justice and the Shape of Mercy

I turn now to a second lens for the understanding of mercy—the relationship between mercy and justice. I have probed this kind of relationship twice before in my analyses of similar relationships—that is, relationships between compassion and respect, and between love and justice.⁷ In each case, I have encountered views of these relationships that aim to distinguish between the poles of the relations. For example, love and justice are often seen as hierarchical, love being greater than justice, beyond justice. On the other hand, love and justice have been seen as opposed to each other because the claims of justice are seen as more absolute than the claims of love. Similarly, in considerations of mercy and justice, it is frequently said that justice goes only so far, but mercy goes farther (the extra mile) in responding to suffering. I appreciate these views of the relationships, but they are, it seems to me, not adequate. There is, actually, a more intimate relationship within each of these pairs.

Hence, in the case of justice and love, and compassion and respect, it is not sufficient to evaluate these pairs as separate attributes of a given moral action; they are interrelated. Love needs to be normatively *shaped* by justice, making it good love, true love, just love. Compassion needs to be *shaped* by the norms of respect, keeping it fitting and true. Mercy—if it is not to be a false mercy, if it is to be a genuinely healing mercy—must be normatively *shaped* by a justice that does not miss its call and response. Without justice, mercy has no power to meet the truly wounded or to give hope to the truly broken. Only with merciful justice and just mercy will there be mutual illumination, and requisite new ways of seeing, required for at least some things to be put right.

A Work of Mercy for the Twenty-first Century

Among the traditional works of mercy, one stands out as a work newly relevant for the twenty-first century.⁸ It is an odd choice, perhaps, but one that has come to the fore in the past three decades with a widespread sense of urgency and interest. It is the work of mercy named “forgiveness” (or “bearing all injuries”), seemingly newly awakened in a fractured and conflicted world. According to some, this interest is dangerous, likely to mask what is either “premature reconciliation” or despair. To others, though, it offers some inkling of the kind of conversion, de-centering, required of ourselves if we are ever to offset the worst forms of fear, resentment, and self-righteousness that divide us. It may also be the one work of mercy that can change hearts so that all other works of mercy may be newly energized to heal the brokenness around us.⁹

⁷ See Farley, *Compassionate Respect*, 39–43; and *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 196–206.

⁸ I am here drawing on numerous essays and lectures of mine on forgiveness as a work of mercy. The most recent published version is in “Forgiveness in the Service of Justice and Love,” in *Changing the Questions*, 319–42.

⁹ By focusing on this spiritual work of mercy, I do not intend to obscure the other urgent works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, but to shed new light on these works and the spirit of mercy that informs them. The work of forgiveness does not substitute for, or counter, the other works of mercy. Indeed, there are forms of mercy that are not about forgiveness at all.

In the gospel attributed to John, we find the post-resurrection Jesus meeting with his disciples, greeting them with peace, showing them the scars from his wounds, breathing the Spirit upon them, and giving them a mission of forgiveness (John 20:19-23). According to some theologians, this is the decisive gift of the Holy Spirit. For Christians it is what makes possible a “new heart,” dying and living with Jesus Christ, partaking of God’s own mercy, restoring relationships otherwise without hope. It reaches to communities as well as individuals. It is to be offered to all who desire to drink of the waters of the Spirit. The mission is to forgive, and to reveal the forgiveness of God. As Paul says, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God’s appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:20). What can this mean for the significance of forgiveness in our world? Can *experiences of forgiveness* really bear witness to a ministry of forgiveness?

A descriptive analysis of the experience of forgiveness yields something like the following: To forgive is not to be passive in the face of injury, betrayal, or abuse. Indeed, forgiveness may be one of the most active responses possible in the face of whatever sort of breach occurs in human relationships. To forgive is a complex action, for it is a choice to act in a certain way in regard to one’s own self as well as in regard to those whom we forgive. Simply put, forgiveness is a decision to let go of something within one’s self, and to accept anew the ones by whom we have been harmed. What, however, do we let go of? Not our sense of justice, nor a sense of our own dignity as a person. Yet in forgiving another, we do let go (at least partially) of something *in* ourselves—perhaps anger, a desire to win in some conflict, resentment, perhaps building-blocks of stored-up pain. And we let go (at least partially) of something *of* ourselves—perhaps our self-protectedness, our selves desiring another chance at self-statement in the face of misjudgment by another. We choose to accept the other once again, to affectively sustain and renew our loving affirmation of the other, to be again in union with the other by whom we have been wronged and to whom we offer our forgiveness.

To understand our experiences of forgiving—whether by gaining insight into our reasons to forgive or into the elements of the experience itself—it is useful to consider also our experiences of *being forgiven*. Being forgiven, like forgiving, involves action, in this case by the recipient of forgiveness. The action is again complex, including both acceptance and letting go. The form of acceptance involved is acceptance of the word of the one forgiving, believing in the genuineness of the intention to forgive. It requires in us a letting go not only of shame and all that it might entail, but also of the objections and fears that may arise in us as one to be forgiven. Since the full efficacy of forgiveness has to do with relationship, forgiveness cannot accomplish its purpose or come full circle unless it is actively received. To accept being-forgiven, then, is to experience *new* acceptance, and to affirm being-accepted, in spite of ourselves.

Although we can learn what it means to be forgiven within human relationships, the potentially paradigmatic experience for humans is the experience of being

These other works of mercy also help to “put things right.” On the other hand, forgiveness is, in a sense, more radical than any of the others. One can, for example, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, even comfort the sorrowful and instruct the uneducated, without truly loving the recipient. To forgive, however, and to receive forgiveness, essentially require mercy that is *love* for those in need.

forgiven by God. To experience the forgiveness of God is to experience one's self accepted by the incomprehensible source of one's existence and life, accepted even without becoming wholly innocent, without being completely "turned around" in our ways; accepted even "while we still were sinners" (Rom. 5:8). From the almost incredible "good news" of this forgiveness, this acceptance, we learn of the love of God that exceeds our understanding and our telling, that invites us into communion with infinite goodness and beauty. The one response asked of us, and made possible within us, is the response of trust. To trust in the Word of God's forgiveness is to let go all of our objections and fears, and to believe. It is to surrender our hearts in our acceptance of being forgiven. It is, to use a phrase of Emily Dickinson, to "drop our hearts," to feel them "drop" their barriers and burdens, in freedom, accepting eternal Acceptance. It foreshadows the ultimate experience, of which we have inklings: "By my long bright—and *longer*—trust—I *drop* my Heart—*unshriven!*"¹⁰

At the center of human *forgiving*, too, is a kind of "dropping of the heart" that is the surrender, letting-go, of whatever would bind us to past injuries inflicted on us by others, or whatever would prevent our acceptance of the new life held out to us in the forgiveness of those we have injured or wronged. In both of these (that is, both being forgiven and forgiving) there is a letting go of our very selves, a kenosis that alone frees us (at least partially) to become ourselves; and there is an acceptance (as best we can), in an affective affirmation, that is, in love, of the one to be forgiven and the one forgiving. Here are the beginning choices that make renewed relationships possible. They come full circle in the mutuality that restored relationships promise.

But what if the injuries we have undergone leave our hearts incapable of the kind of love that makes forgiving possible? And what if those who injure us continue to injure us? What if there is no remorse or regret, no willingness to accept our forgiveness? What if oppressors believe their actions are justified—by whatever twisted stereotyping, judging, or stigmatizing? In our broken worlds there are, as I have tried to describe, countless situations in which injury of every sort is ongoing. How, then, is forgiveness possible, and what would be its point? In regard to *current* oppressors and false claims, must our focus be not on forgiveness, but on justice? Not on "dropping our hearts" but on a struggle against the evils that cry out to heaven for change?

