

The Future of Religious Life

By Breege O'Neill R.S.M

Good morning Sisters and thank you for your warm welcome. I feel very privileged to be with you this morning as you gather here in All Hallows for your MIA Conference. My wish is that your stay in Ireland will be a time of nourishment and blessing for you. I am conscious that you who are present here this morning represent all the Sisters of Mercy in the world today. It is also significant that you are gathered in Dublin, Catherine McAuley's birthplace, the birthplace of the charism of Mercy with which she and all of us have been gifted. What a gathering! What richness! What opportunity for sharing multicultural experiences! What possibilities for newness, as we attend to God's promptings and listen to God's whisperings. So be excited! Your time together has immense possibilities. The agenda for the three days is quite full but I hope you will also find time for fun and story -telling! Remember Catherine's maxim that every day should end with a little dancing!

I invite you as we begin, to take a moment to be present to each person gathered here this morning; the women entrusted with the leadership of our Mercy Congregations at this time in our history, the women with whom you will share your hopes and dreams over the course of the next few days; honour each one, her uniqueness, her hopes and dreams, her giftedness, her contribution to the mission of Mercy worldwide. Reflect for a moment on the unique presence of God within each one and the God present among us

"Where two or three are gathered- I am there"

Let us also draw inspiration and hope from all women Religious from all Congregations who over the centuries have given their lives to furthering the reign of God in their time and those who to-day continue to weave hope and love and life into the fabric of society. With a deep sense of reverence for each other let us entrust ourselves to God's gentle guidance throughout this day.

We gather in the month of May, one of the loveliest months of the year in Ireland, when the country is covered in a profusion of colour –the hawthorn, the lilac and the gorse are in full bloom- there is warmth in the sun (not too much mind!) and the vibrant energy of growth is all around. We gather too in the liturgical time between the resurrection and Pentecost- an **in between time** filled with confusion, loss, fear, - a waiting time,- filled with expectation and hope, as we anticipate in our lives the outpouring of God's spirit.

I have been asked to reflect with you to-day on the future of Religious Life in the context of the MIA Vision and the Conference Theme- *--Mercy is the wellspring- the source of never failing supply.*

I need not tell you that I do not have a crystal ball through which I can foresee the shape of Religious Life that will evolve into the future so I will not be providing answers or blueprints or guarantees regarding where the Spirit of God might lead us. What I am sure of is that the future is within each one of us here and we are creating our future and the future of Religious Life by how we live the present moment. What I will do to-day is offer you some reflections that may resonate with your own experience and with the questions you ponder in your hearts; questions you hear asked in your Congregations and beyond. I hope that what I offer will be of some help to you as you grapple with these questions. I hope too that it may assist you, the leadership of Mercy as you discern together over the next few days ways to take forward the MIA vision.

So this morning I will look at the future of Religious Life through the lens of three questions:

What is the journey that shapes this present moment?

What kind of story will gift the future?

Where is the call in Religious life/Mercy life today?

What is the power that opens the way into the future?

Throughout the day there will be opportunity for you to reflect and share your own insights and wisdom.

Occasions like this remind me of a story from our Irish folklore. Fionn Mac Cumhaill as you may know was a hero figure in ancient Ireland, renowned for his wisdom. The story goes that one morning he and his comrades, who were known as the Fianna, were engaged in conversation when Fionn posed this question to his company:

"What is the most beautiful sound in all of creation"?

"The rustling of the grass as the deer gallops over the meadow" said one.

"The most beautiful sound in all of creation is the first birdsong at dawn," said another

"It is the gurgling of the water over the stones in a stream at even-tide" said a third.

"And you", they asked Fionn, "what do you think"?

He replied "The most beautiful sound in all of creation is the music of what happens".

I believe that we need to listen deeply to the music of what is happening within us, in Religious Life and in our world just now. We need to listen to its call, to allow it to draw us into new depths, to lead us in new directions, so that our engagement in the dance of life is vibrant and transforming. I hope that you will tune in to that music here, the music of what happens during this Conference, that you will savour it, trusting that it is through what happens between us that the Spirit of God works.

In a recent article the Organizational consultant, Margaret Wheatley had this to say: *Despite current ads and slogans, the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible "*

She believes that it is together we change the world. It is from sharing our hopes, our vision and our questions that we will create our future. The quality of that sharing is crucial-our willingness to risk speaking our truth trusting that our truth will be respected, our willingness to listen well, not only to those who think like us but more especially to listen with an ear for difference. It is through such engagement with each other that we open up pathways into a hope-filled future.-through *the music of what happens* when we gather with open hearts, minds and wills.

