

MERCY IN GUYANA

“The world in which we live in is in many respects different from the world of Mother Catherine, in other respects it is essentially the same”, wrote Dermot Ryan, Archbishop of Dublin. I will contend it is worse. One reads and sees daily on TV of the widespread violence throughout the world and in the home, extreme violation of human rights, rape, sex tourism, child pornography, the extreme vulnerability of women; it was recently recorded that there are over 100-150 million street children in the world!

In Guyana the social fabric of our society is severely frayed. Family life is dysfunctional, the economic situation compounded with a growing sense of individualism. The disintegration of neighbourhood and community organizations has caused a tremendous strain on the family. Over 65% of the population exist below the poverty line; parents emigrate in search of greener pastures for themselves and children; those who remain try to cope with the high cost of living and lack of employment, they turn to illegal trade in guns, drugs, sex and money laundering. The drug scene has resulted in an increase of DAILY violent crimes; many young people are in jail; others walking the streets and begging. Much of this deterioration has been the result of a breakdown in the educational system. Guyana once boasted the highest rate of literacy in the Caribbean; since the 1970s it has reached the lowest. In 1976 after the government take-over of the denominational schools, of which the best were administered by the Sisters of Mercy, there has been a physical as well as an educational decline in schools—morale among the teachers low. Teachers have migrated to the Caribbean, USA, and the U.K. The University of Guyana has suffered even more from a similar malaise.

The concern of the Sisters of Mercy re this collapse of the educational system was evinced in the teaching of young children at their convent premises on the week-ends; for the youth a Mercy Wings Vocational Centre was opened where training is being given in various subjects, above all, Home Economics, Carpentry and Masonry and, of course, Religious Studies. Also a school connected to our St. John Bosco Orphanage, assures the young boys of a solid and basic education—these boys who have been abandoned at birth by mothers who are unable to support their many offspring. Our Mercy thrust today in this 21st century is to assure our young people, the hope of every country, of our loving care, concern, support, both morally and financially—this particularly carried out in our Mercy Boys’ Home which reaches out to boys of 16 through 21 from our orphanage who have no one and nowhere to go.

Guyana ranks third in the world after Africa and Haiti in the high incidence of HIV/Aids. Our Sisters give positive help through its programmes, medical support and visits. A Mobile Clinic operating through St. Joseph Mercy Hospital serves the poor and sick in the outlying areas of the city. Reams could be written about the work of the Sisters among our very outcast, the patients suffering from Leprosy /Hansen’s Disease—a work begun

in the 1930s and still carried on . Yes, the Sisters offer much financial helping supplying their needs as the government does not really support these people but even moreso it is imperative to carry out Catherine's injunction of "the kind word, the gentle compassionate look, the patient hearing of their sorrows..." But may I say here that these patients give us so much more than we ever give them. They show us so well how to bear sorrow, to look on their affliction with the eyes of faith in and love of God. Among the works of Mercy at the Leprosarium we do literally bury the dead as the other patients do not have hands to lift the coffin. There is very little help from other sources as most Guyanese still have the Biblical conception of leprosy and shun these people.

It is also our urgent responsibility as Sisters of Mercy to persuade the authorities that ending sexual violence against women matters, that Amerindians, our indigenous people, matter and that the curbing of criminality matter. So we are involved in a variety of organizations: Guyana Human Rights Organization, Amerindian Peoples' Association, etc. , Women Reaching Out, etc. I also serve on the Advisory Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs which particularly deal with the territorial rights of our country and another Sister worked in the Ministry of Amerindian affairs so in some small way a Mercy charism is injected in the political stream. Recently, together with a large number of our members of the Guyana Human Rights Organization we joined a large street protest against the horrific attack of an Amerindian family –the women being stripped, beaten robbed, and sexually assaulted by a gang of men while a male was stabbed and robbed.

The trends in Guyana as briefly stated are a microcosm of global trends as so clearly delineated in all the papers, but whether we live in the First World, the Third World or whatever world, the stress should always be on indeed in the "kindling of the Mercy fire"—the fire of love- in whatever field we work to build bridges, to promote harmony and love among our people.

I offer some words of Thomas Merton which I feel capture the mandate for Mercy in the 21st century:

Where there is a deep, simple, all-embracing love of man, of the created world of living and inanimate things, there will be respect for life, for truth, for justice, and there will be a humble love of God. But where there is no love of man, no love of life, then make all the laws you want, all the edicts and treaties, issue all the anathemas, set up all the safeguards and inspections, fill the air with spying satellites and hang cameras on the moon. As long as you see your fellowman as being essentially to be feared and mistrusted, hated and destroyed, there cannot be peace, neither justice on earth.

Sister Mary Noel Menezes, RSM



“Home” (shack) of two patients, Desmond and Ameena, suffering from Hansen’s disease [leprosy]



Desmond and Ameena and their one year old daughter, Juliet



Desmond and Ameena and their one year old daughter, Juliet

Srs Noel and Celine Marie visit these patients every week and bring them foodstuffs, medication and money. They have helped them to buy a plot of land and have arranged with Food for the poor to build them a small house.

The Sisters also visit the 14 other patients who reside in the Leprosarium in Mahaica Village; many of these patients are blind and without limbs.

This work among these “outcasts” of society was begun by the Sisters of Mercy in 1930.

Sr Mary Noel Menezes