The challenge in these questions is a serious one. I want to argue, however, that even in situations where injustices prevail, where the rights of individuals and groups continue to be violated, the disposition of the heart of the oppressed and violated (as well as those who stand in solidarity with them) ought to include a readiness to forgive. To argue this does not contradict a need for resistance. If we think that forgiveness all by itself is a sufficient antidote to injustice, this is a mistake. But if we think that struggles for justice are sufficient, no matter what is in our hearts, this, too, is a mistake. The challenge and the call to forgiveness in situations of ongoing humanly inflicted evil and suffering constitutes a call to forgive even those we must continue to resist. Forgiveness in such situations is what I call "anticipatory" forgiveness.

¹⁰ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1987), 108.

Plenary Session: Mercy and Its Works

Anticipatory forgiveness shares the characteristics of any human forgiving. That is, it involves a letting go within one's self of whatever prevents a fundamental acceptance of the other, despite the fact that the other is the cause of one's injuries or loss of basic wellbeing. It is grounded in a basic respect for the other as a person, even love for the other as held in being by God. It does not mean passive acquiescence to subservience, or silence when it comes to naming the injury imposed. It does not mean failing to protect those in serious need. It does mean being ready to accept the injurer, yearning that he or she turn in sorrow to whoever has been injured; it means waiting, if necessary, until the time that the enemy may yet become the friend. It is anticipatory, therefore, not because there is as yet no disposition in us for acceptance and love, but because it cannot be fulfilled until the one who is forgiven (the perpetrator) acknowledges the injury, ceases or at least tries to cease injuring, and becomes able to recognize and accept, in turn, a forgiving embrace.

Conclusion: A Way Forward

Where, then, have we come in these considerations of broken worlds, broken societies, a wounded church? Life goes on, and things still fall apart. Are there any responses to be made to my, after all, not-so-rhetorical question in the beginning: Can a year of mercy, a year of Jubilee, really help us to put things right? For myself, I think it has a chance. It has a chance if we do not avert our eyes from the suffering around us. It has a chance if we help one another, learning together how at least some things might be put right. It has a chance if we behold not only the pain and desperation in the world but also the signs of divine mercy. It has a chance if the human works of mercy can weaken the works of war.

Mercy is not reducible to any of its works, but forgiveness, I still maintain, is particularly relevant for the twenty-first century. It is directly aimed at the healing of relationships. It can be an antidote to broken hearts, broken societies, and even broken churches precisely because it is the opposite of hatred, anger, *ressentiment*, greed, and self-righteousness. Its ways can yield dispositions and actions that are radical enough, and sufficiently embodied, to allow conditions of possibility for putting some things right, at least to a meaningful degree. In so far as it sheds light on all the other works of mercy, traditional and new, it offers paths to conversion and to hope—simply, but profoundly, in the loving of those in need.

The Day of Catherine's Death



This November 11 is the 175th anniversary of the death of Catherine McAuley. Let it not be just an ordinary day during which we briefly recall Catherine's life and the events of her dying. May it be a sacramental time when the grace of her life and death renews and transforms all of us in her Mercy family, enveloped as we each are in the merciful paschal mystery of her living and dying.

This year I cannot think of the events of Catherine's last human hours without seeing the face of little Omran Daqneesh, the five-year-old Syrian child rescued from the rubble of his bombed home in Aleppo on August 18. Omran is silent, stunned, dusty and bloody as he sits in the ambulance staring at his bloody hand and at us.

Catherine McAuley's death was a normal human death, coming at the end of months of tuberculosis. Omran's suffering is not "normal." Catherine knew she was moving toward death, and she quietly prepared herself and her sisters for that hour, simultaneously encouraging them even while making herself more and more what she had always believed herself to be, unneeded and dispensable. The brutality of Omran's suffering, and of war itself, is not "normal," except in a world that has turned to violence and indifference toward the cruel reality of many children's lives.

On Thursday, November 11, 1841, Catherine could not see Omran's shocked and bloody face, but she had spent her whole adult life cradling Ireland's Omrans, its suffering children staring out at her for human mercy. Teresa Byrn whom Catherine had adopted as a baby; the newborn child, of a cholera-stricken mother, whom she wrapped in her shawl and brought home to a make-shift bed in her own room; infants abandoned on the streets; small barefoot girls in the Baggot Street poor school; "little Fanny," a fatherless, grief-stricken child to whom she sent a precious brooch and "six kisses . . . so sweet tho' from a Granny" (*Correspondence*, 324); and orphaned Mary Quinn who always sat next to Catherine at meals on Baggot Street.

All these—and Omran—may have been silently, spiritually, in the second-floor infirmary room on Baggot Street in the late afternoon and evening of November 11, brought there tenderly by Jesus Christ.

Somehow as we commemorate this 175th anniversary of Catherine's death, let us ask her to help us to reach out more generously and selflessly to the Omrans of our world—the severely suffering Syrians, the starving children, the bombed-out victims of other peoples' wars, the millions of refugees, the trafficked girls. The size and shape of our present mercifulness has to be both local and global; it has to affect our own daily lives; it has to cut into our budgets and menus; it has to collaborate with others; it has to be international; it has to give, advocate, protest, and witness; it has to beg for the spirit and generosity of Catherine McAuley; and it has to beg unceasingly for the Mercy of God.



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The Day of Catherine's Death

Catherine's death agony began in the late morning. Mary Elizabeth Moore, who was present, tells us that when Dr. William Stokes came, she said to him: "Well, Doctor, the scene is drawing to a close." As evening came, she was calm and quiet. About 5:00 p.m.

she asked for the candle to be placed in her hand.

We commenced the last prayers; when I repeated one or two she herself had taught me, she said with energy: May God bless you. When we thought the senses must be going and that it might be well to rouse attention by praying a little louder, she said:

No occasion, my darling, to speak so loud. I hear distinctly. (*CMcATM*, 256).

Any religious family whose founder, with her last breath, calls them "my Darling" cannot be all bad, no matter how severely they sometimes judge themselves.

The prayers for the dying that Elizabeth and the sisters prayed at Catherine's bedside would have been the same prayers that Catherine herself had always prayed at the bedside of a dying sister, simple human prayers asking God to assist her in her last moments, and to strengthen her confidence in God's unfailing help and mercy.

But what of the candle? Was this the lighted candle that each Sister of Mercy had received at her reception as a novice, and that she carried as she professed her vows? And what did it signify as Catherine held it in her dying hand? Was it a sacramental sign, a burning human request that Christ the Light would come to accompany her on the last steps of her human pilgrimage? Was it a recognition of the paschal mystery that she was now entering more fully than ever before, the death and resurrection of Christ? As her hand weakened and her eyesight dimmed, Catherine asked for a smaller candle, but we do not know how long she was able to hold it. Then at "10 minutes before 8 . . . she calmly breathed her last sigh."

Later, in the community room, the sisters comforted one another, as Catherine had wished.



Today as we remember this good woman's death, let us also remember and comfort the Omrans of the world, as Catherine would also wish. Let us take into our own hands the candle of the merciful actions and accompaniments to which she gave her life, and to which she urges us each day—"until we," like her, "take the last step which will bring us into the presence of God" (*Practical Sayings*, 23).

Catherine once said of two homeless servant girls she could not receive into the severely overcrowded House of Mercy, "their dejected faces have been before me ever since" (*Correspondence*, 322). Today as we contemplate Catherine's simple act of dying, let us search for more and more ways to comfort the suffering children of our world, as she would wish. Let us not forget all the little Teresas, and Fannys, and Marys, and Omrans—all the orphaned, barefoot, grief-stricken, starving children of whom Jesus once said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matt. 19:14). In this Jubilee Year of Mercy, and always, let us be women and men who carry "dejected faces" in our hearts and who raise the candle of our voice and cry out loudly and increasingly to the whole world, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God" (Isa. 40:1).