I am aware that some of you have been to the UISG Conference in Rome where you reflected on this very topic- the future of Religious life- and I notice the resonance in the themes chosen for both Conferences. (Is that co-incidence or God incidence?) In both there is the image of water depicting God's Sustaining Presence. *The wellspring of God's Mercy, the source of never failing supply and the fountain that springs forth and flows although it is night.*

The UISG Conference brochure states "*Religious life finds itself today in a situation of deep searching, of creativity and pruning. The Spirit, who dwells in us, continually quenches our thirst with water from the Fountain that is always replenished. We are drawn and inspired by a love, which calls us to fill situations of darkness with prophetic light and to dwell courageously in new horizons. The future of religious life lies in living fully our mystical yearning with our traditional calling to prophecy.*"It is in the spirit of that statement that I offer my reflections.

We cannot look at Religious Life in isolation from what is happening in our world and planet. So to understand what shapes this moment in Religious life we need to identify **The Journey of Global Change** that is taking place in our time.

Each of us here has seen extraordinary changes in our lifetime. We have witnessed the collapse of Communism, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and the end of the Cold War. We have noticed the gradual loss of trust in certainties. Our means of communication has been transformed, as has our approach to travel, our understanding of family, work and leisure, life and death. We have seen the development of a globalised economic culture that even as we speak is collapsing. We also live with the reality that despite enormous progress millions of people live in poverty. Millions go to bed hungry every night, are displaced because of conflict, are denied access to education or are dying from illnesses that are preventable. We are beginning to realise that our greed as a human species is slowly destroying our planet.

The journey of global change has brought us to a place that is full of promise but fraught with great dangers. Commentators tell that we are now living through the most dramatic transformation of worldview that has ever taken place in human history. The discoveries of physics and the new cosmology, the explosion of technology, new developments in the world of psychology, the impact of globalisation and the worldwide development of the feminist movement have provided the underpinnings for this new worldview. These developments have created a shift in consciousness that is calling into question our assumptions of how the world works, who we are as humans on this planet, how we relate to and live with each other and how we understand our relationship to the Earth. Above all they call into question our understanding of God.

We have moved from an understanding of the universe as a machine, where order, stability, and control were central to now seeing the universe as a complex, expanding ever changing, interconnected, organism. Astronomers and quantum physicists tell us that everything in nature, from the smallest particle to the entire universe, is interconnected. In this organic, inseparable web of interconnectedness that is the universe, relationship is the new focus. Our relationship to each other and the world around us is characterized by interconnection, interdependence, and interaction. We are slowly and with difficulty learning the implications of this paradigm shift. We are discovering that whatever happens within that web of interconnectedness will either enhance or diminish the whole of life on our planet. We are discovering that what we do affects everything in the universe and in turn every event in the universe affects us. We have come face to face with this truth in a most stark and also hopeful way in recent times. We are experiencing the collapse of the global economy and its effect on the economy in each of our countries, the spread of global terrorism and most recently the impact on travel of the volcanic eruptions in Iceland. We also see new responses to global crisis made possible through the channels of global communication, global networking and an outpouring of global compassion.

This time between paradigms inevitably creates a sense of insecurity and confusion in society. The stable institutions of society have all lost the confidence of people. With nothing yet to replace them there is a vacuum that is being filled by disillusionment, fear, and loss of meaning. It is our privilege to live in such a time. It is also a major challenge to accept that the dualistic system of belief in which we have been formed no longer works. It is unsettling to realise that the global questions that confront us to-day can only be engaged with from a new consciousness, and that that consciousness is only as yet emerging.

We can deal with our insecurity by denial – just keep going, focus on doing more of the same old, same old. Or we can as a human species engage with the shift in consciousness, begin to break with the patterns of the past and tune into our highest possible future. This is a snapshot of the journey of global change that is shaping this moment in Religious Life.

Journey of Religious Life Renewal

We are also living through a time of extraordinary change in Religious Life. Most of us here were formed in the understanding that Religious Life was a privileged state of perfection, a higher calling, to be lived out in separation from the world. Our prayer life, our way of living and interacting, our involvement in ministry, everything we did flowed from that underpinning belief. Our daily horarium was fixed, our apostolate was institutional and was visible and appreciated, common life was the order of the day, authority structures were clear.

The documents of Vatican II not only turned that understanding on its head but they completely changed the worldview of the entire church. The opening words of the Document *Gaudium et Spes* “*The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time...is the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ...nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts...*” marked a radical and profound change in how the Church views the world. It was through the lens of this changed view that Religious engaged the Document *Perfectae Caritatis*. We embarked on a process of renewal that continues to this day. We engaged with the new developments in theology, in feminine consciousness and psychology, with the new insights of quantum physics. We availed of opportunities to develop psychologically and spiritually, to do our inner work, to ground ourselves in God, in God’s word and in God’s world. We acquired the skills of dialogue, discernment, social analysis, theological reflection. These new understandings continue to impact on our prayer, our living spaces, on our way of relating to each other and above all on our ministries.

