



Mercy: A Vision that Continues to Evolve – Mary Reynolds rsm

In the dawning days of the 2017, I found myself drawn to the Clare Augustine illustration of the nativity, which had been uploaded to our website to mark the Feast of the Epiphany. Its resonance with the visit of the Magi is evident, but surprisingly the images of the three wise men Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar are replaced by three women, dressed in the Mercy habit, complete with celebratory church cloaks.



One of the great gifts of art is that it does not impose facts or time frames; the viewer has the freedom to create both. Availing of that freedom, it led me on a journey of imagining who these wisdom figures might be. Wise women and women of vision are closely related and so very quickly I found myself connecting with three major vision moments in our Mercy story which we will celebrate in 2017. Firstly, we will celebrate the 190th anniversary of the opening of the House of Mercy, Sept. 24th 1827; secondly the 25th anniversary of the establishment of [Mercy International Association](#) in October 1992 and this year we will launch the outcome of the world wide discernment of the '*cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*' through the [Mercy International Reflection Process](#). So taking artistic license, I imagine each of these three women representing a vision that continues to evolve and inform our search for a deeper experience of God's mercy in our own lives and a

commitment to *'keep alive the founding spirit of Catherine among peoples of the world most in need of God's mercy and compassion'* as well as a renewed care for our common home.

Following a vision is quite like following the star and in 2017 we at Mercy International invite you to engage the journey of following the star, looking back on how the star has led us to the point at which we have now arrived and looking forward to the journey ahead to which the star may be pointing. Over the last few years we have been journeying together in very privileged contexts. In 2014, we discovered anew our capacity to interconnect at enhanced levels as we celebrated as a global Mercy family the [20th Anniversary](#) of the opening of Mercy International Centre. In 2015 we celebrated the [Year of Consecrated Life](#), which called us *'to wake up the world'* and last year, we had the [Jubilee Year of Mercy](#), calling us to *'be merciful like the Father'*. Nourished by such rich experiences, perhaps now is the time to join the three wise women at the crib in deepening ourselves in the vision that gives direction to our lives.

No doubt the first of the three women must surely represent Catherine and the early founding women of Mercy. Mercy was the motivating power underlying Catherine's vision. For her, Mercy in the form of a compassionate practical response to need, was where she believed she was called by God. She initially understood her call or vocation in terms of working as a laywoman, doing good among the poor in her city of Dublin but her understanding of the direction her life was disturbed, enlarged, opened to the 'more' of God's will for her by the request/directive of the Archbishop of Dublin that she give canonical status to her charitable undertaking or hand it over to another canonically established Congregation. Catherine feared that the poor would be denied the comprehensive services that no other group was offering, so she agreed to place her community canonically within the greater community of the Church. *'God'*, she said, *'can bend and change and form and reform any of his creatures to fit them for the purpose he designs'*. She institutionalised her vision in the Rule of the Congregation, describing Mercy as *"the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who wish to follow his example"* She saw the Mercy response as multi-dimensional and in her singleness of purpose she turned out to be a pioneer in many areas. Her focus obviously was on doing the very best she could for the poor of Dublin, putting flesh on the vision with no thought of her own security in any of the transactions she entered into. Her vision met with opposition from some members of family, church and society. However in spite of the pain inherent in that, she did not surrender her hopes and dreams to the fateful limitations others tried to place on her. Furthermore the abundance, joy and love so evident in her life witnessed powerfully to what Pope Francis calls *'The Joy of the Gospel'*. As she matured this weaving of joy and pain was expressed through a profound trust in the Providence of God expressed so well in her [Suscipe](#).

Two short statements of Catherine capture the essence of her vision. She said that all she wanted was *to make some lasting efforts for the relief of the suffering and the instruction of the ignorant'* and when asked what was the prerequisite for a Sister of Mercy, she took as

given *'an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor'*. Heidegger tells us that our future comes to meet us out of our past. The vision of Catherine McAuley in its transparent simplicity is as apt to inspire and challenge today, 190 years later, as it was in her lifetime. She is a very real example of what it means to be a conduit of God's loving and compassionate Mercy in the world. She understood and lived the conviction that Christ has no body now but ours and exemplified that each one of us brings our own unique gift to living that vision in the place and time in which we find ourselves

The second figure for me represents the women of vision, especially Sr. Mary Trainer with the support of Sr. Sebastian Cashen, who in 1998 began a dialogue with the Sisters of Mercy worldwide, raising the question: *'If Catherine were alive today what would she have us do with the House of Mercy she founded at Baggot Street. What are your dreams?'* The dreams sent in from the various national conferences around the Mercy world revealed a remarkable convergence of desires and hopes, centring on heritage, pilgrimage renewal, service of the poor and the bonding of the Mercy family. While shared dreams sent spirits soaring, the realities of the Baggot Street plant (damp, cold and structurally challenging) and the challenges of listening and discerning the Spirit speaking in *'diverse tongues and cultural experiences'* kept feet very much on the ground. Indeed if anyone, in December 1992, when the first steps of the renovation began, wanted to parallel their experiences to that of ['The Journey of the Magi'](#) as imagined by T.S. Eliot, they might have found several resonances:

*A cold coming we had of it
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter. With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly*

But as with the Magi, the star continued to draw the searchers on and in October 1992 Mercy International Association (MIA) came officially into being, the Memorandum and Articles of the Association were signed and the House of Mercy at Baggot Street passed from the Dublin Congregation of Mercy to Mercy International Association by Deed of Transfer. The vision statement that directs MIA today acknowledges that *'God's gracious and compassionate Mercy is the wellspring, the source of never failing supply, for all those who cherish and seek to live out the gift of mercy'*. It challenges us to *'use our resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of people worldwide'* and it sees the role of Mercy International Centre as offering *'a diversity of programmes, enhanced communication and outreach efforts in relation to global action'*. MIA's [vision](#) and dream is to *'to keep alive the founding spirit of Catherine among peoples of the world most in need of God's compassion and mercy'*.

The third wisdom figure, one might say, is the descendent of the first and second wise women. For me she represents the [Mercy International Reflection Process](#) (MIRP).

Launched on 8th December 2015 this process provided us with a profound call to explore Mercy anew in a world in which the other-than-human together with the human, cry out for mercy. Groups from all around the world responded -vowed members, associates, partners in ministry, friends and people from diverse backgrounds who walk the path of Mercy. People of all ages, from youth to late adulthood and from places across the length and breadth of our world as far apart as Newfoundland and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Peru, and myriad places in between entered into *'the grace and challenge of this contemplative space'* and sought *'to discern together globally a shared response to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor, thus flaming the fire of Mercy in themselves and in our Universe.'* Like the Magi, there was a star to guide, a star with several beams of light: Personal experience, knowledge and concerns; Social, scientific, environmental, political, cultural and economic realities; Biblical, theological, spiritual, ecclesial, mercy traditions , and other wisdoms and traditions. The star was particularly bright as it beamed the inspiration of [Laudato Si'](#), the riches offered through the [Voices](#) and the many resources, news and reports offered through the [special section](#) on the Mercy World website and the weekly [Mercy e-News](#).

By December 12th, most MIRP groups had articulated a vision for a new engagement and developed action plans to bring about change. In March 2017 the Guiding Team, the national co-ordinators and others will gather once again in Baggot Street to discern together what the outcome of this process is calling us to at a global, national and local levels. We wait in anticipation for the 'something new' that is being birthed. Perhaps with T.S. Eliot again, we will find ourselves reflecting

*Were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt*

The gifts offered by the Magi may become pointers to where we are being called.

Gold, in all ages, has served as an article and store of enduring value. It holds its value over long periods of time even as other goods and commodities rise and fall. **What is of enduring value in Mercy that we are being called anew to embrace?**

Frankincense, when flamed or burned produces an aromatic smoke that rises up into the air. **How will we 'flame the fire of Mercy as creation waits in eager longing?**

Myrrh was one of the ingredients used in the sacred anointing of people and symbolises consecration and active service of God, humankind and all of creation. **To what actions are we being called as we respond to 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor?'**

We can be sure of one thing – our experience of the process and our discernment of the outcome will call us on new paths. Like Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar who were led home by a different way, like Catherine who discovered that *'God can bend and change and form*

and reform any of his creatures to fit them for the purpose he designs', like the MIA leaders in 2006 who saw a need once again to focus its vision in light of changing realities in the member congregations and the world; we will set ourselves a new challenge. Hopefully with the Magi we will be able to echo:

*We returned to our places, ...
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation*

2017 will be a year to focus our vision anew. Among the opportunities we will offer are:

- Weekly introductions to the mission of Mercy as it is being lived in [the 40+ countries](#) in which Mercy ministers today, keeping alive the founding vision of Catherine.
- Ongoing invitations to vowed members, associates, partners in ministry, youth and friends of mercy to engage with us in our programmes and global action initiatives
- Engagement with the outcome of the [Mercy International Reflection Process](#).

Our wish for the year is that we will not close the Door of Mercy and that we will continue to hear the challenge so well expressed in the questions posed to us by Elizabeth Davis rsm:

Will you as doorkeeper hold wide the door to invite Mercy to come in to be with us?

Will you as doorkeeper hold wide the door to invite those who are hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick, strangers, or naked to come in to find Mercy?

Will you as doorkeeper help us find new ways of being Mercy on an Earth and among a people crying out for justice?

Will you as doorkeeper guide us into a holy place of contemplation and vision?

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Image: *Clare Augustine Moore's illuminated version of the Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy. It comes from Chapter V 'Of the Vow of Poverty'. © 1992 MIA*