Mary C. Sullivan, RSM

Catherine McAuley – an Integrated Life

October 23, 2016

Sheila Carney, RSM

Over the years I have, and I know you have, been engaged in a lot of discussions around a couple of questions. *What is unique or distinctive about the Sisters of Mercy, about the call to Mercy for our associates and companions? And how are we to understand our vow of service? How are we called to minister? Where are we called to minister? When and with whom? Does this particular need fall within the embrace of our charism?* This last question has always been the easiest to answer because Catherine cut a broad path for us. In the document that we call “The Spirit of the Institute” she tells us that the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy are the business of our lives. There are countless ministries that easily fall within the ambit of these works. I remember a retreat director once who said to a group of us that he found our charism hard to define because, as he said, “You Sisters of Mercy do everything.” That’s it, “we responded. “You’ve got it!” When Catherine gave us the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy as our focus, when she defined an approach to ministry that was as broad and wide as human need, she left us a lot of room in which to move about. And truly, these Works seem more a spectrum than a focus.

When we are asked what was Catherine’s unique contribution to the development of religious life we often focus on this call to service, or we respond in terms of the novel and far-seeing governance structure she created for us. But that question has rattled around in me for a long time. What was Catherine’s unique contribution? What was the fresh understanding that she brought to the evolution of religious life? How would we name that portion of her legacy that is her special gift

and challenge to us who have been called to wear the name Mercy and to the whole Church? To answer these questions I'd like to go back to 1836.

Catherine's most succinct description of the life of a Sister of Mercy is found in a letter to Rev. Gerald Doyle, the parish priest at Naas. He was interested in directing young women from his parish to the Sisters of Mercy and wrote to Catherine asking her to name the personal requirements. Catherine responded on May 6, 1836.

“. . . . In compliance with your desire, Reverend Sir, I shall submit what seems generally requisite for a Sister of Mercy. Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor, she must feel a particular interest for the sick and dying; otherwise the duty of visiting them would become exceedingly toilsome. She should be healthy, have a feeling, distinct, impressive manner of speaking and reading; a mild countenance expressive of sympathy and patience. And there is so much to be required as to reserve and recollection passing through the public ways: caution and prudence in the visits, that it is desirable they should begin rather young, before habits and manners are so long formed as not likely to alter.

I beg again to remark that this is what seems generally necessary. I am aware exceptions may be met, and when there is a decided preference for the Order, and other essential dispositions, conformity in practice might be accomplished at any period in life.” (Bolster, Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841, p.22)

This is an interesting and detailed set of requirements. So much so that it would be easy to miss the importance of how it begins. “. . . Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor.” BESIDES is a key word. What Catherine conveys to Rev. Doyle, and to us, is that at the heart of the life of Mercy is this ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor. This is so central as to be almost taken for granted. These almost go without saying. Here's the core, she says quickly, and then there are all these other things besides. An ardent desire for

union and service. This is what it means to be a Sister of Mercy, a person of Mercy. Ardent is an interesting word for Catherine to use. It means passionate, fiery, and unquenchable. There is nothing tepid in the life to which she calls us.

Catherine elaborates on this simple formula in her Rule in words that are no less dynamic.

“The Sisters . . . shall animate their zeal and fervor by the example of their Divine Master Jesus Christ, who testified on all occasions a tender love for the poor” (Chapter 1, 2nd)

“Let those whom Jesus Christ has graciously permitted to assist Him in the Persons of his suffering poor, have their hearts animated with gratitude and love and placing all their confidence in Him endeavor to imitate Him more perfectly day by day.” (Chapter 3, 3rd)

“Mercy, the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our Divine Master.” (Chapter 3, 1st)

Animation, zeal, fervor, excitement - the dynamism of these words calls out to us.

Over the years since the founding of our congregation, Sisters of Mercy all over the world have articulated this central identity in a variety of ways. WE have generated a lot of words – a veritable mountain of words – but living in the heart of them all is Catherine’s simple call to be passionate about God and about persons living in poverty.

There is another way of naming this heartbeat of who we are. Though these are not Catherine’s words, we have come to call it contemplation and action - the difficult

rhythm, the intricate dance between stillness, focus, absorption in God and the active, practical mediation of God's love to those around us. Catherine lived this challenging rhythm and she embedded it in the life of the Institute she founded. For a while, I was fond of calling it a dance, as if one partners for a while with action and then switches and partners for while with contemplation and so on, back and forth. But this image has become woefully inadequate. Even our ways of articulating this rhythm - action *and* contemplation or action/contemplation suggest a dualism or differentiation that I don't think existed in Catherine. In her, these are not separate realities, separate energies, but one life force flowing through her. One was sometimes more evident than the other but each continually called forth the other, gave birth to the other. And so I struggle for a new image.

What does it mean to move in this rhythm? A long time ago, in a theology class, my professor expressed God's invitation to us with the words, "Give me your heart and I'll give you my eyes." In many years of reflecting on these words, I've come to understand them as descriptions of apostolic spirituality; of contemplation and action.

"Give me your heart," God invites. "Rest your heart in me. Let it beat with my heart. Be one with me. Give way to your ardent desire to be united with me. In return, I'll give you my eyes."

What is it we perceive when we look through God's eyes? We see the beauty and the intricacy, the dynamism and the potential of our world. We also see its poverty, violence, disease, and brokenness. Seeing, we are moved to act and acting we experience our limitations and our need for God's help. And so we return to prayer and the cycle repeats itself and continues to repeat itself. Prayer, insight, action, prayer. Over and over. Deeper and deeper. Spiraling down to a single point of union.

There is balance in this dynamic that our world sorely needs, driven and frenetic as it often is. To be Mercy people today means to nurture that balance in our own lives and to witness it to others. Contemplation and action; prayer and service; mysticism and prophesy, sabbath and justice, ardent love of God and practical love of neighbor, however you name it, this is the rhythm that was and is and will be at the heart of our Mercy lives.

Over the years I have frequently been in a state of wonder at how faithfully the very young women whom Catherine made superiors of foundations were able to convey and nurture her spirit in new environments. So much so that through the years and in every part of the world, the life of Mercy has remained remarkably unchanged. There are, of course, cultural and societal differences but a Sister of Mercy is a Sister of Mercy no matter where and when you find her. I suspect this is in large measure due to the clarity and simplicity of the central message. So while foundation superiors were given great responsibility to plant the seed of Mercy in new places and great flexibility in how they did it, the central focus on God and on persons who are poor was unvarying.

An ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor - this is the heartbeat of what it means to be a Sisters of Mercy. This is what they packed in their suitcases, wherever they went. When I think of the sisters setting out across the world I am reminded of a book by Annie Dillard entitled Teaching a Stone to Talk. In one of the essays she describes the Franklin Expedition, a force of 138 men who set out in 1845 to find the northwest passage through the Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. There were two three-masted schooners in the expedition. Each had an auxiliary steam engine with enough coal to last 12 days in a journey projected to last 2 – 3 years. In the place where they might have stowed additional coal, they loaded “stuff” intended to assure the comfort of those 3 aboard. Here is how Annie Dillard

describes the way they packed for the trip.

Each ship made room for a 1200 volume library, a “hand organ that playing fifty tunes,” china place settings...cut glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware. The officers’ sterling silver knives, forks and spoons were particularly interesting. The silver was of ornate Victorian design, very heavy at the handles and very richly patterned. Engraved on the handles were the individual officers’ initials and family crests. The expedition carried no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty’s Navy.”

Because of an early winter, the Franklin Expedition become stalled in the ice when they reached the Arctic. In order to try to find their way across the ice, they divided into small parties and set out on foot. None survived. Over the next twenty years or so, groups of them were found frozen on the ice. Each group had been dragging a sledge on which they had packed what they thought was essential and among these items were the sterling tea services.

When the Sisters of Mercy set out for England and America and Australia, they packed more carefully and with more respect for the lands to which they were traveling. We don’t know much about what they were carrying, but we do know that each sister had carefully included in her bundle of possessions an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor. Because they knew that, wherever it was that God was taking them, these would be the only essentials as they planted the seeds of Mercy in a new environment.

While in every age and in each place we strive to interpret this call in terms of the times and circumstances in which we find ourselves, this names who we are. In deceptively simple language it calls us to the difficult dynamic of contemplation and action; it calls us to hold in graceful balance our lives of prayer and our lives of service.