One of the great gifts of renewal for us has been, and continues to be, the invitation to reclaim the inspiration of the life of Catherine McAuley and re- connect with the passion of

our Mercy charism. Option for the poor has become the lens through which we critique our ministries. We have moved from a focus on established institutional ministries to an outreach to those on the margins. In 44 countries across the world to-day Sisters of Mercy are involved in a multiplicity of ministries serving, accompanying, educating, consoling, healing, loving and empowering people. We continue to adapt our community living and our prayer forms in response to this diversity. We reconfigure our structures to enable us to be more effective channels of God's Mercy to-day. Gradually the form of Religious Life we live has moved away from being an institutional, ordered, hierarchical way of life.

The process of change is neither neat nor tidy. Change happens in different ways, at different paces and with differing levels of conviction. Some Religious wholeheartedly embraced the task of renewal. Others felt it as a betrayal of the values they had lived faithfully for decades. As a result our present reality is that in our congregations, sisters hold differing views about what is important, about how the world works, about how we should pray and live, about what the focus of our ministry should be. Each day we engage with these differences and this diversity. Through it all fidelity to the vision of Vatican II and the hope of a renewed and revitalized Religious Life sustains us.

The journey of renewal is ongoing. It is a pilgrimage of faith, a surrendering to God and a living out of the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection that we could never have imagined when we set out. We now recognise the moulding in the hands of the potter that the prophet Jeremiah speaks in Jeremiah 18: *'Like clay in the potter's hand so you are in mine'*. Religious Life continues to be re-shaped, re-formed and transformed in the hands of the Potter.

The fruits of five decades of fidelity to the renewal of Religious Life are evident to-day. Religious Congregations have a clearer sense of the mission to which they are called in living out their charism. For Sisters of Mercy that Mission is to be the carriers of the Mercy of God to the poor, the sick and the forgotten in society. The clear focus on Mission has resulted in a radical shift over time in our way of living Religious Life. We now live our vowed commitment immersed in the world and in solidarity with God's people, in neighbor-hoods, parishes, barrios, social housing estates. We have let go of external uniformity but continue to live from a place of interior integrity. In the past our visibility was in terms of dress, involvement in institutional ministries and a regular life-style lived behind convent walls. Today our presence is more like yeast in the dough, not immediately visible but making a difference. That is a different kind of visibility, less safe, less clear but equally valid.

We know that through the centuries, the emergence of new forms of Religious Life have always happened in response to a particular crisis in humanity. This is another such time and the form of Religious Life is adapting to a new reality. The institutional way of life of the past no longer serves our Mission to-day. The seeds the new have already take root.

Sandra Schneiders in her article "God so loved the world" and in a series of articles published in the National Catholic Reporter has reflected on the changes that have taken place in Apostolic Religious Life. Her conclusion is that we have become a new form of Religious Life. She states " *We are really no longer "Congregations dedicated to works of the apostolate" - that is, monastic communities whose members "go out" to do institutionalized works basically assigned by the hierarchy as an extension of their agendas, e.g., in Catholic schools and hospitals, etc. We are ministerial Religious. Ministry is integral to our identity and vocation. It arises from our baptism specified by profession, discerned with our Congregational leadership and effected according to the charism of our Congregation,*"

She goes on to say." *Our whole life is affected by our ministerial identity: searching out the places (often on the margins of Church and society) where the need for the Gospel is greatest (which may be in Church institutions but often is not); living in ways that are conducive to our ministry; preaching the Gospel freely as Jesus commissioned his itinerant, full time companions to do. Our community life and ministries are corporate but not "common life" in the sense of everyone in the same place at the same time doing the same thing."*

Timothy Radcliffe O.P. recently addressed the General Assembly of the Canadian Religious Conference and he had this to say:

In this time when humanity is suffering from a crisis of hope, then religious life may be one small sign of the Kingdom. We are sign first of all by virtue of our vocation. We make visible the vocation of all humanity, called to the Kingdom. We are signs of the Kingdom by being called into community, and daring to live with those who are unlike us. Prophetically we refuse the security of making our home with the like-minded. And we are a sign in being called out of community, sent on mission, as a sign of God's boundless and unforgetting love. It is worth being such a sign. The Church and humanity need that sign more than ever. So let us be confident. We are not finished!

Reflection

How do these descriptions fit us, as Sisters of Mercy?

What opportunities, challenges arise from this?

We cannot look at the future of Religious life without reflecting on another journey that is shaping this present moment in Religious Life. That is the

Journey into Diminishment

In the Western World we live with the reality of this being the end-time for the form of Religious Life that we have known. In your leadership roles you know only too well the enormous challenges associated with this and the tension you experience between the demands of maintenance and the call of mission in the face of diminishing resources, aging membership, the scarcity of vocations, the closure of convents, the handing over of institutional ministries.

The great temptation for us now in Religious Life is to focus on our own internal concerns rather than on the mission of God which continues to call us as urgently now as it did at the time when our Congregations were founded. We do well to take to heart the words of Diarmuid O Murchu in this regard: *“The future of Religious Life is not for us to invent- that is a divine prerogative- but one we can anticipate co-creatively. We do so by befriending in a more discerning way the decline and death of the old model, by courageous risk-taking with new experiments and by embracing with deeper wisdom the new world order struggling to unfold all around us.”*

Fidelity to God’s mission in our time requires us to move beyond the past, to stop trying to fix what cannot be fixed, to let die what needs to die, to search out and nurture the new form of Religious life that is already emerging in our midst. It challenges us to reclaim our prophetic vocation, to live on the frontier of to-day, engaging with and responding to the questions and struggles of now not those of yesterday, and above all not trying to respond with the solutions of yesterday.

This does not mean that we do not have to attend to and address the specific internal issues that need our attention at this time. But we are walking a fine line. On the one hand there is the danger that we will deny the diminishment and dying that we are experiencing or on the other hand there is the danger that we will not nurture the possibilities for new life that are there. It’s not a question of one or the other. We have to be able to address both realities. For Religious survival cannot be a preoccupation. Service is what we are about. When the going is difficult there is the temptation to excuse ourselves from the struggle, to see no need for new efforts, new ideas or new initiatives. If we do this we have already lessened our possibilities for the future. It requires deep faith to recognise the opportunities within this time of diminishment, to recognise the seeds of the future that are relying on us to nurture them into full bloom.

Our present reality of diminishment is the context within which we in Mercy engage the MIA vision. Our response must take a realistic account of the limitations specific to this time. We also have to take account of the potential that is among us, despite and even within these limitations. We have the resources to make a difference in our world. What

we need is the imagination and commitment to find new and creative ways to pool these resources in the service of our global Mercy mission.

If we have the courage to seek out the hidden possibilities waiting to reveal themselves in the midst of diminishment and difficulty, God will not be found wanting. We have the lived experience of our Mercy tradition, of Catherine's unshakeable trust in God "Put your whole confidence in God, in whom we move forward or stay back"

If I might quote from Mary Sullivan :

"When Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831, there were only thirteen sisters; two of these died, two left, and two more entered within the next year. From the life, example, and effort of these eleven have come, through the providence of God, the 9710 Sisters of Mercy in the world today. Surely these 9710 are enough to be powerfully "Mercy in the Twenty-First Century."

Reflection

What resonates with you from what you have heard?

What opportunities do you see within the limitations of this time in Religious life?

What are the implications for the MIA vision?

Session 2

The stories we tell shape our thinking and focus our energies so.....

What kind of story will gift the future of Religious Life?

I have chosen two that I believe we need to pay attention to.

The New Story- a story of Interconnectedness

The discoveries made by science over the last century have changed how we understand the story of creation. We are the generation who has received this New Story of the Universe and as that story seeps into our awareness, it challenges us to expand the way we think about life. We must also allow it to expand our thinking about God, because our cosmology story has a deep impact on how we relate to God. Thomas Aquinas noted that a mistake in our understanding of creation would necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God. In

turn the way we understand God, determines how we relate to the world, how we understand ourselves, and how we negotiate our relationships with each other.

We are just beginning to grasp the profound mystery of a continuously evolving universe as a source of the ongoing revelation of God, a God who is not outside or apart from creation, rather the ever creative energy pulsating within it. Creation is not a static event but an ongoing creative process. We are beginning to understand that we are both woven into the interconnectedness of all life and weavers in it. We are aware of God intertwined in our relationship with the universe, our world, its people, and its species. Within this new consciousness we are seeing with new eyes, pondering new questions and beginning to live differently. We awaken to wonder, to an appreciation of beauty and to a stance of gratitude towards all of life.

As Mary Oliver says in her poem Messenger

*“Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.”*

The urgent task of our time is to integrate the new story of the universe. We need to absorb it and live it out in all its implications. We need to re-focus our spirituality, our understanding of our vowed life and of mission in light of it. To do this means committing to reading, studying and pondering in our hearts these new understandings.. It requires that we re-view the stories in which we have been formed, our Creation story, our Human story, Our Christian story, our Religious Life story, our Congregational Story, in the light of this new consciousness. It challenges us to re-frame our understanding of the vows we profess. Living into this changed consciousness is our first step. Many of our sisters are already living from this new place. We now need to let this emerging consciousness change our Congregational thinking. The role of leadership is to invite and facilitate this growth in awareness, this change of consciousness.