How does this union manifest itself in Catherine? By her living what is

undoubtedly her best known and most oft repeated maxim - We have one solid source of comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back. (Neuman, Letters, p. 273) This quote comes from a letter to de Sales White - the letter in which Catherine compares her life to the dance, Grand Right and Left. It was written in December, 1840 when she had already made numerous foundations, with three still in her future. She was exhausting herself with constant travel, not only to make new beginnings but to encourage those that were already underway. In the midst of these unrelenting demands and the considerable discomfort of travel in her day, she is able to say that her heart is always comfortable, always at rest, because it never leaves the presence of God. In the Retreat Instruction, she uses two other images to convey the same idea. We should be like angels, she says, “who while fulfilling the office of guardians, lose not for a moment the presence of God, or as the compass goes round its circle without ever stirring from its center.”(p.154) God, in this image, is a magnetic force holding us always to our true center. Catherine’s truth is that, when one is truly immerses oneself in God, one’s being becomes centered and focused *and* ready to do God’s work.

Because it must be noted that, in lifting these images from their context, which we usually do, we fail to hear the entire message. In the letter to de Sales White, Catherine follows the image of the heart centered in God by saying, “Oh may He look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feelings.”(Neuman, p. 273) Catherine feels herself ready to do whatever it is that God asks because her heart is comforted by God’s continual and consoling presence. The quotation from the Retreat Instructions in which she talks about the compass never stirring from its center is followed by, “Now our center is God from Whom all our actions should

spring as from their source, and no exterior actions should separate us from Him. The functions of Mary should be done for Him as well as the choir duties of Martha. It is the want of attention to this important point that causes exterior work to be so distracting to us.” (p. 154). It is not the work which takes us from God, but our inability to remain centered in God regardless of our activity. But when we are able to hold our center then, as Catherine quotes someone to whom she refers as “a devout author,” each action is all full of God, breathes God, shines with God, is fragrant of God.” (Familiar Instructions, p. 88).

We would expect to find reflections such as these in Catherine’s teachings on prayer, and we do of course find them there - exhortations about the importance of the regular reception of the sacraments, of frequent recourse to devotional practices, of the power of frequent, fervent aspirations to keep us united to God throughout the day. But they are in other places as well. The letter to de Sales White is about the demands of travel. The images of the angel and the compass are found in the section of the Retreat Instructions on charity. The letter to Rev. Gerald Doyle quoted earlier is about entrance requirements. In Catherine’s life, contemplation and action are never separated, regardless of what is the topic at hand.

Even a teaching like the Chapter on the Perfection of the Ordinary Action from the original Rule, is suffused with the call to contemplation and action. Here Catherine says, “The perfection of the religious soul depends, not so much on doing extraordinary actions, as on doing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions of each day.” When we are united to God in everything we do, then, the Rule tells us, “Nothing is lost, every word and action fructifies, and the religious soul enriches herself every moment. (Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p. 301)

This is a particularly challenging teaching for us in the hectic world in which we

live and move and have our being as it calls for us to do each thing slowly and perfectly; by performing each action as if it were the only thing we had to do. That Catherine preached what she lived in this regard is supported by a description offered by Vincent Harnett, one of the early members of the congregation. “In the midst of all the pressing occupations our venerated foundress was never seen in a hurry. She seemed to have nothing to attend to but the one in which at any moment she was seen to be occupied, and she performed that with the utmost quietness of manner, without the least impulsiveness or hastiness. When any unlooked-for interruption interfered, she took that as tranquilly as the rest.” In the poem that we have come to know as “Attend to one thing at a time, you’ve fifteen hours from six to nine.” It occurs to me that this attitude of Catherine’s may be an early precursor of mindfulness - the careful reverencing of each act and each moment which flows from a centered heart.

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, in her book, In Quiet Light, Poems on Vermeer’s Women, offers us a lovely image to illustrate this point. In the poem which accompanies the painting “Woman Holding a Balance” she describes all the things in her surroundings which may distract the woman from the work at hand – weighing some jewels on a balance. The poem ends this way:

*Trained on the object, undistracted,
Patient while the instrument swings
To its center and is still,
She turns this little task to prayer – if mindfulness is prayer
To an exercise of love
If it is love to be attentive to the things at hand. (McIntyre, p 65)*

In these words we are challenged, as Catherine challenges us in her teachings on the Perfection of the Ordinary Action, to render reverent focus to each task at hand, thereby turning it into an act of prayer.

The simple and graceful beauty of the integration which Catherine embodied and to which she calls us is glimpsed in a passage in the Familiar Instructions. Catherine writes: “St. Teresa tells us: ‘We must leave God for God’, that is, we must be ready to quit even prayer in order to find God in our neighbor.” (p. 111). These are the words of a woman in whom the integration of contemplation and action is completely harmonious.

I’d like to go back, at this point, to the question with which we started: *What is it that is unique about the Sisters of Mercy? What special gift did Catherine contribute to the ongoing development of religious life?* In these reflections, I have been making a case for the fact that Catherine’s unique contribution was the call to contemplation and action. But, in fact, I believe the call is much more profound. It is the integration of contemplation and action, so evident in the life of Catherine, that is, I believe, our deeper calling. Deeper than the Works of Mercy, deeper than the demands of our vow of service is our call to unity of being. Catherine’s unique contribution, our special contribution to the phenomenon of religious life is the refusal to see contemplation and action, these expressions of the God life within us, as competing demands or even competing dance partners. It is in knowing that the depth of our prayer is a resource for our service and that our service enriches our prayer. It is in bringing the centeredness of our heart to the demands of our day.

We used to talk about religious life as being counter-cultural. Perhaps the way we could be counter-cultural today would be to stand against the frenzy and workaholicism we see around us, and sometimes contribute to; to be, in our hectic and clamorous world, persons and places of deep peace, of generous, merciful service.

All of these thoughts are, for me, captured in a quotation from William Butler Yeats. “We can make our minds so like still water that beings may gather around us that they may see, it may be, their own image, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.” We can be so still that we, and others, are drawn to that stillness, find in it our true selves and, consequently live a more passionate life. Our contemplation manifesting itself in action - in a clearer and fiercer life. Fierce for the Gospel, fierce for justice, fierce for Mercy. This is no tepid calling to which Catherine encourages us.

What was Catherine’s unique contribution? What is the particular gift that the Sisters of Mercy and all Mercy people can offer our world? I come, more and more, to believe that it is the integration of our ardent desire to live in union with God while expending our lives in practical love for God’s people – especially those who live in poverty. Integration for the sake of focus, for the sake of clarity and fierceness, for the sake of holiness. This, I believe, is the life to which we are called. This is our deeper ministry.

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Catherine McAuley – Heroic and Holy

Holiness as we understand it is God's holiness in us. "Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord".

Raissa Maritain (1949 in *Les Grandes Amities*) said; "the only tragedy in life is not to be a saint"

I would like to take a quick look at what heroism and holiness is, as understood in the Catholic Church and especially in her decision to canonise one of her members. What do we understand by heroic holiness?¹

Holiness is found in the ordinary round of everyday life. It is essentially trying faithfully to live what we believe God is asking of us (doing His Will). In other words it is the process of assimilating one's life to Christ and that demands heroic effort (cf Paul Molinari S.J. and Peter Gumpel S.J.). Extraordinary manifestations are not taken into account.

Catherine McAuley herself taught that:

"Since God's power is not limited to time or place or persons, we have the same means as they (the greatest saints) had. God can effect in us what He accomplished in them. In fact to arrive at their sanctity requires no more than to simply perform our daily actions perseveringly and regularly for this is what constitutes a saint"

The Church has great need of saints; holy people whose lives are dramatic with a humble and unpretentious (homely) heroism. A saint is someone who offers so little resistance to the presence and power of God in her life that God is able to pour Himself freely into the person's heart and fill it with love. That love flows out through the holy person's 'hands' to all those who have need in the world – the poor, the lonely, the sick, the homeless, the helpless, all who have need of God's Love – whatever shape or form that need takes (and we do not exclude ourselves from having a need to be loved, to receive the Mercy of God).

This is what makes the saints the real innovators in the Church.

Von Balthasar (*Two Sisters in the Spirit: Therese of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1992, 21*) says that;

"saints stand at the very heart of the world; they set before every generation a new interpretation of Revelation".

¹ It has come down in the Church through Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (translated by Robert Gatehead into Latin) and standardised through the writings of St Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas. Pope Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini) declared holiness consists solely in conformity to the will of God which expresses itself in the constant and exact fulfilment of the duties of one's state in life.

In a sense the life of a saint is theology in practice. One saint is worth a thousand theological concepts. We will always have need of theologians to interpret our experiences of the divine mysteries but we need saints to **help us embrace that mystery**. Minds are formed and hearts are moved not by abstract ideas but by models. It is not books that tell us what holiness is about. It is saints. The saints are **gifts from God**. They become real parables of the inner life of God and erupt into history with spontaneity and novelty.

It is also important for us to keep in mind that **holiness is not for the few. It is for all of us.**

Saints surprise us. Their life stories remind us not only of the excellence of the virtuous life but of the unpredictability of what happens when a person allows herself to be transformed by God's grace. (Catherine McAuley's story is awash with the intervention of the God of surprises)

Von Balthasar has said that "no one is so much herself as the saint who disposes herself to God's plan, for which she is prepared to surrender her whole being, body, soul and spirit". The saints experience the same things as you and I do, but what is different is **their insight into what they experience**. It is this insight that makes the difference between one saint and another and between a saint and you and me.

One final point, it is God who makes the saint; the Church simply ratifies God's handiwork and calls the attention of the faithful for their encouragement and veneration. The task of the "saint-maker" (Congregation for Causes) is to illuminate the specific difference, to carve out what fresh and formative insight God has produced in the person who says; "here I am Lord, I come to do your will" or "not my will but yours be done".

Catherine McAuley's life shines like a beacon because of her insight into a practical expression of the merciful Love of God made tangible to the poor of Dublin of her time and continued today in 40+ countries throughout the world by 7,000 thousand or more Sisters of Mercy and more than a quarter of a million of their collaborators and associates in mission and ministry. It is a charism that continues to have extraordinary significance in the Church and in the world of our time.

When the Church looks at the life of a person in order to discern the person's holiness, she looks to the last ten years of that person's life. The last ten years of Catherine McAuley's life were spent as a religious Sister of Mercy. She made her profession on December 12th 1831 and she died on November 11th 1841, about six weeks after her 63rd birthday and just a month short of her tenth year in religious life.

Why the Church focuses on these latter years is that they are influenced by what has gone before, by how the person has lived her life from the beginning. We arrive at the sunset years of life moulded and formed by the choices we have made in the various circumstances life has offered us.

The **scholars who scrutinised the life and work of Catherine** as she responded to the action of God in her life found that Catherine's **spiritual greatness** lies in:

- Her **strength of spirit and dependence on God** that kept her faithful to the Catholic Faith. Because of family circumstances, she struggled during her adolescent and early adult years but she took practical steps to inform herself about her religion. This is what brought her into contact with Dr Murray (among others) long before he became Archbishop of Dublin or she the founder of a religious congregation
- Her **marvellous docility to the whisper of Divine Providence** which drew her humble and obedient step by step along the path of her specific vocation. Her time in Coolock seems to have been her “desert/novitiate” time during which her relationship with Jesus Christ deepened and matured, focussed on “her poor, humble abandoned Christ”. It gave expression to a personalised response to God’s loving call to Mercy. Catherine’s spirituality was focussed on the suffering Christ. She would say that the new congregation was “founded on Calvary there to serve a crucified redeemer” Her goal was to bring to the world around her that Mercy that flows from the crucified Christ
- The **total sacrifice of all that she was and had for the sake of the poor, sick and uneducated**. This was seen especially when she became the surprise legatee of the not inconsiderable wealth of William Callaghan. She saw the legacy not as something for herself but as given to her in trust for the poor. She spent all her inheritance in building and establishing the House of Mercy on the then fashionable Baggot Street in Dublin – an extraordinary feat for a single Catholic woman of that time and in that place.
- **She not only had great ideas, she also put many of them into practice**. She had her dreams/her vision but she was not a dreamer. Even before there was a question of her inheriting the Callaghan fortune, Catherine told William Callaghan what her dream was – to help poor young women to improve and better themselves. She had thought through what she would do when the Callaghans died and when she would have to fend for herself.
- Her **knowledge of Scripture is electrifying, especially for an Irish Catholic Woman** of her day. Catherine read daily from the Scriptures for Catherine Callaghan who was a Quaker, and so in God’s providence she herself was exposed to the transforming power of God’s word which she read, meditated upon, absorbed and translated into action. In her words “The life and teachings of Jesus Christ should be as a book always open before us, from which we are to learn all that is necessary to know”. Also, “what Jesus said and did was said and done to give us an example which our lives should be spent copying”. (Catechesi Tradendae no. 49: “everything that Jesus said and did teaches us” Pope St John Paul II)
- Her **devotional prayer was centred on Christ and on God’s universal Mercy** (Psalter of Jesus², Thirty Days Prayer). If you read Catherine McAuley’s letters or her Retreat Instructions you will find that there is no sentimentality. Her prayer reflects

² In the Psalter of Jesus, the name of Jesus is mentioned numerous times calling on his Mercy.

her time and place but deeper still it reveals a soul that recognised the importance of a vital prayer life. She would say herself; “how can we teach the Love of God if our own hearts are cold”. She described prayer as: a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian but its growth depends on the care we take to nourish it. If neglected it will die. If nourished by constant practice, it will blossom and produce fruit in abundance”. Catherine reminded those who would share her life and charism to cultivate a contemplative attitude to life because she knew from experience that out of a contemplative heart would flow compassionate service for those in need and the fruits of prayer are seen in our everyday choices/actions in life.

- She **had a great attention to detail**. On her deathbed she had the signs of her penance destroyed; she asked that refreshments be prepared in the community room rather than in the dining room for the sisters coming to the funeral. This revealed her thoughtfulness and her ability to meet people where they were at. She intuited that the sisters would need relaxed surroundings as they shared their grief. She was faithful in the small things as well as the big ones. (The good is always concrete).
- Her **synthesis of contemplation and action** foreshadows Paul VI’s Populorum Progressio in that she integrated in her service of the poor both their spiritual and material well-being. In this we see the radiance of the charism with which she was gifted. The corporal and spiritual works of Mercy were always her immediate focus. She understood how useless it is to preach the word of God to someone who is hungry, At the same time when she relieved someone’s hunger she never failed to help the person turn to God, the giver of all that is good.
- What Catherine asked of herself and others was the **fulfilment of ordinary everyday actions, starting from the most menial, fulfilled with perseverance, attention and love**, instead of spectacular efforts abandoned at the first hurdle. It is through her very ordinariness that her strength of spirit and her holiness become visible. She appreciated the value of the ordinary to bring the person into close contact with the Merciful God who is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.
- 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 tidbits 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.

There are **three elements that qualify action** as heroic

- Actions performed at a level which is **beyond to what is normally expected of a good person.**

This is obvious in Catherine in the way she used all her inheritance for the poor. Or her acceptance of the necessity of becoming a religious sister so that the poor might be more surely served, even though this was a long way from what she had imagined for herself in life. Like Mary of Nazareth before her, she learned that what she understood as giving ALL to God and what God intended required that she surrender and trust the more of God’s will.

- The practice of these acts is **continuous and progressive.**

This is very obvious in Catherine’s life from the time she began to help the tenants on the Callaghan estate in Coolock, through her teaching days in St Mary’s in Middle Abbey Street, to her building of the House of Mercy in Baggot Street, through her founding the Sisters of Mercy.

- This behaviour becomes a **powerful example and encouragement** for those who are in direct or mediated contact with the Servant of God.