When we live from a place of wonder, of contemplative reverence towards the beauty, fragility and unity of a world “charged with the grandeur of God”, we will be moved to “take off our shoes”, the shoes of indifference, greed and exploitation. We will consider the implication for the environment of the choices we make. We will take personal and communal responsibility for simplifying our life-styles. We use our resources responsibly, educate ourselves on the critical issues affecting our planet and address them with urgency. Living in a way that respects the sacredness of earth will flow from internal transformation and not from legislation. When we know in our deepest heart that we are one with all creation, we will be impelled to work towards bringing about a sustainable global society.

Another story that will gift the future of Religious Life is the story of recent scandals and the impact they have had on our lives and on our credibility in the public mind. Here to-day I am going to reflect on that story from a Mercy perspective because I believe that it has implications for all of us.

Our Mercy Story – A story of Light and Shadow

Catherine McAuley's deepest desire was to be a bearer of God's tender, compassionate mercy to the poor of Dublin in her time and to do all she could to relieve their suffering. She gathered around her a group of co-workers who shared her vision. It is a testimony to the magnetism of that vision that to-day thousands of Mercy sisters and their co-workers who walk in her footsteps continue to undertake works of Mercy in over forty countries across the world. We give thanks to God for all the goodness poured out and blessings received since Catherine herself became the first Sister of Mercy in 1831. We are also painfully aware that we who walk in the footsteps of Catherine have failed at times individually and corporately to show forth in our lives the mercy and compassion of God.

We are the first generation of Mercy Sisters to be confronted with the public exposure of the shadow side of our Mercy story. The Ryan Report which was published almost a year ago to the day shocked and distressed us beyond measure and brought us face to face with the fact that in the living out of our mercy charism we have failed to be mercy. This Report was the end result of a long investigation initiated by the Irish Government into the abuse of children in institutions in Ireland.

The contents of the Reports are almost too much to bear or to believe. They raise many disturbing and soul-searching questions for all of us in the Mercy Congregation: how did it come about that children were abused whilst in our care, that we failed to protect them or recognise their suffering?

The findings of the Report were not just that children were abused because of individual failures but that our system failed children. Let me quote what it had to say:

" The Congregations need to examine how their ideals became debased by systemic abuse...They must examine their attitude to neglect and emotional abuse and, more generally, how the interests of the institutions and the Congregations came to be placed ahead of those of the children who were in their care.

An important aspect of this exploration, acceptance and understanding by the State and the Congregations is the acknowledgement of the fact that the system failed the children, not just that children were abused because occasional individual lapses occurred."

While we dedicated our lives to the service of children, the institution to which we belong became self-serving. We failed to reflect, to question, to speak truth to power, to

recognise the human needs of those in our care. We did not nurture our feminine, caring nature. A culture of harshness developed that caused enormous hurt. One of the most critical comments in the report in regard to our institutions states that: “a little kindness would have gone a long way towards compensating for the scarcity of resources.”

The reality that children were emotionally damaged while in our care of reveals to us the shadow and sinful side of our individual and congregational lives. We are challenged to examine our lives, not just in the past but in terms of how we live our religious lives today and in terms of how we are in ministry, to ask

Where are those practices, outlined in the Report, or even hints of them operating among us in the present? Who among us is deprived of voice? What sinful elements of our culture are we absorbing now and are now defining our practices?

Like the dandelion in the wheat, light and shadow, mercy and harshness co-exist in our story. No person or institution is without its shadow side. But whether we accept it or not, we are responsible for the consequences of our shadow. Those who carry pain from their time in our care require us to take that responsibility for the hurt we have caused.

Every crisis we face in life has the potential to overwhelm us or to strengthen us. Every crisis also changes us forever. We always carry with us the scars from such times. These revelations of abuse of children have changed us and our Mercy identity forever. We live now with more humility, deeply conscious of our need for Mercy. We live with the awareness that we are flawed and that it is through facing and integrating our flawed/shadow side that we will become whole. We live too with the shame and the sense of being discredited and these feelings impact on our lives in different ways. We continue to do the work of Mercy but play down our Mercy identity. We distance ourselves from the pain and the truth we need to face.

This crisis will radically change our lives and our Congregations into the future. *We need to learn from and not repeat the mistakes of the past. What we cannot do is let the failures of the past prevent us from continuing to do the work of Mercy... calling attention to and caring for those forgotten in society.*

Perhaps it is the darkness we now experience that holds the greatest possibility of light and is in itself God's gift in our time. It provides us with the opportunity to re-form ourselves, this time with more compassion, tender-heartedness and respect for all life.

In that moment of recognizing our own need for God's Mercy we receive the charism in a new way. The growth that comes from acknowledging our need for conversion, facing our failures, seeking forgiveness, and searching for ways to make amends and be reconciled opens a pathway to a fuller, healthier life and mission as we evolve as Sisters of Mercy.