In 1827, her first companions who came to help her with her works of Mercy in the house on Baggot Street in Dublin were attracted by the way she lived which one of them described as a “prayerfully quiet way of being”. Her “light on a lamp stand” is no less attractive today than it was in 1827.

Another aspect of Catherine’s **heroism is her humility**

When the life of a Servant of God is being evaluated as virtuous, the aspects looked at are; how the person lived the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity; how the person lived the virtues of Prudence, Justice, Courage and Temperance; how the person lived the virtues of his/her state in life which for Catherine were the virtues associated with the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. When the theologians were looking at the life of Catherine McAuley at the time she was declared Venerable on April 9th 1990 by Pope St. John Paul II, **the central virtue** that they discerned in Catherine was **humility**. Catherine has said:

“Humility makes us close imitators of the Blessed Virgin who, at the period of her unequalled exaltation, intoned the Magnificat, so expressive of her deep sense of God’s goodness and her own littleness”

From what we know of Catherine she saw humility as a prerequisite for serving people in need. She herself was a humble woman. Those who knew her attested to it with consistent

regularity. Her humility, it would seem, sprang from her inner awareness of her own need for and absolute dependence on God. From her letters and writings it is clear that she was convinced that she was “God’s instrument”, a strand in the great tapestry of God’s Divine Plan – only a strand but a very necessary one. It was **her grounded self-acceptance** of who she was before God, nothing more and nothing less, that was the secret of her humble hospitality. There was room in her heart and in her house for all who needed hospitality – family, friend or stranger. In opening her heart to God she exemplified living the Gospel imperative “love one another as I have loved you” (John 16:12).

Catherine was conscious of her own limitations and this knowledge saved her from any messianic complex that can be the mark of people who do great things. A novice in Carlow, who met her a number of times, said about her “there was in her, an absence of a manner of telling ‘I am the foundress. She was cheerful and motherly with all of us and looked very devout in her prayers”.

The same humility was inherent in her theory and practice of leadership as we see in the advice she gave to Elizabeth Moore in her letter of December 1838. In this letter Catherine lists other virtues that she associates with humility such as; kindness, acceptance, gentleness, patience, prayer and good example.

Catherine rarely drew attention to herself except when absolutely necessary as we see when she was very ill. While in her health, she served at table, helped in the laundry, looked after her own room, and never exempted herself from the ordinary work of the house.

Her humility, seen in many and varied ways in her life, is epitomized in her submission at 52 years of age to the rigours of an intensive novitiate. In the time when it took place, this act of humble submission was in itself nothing short of heroic. It is rendered even more significant by the fact that at one stage of her time in Georges Hill there was a question of the validity of her novitiate which threatened to prolong her absence from Baggot Street. We can only imagine the inner experience of anguish and the trust and surrender to God she needed to contain this anguish at a time when she was anxious to return to Baggot Street as soon as was humanly possible because she had learned that in her absence misplaced zeal and excessive penances had undermined health among her small band of very young companions. (At the outset of the Baggot Street project Catherine was more than twice the age of the majority of her companions).

Her ability to surrender humbly to God will always shine as a lamp for those of us who follow her especially as we get older and surrender back to God all the capacities and abilities that we once took for granted like sight and hearing, mobility and memory.

Underpinning Catherine’s humility is her unwavering trust in and devotion to her “humbled abandoned agonizing Christ”.

“The humbled, abandoned, agonizing Christ, this is my Christ, him will I have and hold. Outside of him, nothing”

Her humility also lay at the source of her gratitude and prayer. We hear her pray; “May God bless the poor Sisters of Mercy and make them very humble that they may not be unworthy of the distinguished blessing that God has bestowed on them”.

In her relationships with others, acceptance and acknowledgement of her own shortcomings allowed Catherine the ability to apologise with courtesy to others and endowed her with peace, serenity, calmness and gentleness.

‘May God forgive me and make me humble before he calls me into his presence’.

For Catherine, humility was one of the prerequisites for ministering to those in need. It was only through her awareness of her utter powerlessness, weakness and absolute dependence on God that she could be used effectively for that for which he intended her:

“Humility must emanate from the heart and arise from a deep conviction of our own nothingness and dependence on God, from our knowing well that if he withdraws his supporting hand we will surely fall.”

Given her humble trust in God, Catherine knew real joy in responding to her call. It is real joy that gives us courage to venture the “exodus” of love, out of ourselves and into the burning holiness of God. It is true joy that pain does not destroy and which first brings maturity. Only joy that stands the test of pain and is stronger than affliction is authentic. Catherine embraced the mission in life entrusted to her, and she lived it joyfully knowing that through this she would bring others to God and would grow into wholeness and holiness and into being the loving mercy-bearing person she was called to be.

Catherine’s failures

Frances Warde wrote about Catherine McAuley, in a letter to Mother Gonzaga O’Brien in 1879 as follows;

“You never knew her, I knew her better than I have known anyone in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision”

This does not mean that the holy person is untouched by ordinary everyday struggles to become more truly open and obedient to what God is asking of her. Catherine McAuley was not born a saint. She grew in holiness through learning from her life’s experiences, searching for God’s will in her regard and responding to the best of her ability. This did not mean that she did not fail at times.

She **publicly rebuked Sr Mary Clare Moore** and promptly asked forgiveness on her knees from those sisters who had witnessed it. She admitted that she had difficulty with the pace at which Sr Mary Clare worked and obviously this difficulty spilled over into a public rebuke at some time.

It also seems that Catherine had difficulty understanding what we might call “difficult” temperaments that lacked gentility and refinement.

She **read three sentences of an aggressive letter from Dr Meyler**, the PP of Westland Row Church, before burning it. The chaplaincy difficulty really sent her into a state of great agitation. However, it is to her credit that she was on good terms with Dr Meyler at the end of her life and he was one of the people who came to see her on the day she died. (Positio p 691).

Like all of us she had her blind spots, for example;

She warned Sr Cecelia Marmion, the novice mistress, about having favourites among the novices. At the same time Catherine herself was inclined to get attached to people she liked. Sometimes her expressions of affection seemed excessive. About a Sr Margaret Dwyer she said; "I am almost infatuated with the darling heavenly little Sr Margaret D. I never met in this great world a sweeter little dove, all animation, candour and real good sense. I declared she should be queen of the order in general". This comment was taken up quite seriously in the community, people reacted to it strongly.

These simple examples take nothing from Catherine, instead they show her humanity and that she had to handle herself in her relationships with others as everybody has. However, her closeness to God rendered her very sensitive to her failures, she saw faults in herself that lesser mortals would never notice nor ask pardon for.

Catherine's death.

Catherine died the death **that any Christian might hope and pray for** and which every Christian must admire. Without any fuss, without any fear she gave herself back to God as she had given herself to Him in life, which was amazing given that she had such a fear of death at the time of her mother's death in 1898 when she was twenty years of age.

Sr Mary Vincent Whitty who was present when Catherine died wrote to Sr Cecelia Marmion on the 12th November 1841:

"Yesterday, she said to me, "if you give yourself entirely to God – all you have to serve him – every power of your mind and heart – you will have a consolation you will not know where it comes from". Indeed she looked the picture of entire abandonment of herself and all that belonged to her into the hands of God. We know that Catherine feared death especially at the time of her mother's death. Here indeed was a journey into Mercy from fear and apprehension to serenity, trust and peace.

Dr Michael Blake Bishop of Dromore, writing to Sr Mary Elizabeth Moore, November 13th 1841, two days after Catherine's death, expressed his deep sense of personal loss and went on to say:

"but God's holy will be done at all times. To him we are indebted for all she did. From him she received the spirit that animated her pure soul".

It is the people who knew the holy person who claim him/her to be holy. It is the role of the Church to discern that claim and search its authenticity. (Pope John Paul II – Santo subito -

the call of the people gathered in St Peter's Square at the time of his death). The same with Catherine McAuley, those who knew her, not only her companions, the Sisters of Mercy, but also priests, bishops and the poor whom she served unstintingly declared that she was a truly holy person. Contrary to her own estimate of herself, Catherine was known for her holiness at the time of her death.

Fr Myles Gaffney, a friend and also the Dean of Maynooth (he was the one appointed by Archbishop Murray to help Catherine formulate her rule on the day after the foundation of the Congregation, 13th December 1831) wrote of her at the time of her death:

“Few people left the world in 1841 that can, with more confidence expect to hear the following words on the lips of our Divine Redeemer, “Come you blessed of my father for I was thirsty and you gave to me to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you covered me, sick and you visited me. As much as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me” (Bermondsey Annals), He summarised very succinctly what was the core of Catherine's expression of Mercy – the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy. Catherine recognised very clearly from Scripture that we will have to answer more for omission than for sin when we come face to face with our Redeemer, for our tendency to look the other way in the face of our neighbour's need.

Conclusion

What Catherine McAuley accomplished through her work in life is just one ray of light from the prism of light which is the life of this great woman. Like the apostles with the five loaves and two fish, she did what she could with what was at her disposal. Like the apostles with Jesus, God blessed her work with an increase that went far beyond anything she could have ever asked or imagined.

From what we know of her we can see that Catherine was consumed by her mission – to be the practical expression of the Mercy of God in her world. The mission was far greater than herself as history has and will prove. In imitation of Mary of Nazareth who followed her mission wherever it led, even to the heights of Calvary, so too with Catherine, she did not hold back on any level of her being, physical, emotional, spiritual, material, everything was given in response to the call that she experienced within.

She did not focus on herself; she focussed all her energies on the mission entrusted to her.

As we have already noted, God gives each of us a specific mission, to which each of us is called and challenged to be faithful. Catherine was entrusted with the charism of Mercy. As she understood and lived it and as we have received it, it is a call to be a conduit of the merciful Love of God in clear and practical ways as they unfold in what we discern as God's plan for our life personally and communally.

Catherine stands before each one of us here and through the challenge of her life asks each of us how we are living our call to be living embodiments of the Merciful love of God in our time and place.

Her Cause for Beatification has a meaning that transcends her persona and her institute and which has implications for the whole Church today.

Brenda Dolphin RSM

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MERCYWORKS: COMPASSION IN ACTION: REFLECTIONS ON MT. 25

By

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Presented at the fall, 2016

Values in Practice Colloquium

Saint Joseph's College of Maine

In Chapter 25 of the New Testament gospel of Matthew, Jesus focuses on MercyWorks as the criteria of the Last Judgment. Herein, Jesus refers to the need to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those imprisoned, shelter homeless people, and bury those who have died. Of note is the fact that each of these actions entails responding to others' physical needs. During this extraordinary jubilee year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis, it is good to reflect on each of these MercyWorks. Before doing so, let us, first of all, consider the religious meaning of mercy.

In the scriptures, Mercy is constitutive of God's nature. Mercy is what God does for humans because God loves each person God creates. As Pope Francis has noted so beautifully, God's mercy is a "caress of love." The mercy-ing God of the Hebrew Scriptures is fully revealed in Jesus' person and actions narrated in the New Testament. As the gospel writers indicate, during his public ministry Jesus graciously and lovingly responded mercifully to the many people such as the lame, the blind, the deaf and the mute, those demon possessed and lepers who brought their needs to him. Jesus dined with social outcasts such as tax collectors and prostitutes and provided bread and fish for thousands of people. Likewise, Jesus invited those who wish to follow him to engage wholeheartedly in works of mercy.

So, what is the essence of Mercy? It is being attentive and sensitive to the needs of others whom one encounters in everyday situations. Mercy is heartfelt, compassionate love in action. As Elaine Prevallet reflects: "Mercy makes our hearts spacious; it also mercies the space around us. Mercy becomes the space we live in."¹ Mercy is *being* in life in ways that concretize one's love of God through one's love of neighbor. According to Thomas Merton, "To give mercy is ... to participate ... in the work of the new creation and of redemption."² In effect, mercy-ing is healing, restorative activity. With this understanding of the meaning of Mercy in mind, let us now reflect upon each of the MercyWorks, that is, the corporal works of Mercy.

FEED THE HUNGRY

In the Old Testament Book of Proverbs we read: "A generous person will be blessed for she or he shares food with the poor." (21:13) Additionally, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to fellow Hebrews that sharing food with the hungry is the kind of fasting that God desires. (See Isaiah 58:7)

During college, Norman Borlaug studied agriculture. Later, this Iowan discovered how to breed highly fruitful strains of food plants which, in effect, saved the lives of a billion people, especially those in developing countries. Borlaug, the father of the Green revolution, died in 2009. Recently, a 100,000 dollar donation from the Green Bay Packers football team provided the resources for the Marian Fathers to build a bakery and instruct Rwandans on how to use it to provide food for their people.

The right to food is a basic human right. That being said, in Westchester County, New York, which is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, currently 200,000 residents are hungry or at risk of hunger. More than half of these residents are seniors and one-third are children under the age of 18. Globally, 3 million children die of malnutrition each year. This means that every 4 seconds another child on Earth loses his or her life.

GIVE DRINK TO THE THIRSTY

Jesus said: “Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water ... shall not lose his or her reward.” (Mt. 10:40 – 42) Today, water shortages are a common reality in different parts of our world. For many people, safe, drinkable water is not readily available. Globally, each day several thousand children die due to diarrhea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. Given this reality, we might ask ourselves how far we each need to go to satisfy our thirst. For almost a billion people on Earth the answer to that question is at least four miles a day.

CLOTHE THE NAKED

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus instructs the person who has two coats to share with another who has none. (See Luke 3:11) In today’s world, millions of people cannot afford to purchase adequate clothing to protect themselves from the elements. In contrast, there are many who possess an over-abundance in this regard. Although clothes do not make the person, clothes and human dignity go hand-in-hand. That being said, engaging in this MercyWork upholds the dignity of one’s brother or sister by ensuring the basic necessity of sufficient clothing.

VISIT THE SICK

During his public ministry, Jesus encountered many sick people. He reached out in love to those suffering from illness; he spoke encouraging words to them; sometimes, he physically touched them; and he healed them of their maladies.

Often those who are sick become discouraged and feel lonely. Some of the sick live in their own homes; others are in hospitals; many reside in long-term care facilities. Visiting those who suffer from short or long term illness is a way of bringing comfort and care to them. It is a way of letting them know that they are not forgotten and that their lives matter. It is a way of lightening their suffering. One’s presence and willingness to listen are immeasurable gifts to sick persons.

VISIT THE IMPRISONED

Jesus said: “I was in prison and you came to me.” (Mt. 25:36) Currently, in the United States a higher percentage of the population is in prison than in any other nation on Earth. Today, 2,240,000 people (one in every 139 citizens) live in prisons in our country. This includes a number of men and women incarcerated for crimes that they did not commit. Life in prison can be very hard and, in general, much is lacking in rehabilitation programs that exist in our prison system. Prisoners look forward to visits; they appreciate others’ taking time to be with them. Spending time with those in prison is truly a MercyWork.

SHELTER THE HOMELESS

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews insisted: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.” (13:2) Today, there are many refugees from war-torn countries and countries where safety is an issue due to human or drug trafficking. Millions are leaving their lives behind to seek shelter elsewhere. Of note is the fact that etched on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor are these words:

“Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me. /I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Also, because of floods, earthquakes and hurricanes, people can suddenly become homeless. Those who come to the aid of victims of these kinds of natural disasters not only rebuild homes but, more importantly, rebuild the spirits of those who suffer from such catastrophic, life-changing events.

Furthermore, homelessness can result from long-term unemployment or a medical condition that depletes an individual or family’s financial resources. In the United States, a significant percentage of the homeless are military veterans. Long-term homelessness can lead to alcoholism, drug abuse, or psychological illness.

In Rome, to the right of St. Peter’s Basilica, Pope Francis had showers installed for homeless people. Very near to these showers, a new shelter for the homeless is being built today. In this way, the pope is making clear how important it is to provide shelter for those in need.