I am reminded of the short, powerful poem “The Uses of Sorrow” by Mary Oliver:

*Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.*

*It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.*

Where is the call in Religious life/Mercy life today?

The call to claim our prophetic edge

Over the history of Religious Life at its holiest moments, religious have been a small prophetic body challenging church and society to fidelity to the Gospel. Vatican 11 called Religious life back to this role and that call has been re-iterated in many recent key Papal and Church documents. Sandra Schneiders I.H.M in exploring the prophetic dimension of Religious life, describes Religious as being called to stand “where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God”. To live this prophetic dimension of Religious Life does not depend on numbers or age, but on fidelity to bringing about the reign of God.

Our ability to be prophetic relies on our commitment to the contemplative aspect of our lives. We cannot speak a prophetic word unless we let ourselves be absorbed by God each day in contemplation. Only if we go deep within in prayer and contemplative reflection on the Word of God can we reach out with compassion and help create a hope-filled and life-enhancing society. We need mystical hearts if we are to act with prophetic courage to challenge the systemic causes of injustice in society. Constance Fitzgerald, OCD reminds us that we are prophets when we “show the way” and are “willing to stand on the horizon so all can see ... “God’s future”. In a world where hopelessness is pervading all societies, living and proclaiming hope is a prophetic witness we can offer. To do this we need to be grounded in the Source of our hope

In a world yearning for unity and peace, a world torn apart by religious division, our prophetic role as women religious calls us to engage in dialogue that crosses differences within our Communities, Congregations, and across the boundaries of religion, to be reconcilers of difference and creators of communion.

In a world where the one different from us is seen as threat, treated with suspicion and sometimes wiped out we live prophetically by embracing difference, encouraging diversity and being open and welcoming to other cultures and beliefs

In a world where women continue to be treated as second class, our prophetic stance is to be a voice for and act in solidarity with women all over the world who are victims of violence, poverty, injustice, abuse of every kind just because they are women. We are part of a Church which discriminates openly against women, in the language used to address,

describe and speak about God, in the formulations of doctrine, in the official Church stance towards the ordination of women and in the teachings on sexual morality. To be prophetic in this Church is to continue to highlight these discriminations and work towards creating a community where women have an equal voice.

The call to continue to evolve new expressions of our Mercy Charism

Charism is dynamic. It lives in a privileged way in our founders and foundresses and it continues to live, evolve and be shaped by all of us who follow in their footsteps. Catherine McAuley was single-minded in reaching out to the poorest of the poor. "God's gracious and compassionate Mercy was the wellspring that shaped and nourished Catherine. It was those who were on the margins of society in the Dublin of the 1800s, particularly destitute women and children, who called forth the charism of Mercy in her. In our time too it is those on the margins of society across the world, that continue to call forth Mercy in us. The sad fact of life is that to-day as in Catherine's time most of those on the margins continue to be women and children.

Our charism continues to-day to shape and be shaped by each woman in our Congregations. We know that with increasing age levels and decreasing numbers, we can no longer be involved in hands-on ministry in the same way as we were in the past. We know too that living our charism is a life-long journey. It is who we are, a way of being, an inner quality, an attitude of mind and heart, an enduring stance towards life...through which we live out the vision of Mercy. I believe that Mercy women who have lived their lives at the leading edge where spirituality and service to humanity is concerned have much wisdom to share as a valuable resource for our world. I believe that at a time when many of our sisters are in the older age bracket, we have an opportunity to model a positive attitude to and develop a spirituality of ageing.

In the early years of our Mercy story the movement was outward, ships on the seas from Ireland carrying women across the world with Catherine's vision to sustain them. In our time the movement of the Spirit is towards a gathering into new relationship that world-wide Mercy family, recognising the potential that our global network of relationships has for Mission. We are re-connecting through new canonical configurations but also through the use of technology, through forming networks of support and collaboration in

Ministry projects that cross our canonical boundaries. The opportunity for us today is to discover and respond to our global call as a world-wide community of Mercy women.

In her book *Fields of Compassion*, the theologian Judy Cannato states

"Making consistent choices out of ever growing awareness creates a spirit, a field of energy that catches others up and invites them in. We know this intuitively. Creating a field of kindness or care with intentionality produces an environment fecund with

healing, allowing us to move out of our egocentric and fear -based behaviour and into the kind of refulgent living that is at the heart of what Jesus means when he says “ I came that you might have life and have it to the full.” Life to the full is possible but not without our choosing it one small action at a time.”

As Sisters of Mercy, we contribute to a field of mercy, one in which compassion and care flow into the universe. We join with all others who are already committed to this field. Each intentional compassionate action of ours contributes to the growth of this transformative groundswell of Mercy in our world.