BURY THE DEAD

In the Christian tradition, burying the dead is based on the sacredness of the human person. After Jesus died, his deposition from the cross, his being buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, and women’s coming to the burial place on Easter Sunday to anoint Jesus’ body with spices model honoring the person who has died.

Proper burial of the dead gives expression to words of the psalmist: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of the saints.” (Psalm 116:15) It is a way of demonstrating that the life of the deceased was valued and continues to have value because she or he is sacred in the eyes of God.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need in our world today to witness to Mercy by doing the corporal works of mercy. Pope Francis has said that what our world needs is the medicine of mercy and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI insists that “There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable.”³ The word “misericordia” (translated “mercy”) means a heart that gives itself to those in need. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul insists that the one who does acts of mercy do so cheerfully. (See Rom. 12:8) And so, whenever and wherever we engage in MercyWorks, let us do so in a warmhearted and most generous way!

¹Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L., “Living in the Mercy” in *The Way of Mercy*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 125.

² Thomas Merton, “The Climate of Mercy” in *The Way of Mercy*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 82.

³Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter: Deus Caritas Est*, 28 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_2005 – accessed 10.11.2106.]

LITANY OF MERCY

A reader or one section of the group reads the main text, the rest respond with the bold type.

Creator God – Maker and Source of Mercy – **all praise to You.**

Jesus – exemplar and champion of Mercy – **all praise to You.**

Spirit – artist and animator of Mercy – **all praise to You.**

Out of the profound silence of Your Presence we murmur the words of Mercy:

- + Rahamim: the womb love – **inscribe it on our hearts.**
- + Heseed: the loving kindness – **inscribe it on our hearts.**
- + Eleos: the healing oil – **inscribe it on our hearts.**
- + the words of tenderness and empathy – **inscribe them on our hearts.**
- + the words of tolerance and forgiveness – **inscribe them on our hearts.**
- + the words of justice and faithfulness – **inscribe them on our hearts.**

In the encounters of the life of Jesus we find our Mercy meaning:

- + the woman with the alabaster jar – **may we meet as Jesus met.**
- + the rich young man – **may we meet as Jesus met.**
- + the little girl brought to life – **may we meet as Jesus met.**
- + the three at Bethany – **may we meet as Jesus met.**
- + the lepers, the outcasts, the lost – **may we meet as Jesus met.**

In the imagination of Jesus we find our Mercy inspiration:

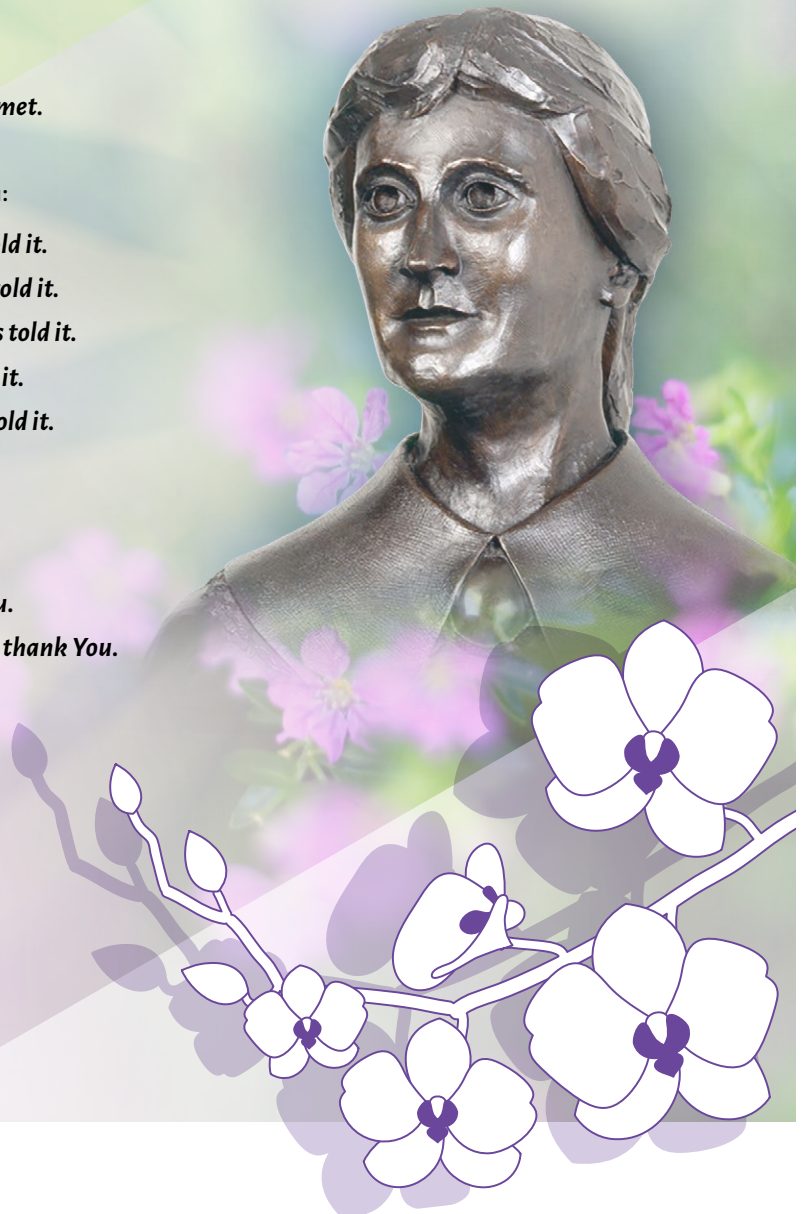
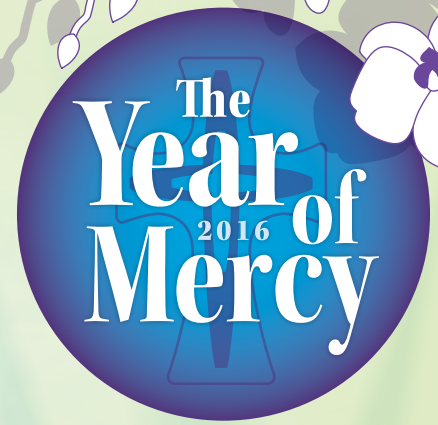
- + the one sheep who went missing – **may we do as Jesus told it.**
- + the son who was welcomed home – **may we do as Jesus told it.**
- + the vineyard workers, late and early – **may we do as Jesus told it.**
- + the treasure buried in the field – **may we do as Jesus told it.**
- + the only one who stopped to help – **may we do as Jesus told it.**

In the life of our forebears we recognise Mercy:

- + for Mary of Nazareth and Calvary – **we thank You.**
- + for Catherine McAuley, woman of Dublin – **we thank You.**
- + for our founders and pioneers, the near and the far – **we thank You.**
- + for our holy ones and wisdom figures – **we thank You.**
- + for the heroic and the humble – **we thank You.**

With all Your creation we share our life in Mercy:

- + the feather and the fur – **we respect and cherish.**
- + the waterway and the breeze – **we respect and cherish.**
- + the rock and the leaf – **we respect and cherish.**
- + the fish and the star – **we respect and cherish.**
- + the flame and the stalk – **we respect and cherish.**



LITANY OF MERCY

The colour of mercy – *we celebrate.*
the shape of mercy – *we celebrate.*
the mystery of mercy – *we celebrate.*
the arenas of mercy – *we celebrate.*

The unfinished chapters – *we pledge mercy.*
the unmet need – *we pledge mercy.*
the violence, the horror – *we pledge mercy.*
the urgent immensities – *we pledge mercy.*
the cries, the silences, the aches and injuries – *we pledge mercy.*

In Your name, with Your help, by Your hand.
In the large days and ordinary ways,
alone and together, we are people for Mercy.

Mercy calls us – *Mercy calls us.*
Mercy guides us – *Mercy guides us.*
Mercy sustains us – *Mercy sustains us.*

Amen.

Mary Wickham rsm
(ISMAPNG)

To read more of
Sr Mary's poetry visit:
marywickhamrsm.org.au

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