The recent emergence of global responses to catastrophes may be calling us to develop an international response of compassion to the needs of to-day. We need to use creative imagination to develop the links that exist among us to generate compassion and solidarity that crosses borders in response to need. We also need a compassion that looks beyond the immediate situations of poverty, hunger, violence, destruction to the underlying causes and the systemic dynamics that give rise repeatedly to these crisis situations. Concern for those trapped in cycles of poverty requires us to address the systemic causes of such poverty. In addition to funding projects to relieve poverty we need to fund the movements that will change the systems that generate the problems. As individuals we may not always understand “the big picture” but collectively we have the responsibility and the capacity to do so.

In our time networking is emerging as **the** means to create societal change. Margaret Wheatley in her article entitled “Using Emergence “which I have already quoted from, goes on to say that in working towards change, we do not need to worry about creating a critical mass, but rather about creating critical connections. Change begins as local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond each local area. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more global (or comprehensive) level.

She outlines a four-stage model that will help us work intentionally with networks so that small, local efforts can become a global energy for change:

Name: The focus is on discovering pioneering efforts “seeds of the new” and *naming* them as such. People involved in such ministries/efforts often act in isolation, unaware that their work has broader value. They are too busy to think about extending their work, or to think that others would benefit. The first act is to recognize them as people with experiences that are of value to others.

Connect: We then connect these works to other works globally. We use opportunities to create connections for the pioneers in many different ways, i.e. hosting networks where people can exchange ideas and resources, using websites, online conferences, etc.

Nourish, We *nourish* these network in many ways, but most essentially through creating opportunities for learning and sharing experiences and shifting into communities of practice. Communities of practice need many different resources: ideas, mentors, processes, technology, equipment, money. The most significant nourishment comes from the interactions and exchanges among pioneering people themselves.

Illuminate. We also *illuminate* these pioneering efforts so that many more people will learn from them by publishing articles, creating opportunities for people to visit pioneering efforts, and to tell their stories at conferences. It takes time and attention for people to see different approaches for what they are: examples of what the new world could be.

The development of networks has become an integral part of our Mercy ministries in recent years. A wide number of networks are already functioning across our global Mercy family. In our outreach to asylum seekers we provide practical support, while working to bring about change through influencing government policy and procedures. In the area of advocacy we have tremendous resources in terms of our networking capacity at local, national, continental and global levels. These networks provide us with the potential for collaborative efforts of every kind. Linking with specialist agencies and NGO's, increases our capacity to influence International Bodies such as the U.N. and the E.U. Our Mercy Global Concern office at the U.N, for instance, provides a forum where Sisters of Mercy can advocate for the less privileged within a huge network of international bodies. The implementing of the MIA vision may require that we expand and develop these networks and encourage new ones in order to "respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide. (MIA Vision)

One of my favourite definitions of leadership is that it is at the service of God's unpredictable grace. You who are chosen to lead our Mercy Congregations in this time need to be especially attuned to that "unpredictable grace". You need to remind us, challenge us, and cajole us to remain open to the unpredictable direction in which God might lead us. That direction is not likely to be revealed to us in clear, secure signs. Rather, it is more likely to be hidden in the experiences and circumstances of daily life, in the unexpected crisis, the disturbing questions, the sudden inspiration, the chance meeting or the new ministry call. This is where "God's unpredictable grace" meets us. Somebody sent me a card recently which said "God never asks about your ability, only your availability"! All we need is to bring open, reflective and discerning hearts to each new situation. We need you to continually call us to this openness.

We need you to keep us focused on the opportunities within this present Religious Life moment.

Reflection Questions

Where in your Congregation do you sense hints of the future emerging?

What forms of networking might need to be created, nourished and resourced across our Congregations and beyond in the service of the MIA Vision?

What opportunities/challenges will this present for Mercy Leadership at this time?

The call to fidelity to the God Quest

At the heart of Religious Life is a longing for God. This longing that is forever deep in our hearts draws us continuously to that place of stillness within, where God dwells, and from there we are sent by God to touch all of life with hope and with tenderness. As we engage with the Incomprehensible Holy Mystery that is God, we gradually come to reflect more of God's true nature. We begin to radiate the Spirit through our lives, we become co-creators with God. *Deep communion with God leads* us look at our world in a new way, with the eyes and the heart of God.

A static image of God will not sustain us into a future that is constantly evolving. A small God will not sustain us either. The image of God we were formed in was of a remote God, removed, disconnected from our reality. This image of God was reflected in an inner disconnection from our own humanity and led to attitudes and behaviours where we lived out this disconnection in our relationships and in our ministries. Erich Heller has said "Be careful how you interpret the world; it *is* like that. This is equally true in relation to God. Our interpretations of God become our God.

The God-Quest is just that –a life -long search to know, to experience, to glimpse something of the mystery that is forever beyond our finite minds and hearts to grasp. When we recognise God as mystery, our spontaneous response is wonder and awe. It means continuously releasing God from our narrow images and likeness. It means paying attention to how advances in science and technology are informing our understanding of God. It means standing humbly in the tension between knowing and unknowing and refraining from making absolute any and all human images of God. It means widening our vision to contemplate God as She, as Trinity, as Wholly Other, as "incomprehensible Holy Mystery" (Karl Rahner). It means embracing God as the God of all and not just God of those who follow my/our beliefs and philosophies. It means being open to dialogue with our own and other religions and cultures.

What if our communities/Congregations became places of hospitality for all those seeking the Holy and trying to find meaning in life to-day?

What is the power that opens the way into the future?

The God, to whom we have committed our lives, is the power, the energy at the heart of the universe. It is this God in whom we live and move and have our being individually and collectively. The word power has got a bad press in our time. We regard it as negative, oppressive and controlling. Yet the Scriptures tell us that it was the power of the Spirit that transformed the apostles from people of fear to people of courage and passion.

The Gospel stories in this Easter to Pentecost season illuminate for us the transformation that happens when the power of God's Spirit of God breaks through in our lives. They have much to teach us in this "in between" time when we try to grasp a new vision of life. Jesus continually invited his disciples and followers to a new way of thinking and living, to a new paradigm of seeing the world through the eyes of the Reign of God rather than through the narrow vision of the restoration of Israel. To say that they failed to understand much of what he was telling them is an understatement. His message was in conflict with their vision, a vision that they held on even after the events of Good Friday. *"We had hoped that he would restore the kingdom of Israel"*

They were still trying to come to terms with their shattered hopes and lost dreams when they were confronted with disturbing news of Resurrection. The women were the first to discover and witness to this new reality. Their fidelity to Christ had led them in the early morning to the discovery that the tomb was empty and to their encounter with the Risen Christ. They were the prophetic bearers of this news of a new Paradigm, of a Risen Lord, but their testimony was dismissed by the disciples, who were locked in by limited expectations and closed to new possibilities.

Each post Resurrection Gospel story portrays an aspect of their struggle during this in-between time, when the disciples moved between belief and doubt. It was a time when they were gifted with glimpses of the new reality breaking through in their midst but they were slow to be convinced. Their journey moved between hope and hopelessness, belief and doubt, grief and joy. The grieving had all the characteristic elements; shock, running away, anger, denial, refusal to believe. Remember Thomas' outburst: *"Unless I put my hands in his wounds, I won't believe!"* or the journey to Emmaus: *We had hoped but!* and the desire to return to the known: *I'm going fishing...*

However, repeated glimpses of the new paradigm gradually opened their eyes and their hearts to dare to believe that something utterly amazing was happening in their midst. They began to accept that a major change had taken place which was calling them to a radically different future. Eventually the power of the Spirit broke through their secure walls and

locked doors, released them from fear and freed them to proclaim God's word in a new reality with extraordinary courage.

These Gospel stories carry much wisdom for us in Religious Life at this time, when we find ourselves coping with the absence of an old secure faith; when we recognise our resistance to letting go of the familiar; our fear of risking the uncertainty of the new; our reluctance to embrace an unknown future. We need to be reclaimed by the energy of the resurrected Christ and in the power of the Spirit discover fresh hope and the courage to cross the threshold into a new way of being.

We need to be reclaimed by the energy of the resurrected Christ and in the power of the Spirit discover fresh hope and the courage to cross the threshold into a new way of being. Or in the words of Judy Cannato in her book *Radical Amazement: We are on the cusp of an evolutionary breakthrough, one that requires our participation in Radiant Love, one that requires us to participate as co-creative agents of Love itself, to do the work that characterized the work of Jesus –and more.* She assures us that in this work of co-creation *"we are empowered by the Spirit, mentored by Christ and lavished with God's grace"*.

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Together at the Leading Edge

(excerpt)

**The leading edge exists for each of us
And for all of us, right in front of us
Just beyond what we already know.**

**Each of us, of course can only know what we know
And work with that, going beyond to learn.
But how do we know what we know together?
And how do we work with that, together?
Going beyond it, to learn at the leading edge together?**

**When “going beyond” is where it’s at,
What is a mistake? What is failure?
Where do we find success? What are we afraid of?
What is “good enough?” at any given time
When we’re together at the leading edge? ...**

**At the leading edge, everything we think we know
Is a place to leap from which, if we don’t leap,
Becomes a chain around our legs, a blindfold on our eyes
And starts to dissolve below our feet
So we have to leap anyway, hobbled and blindfolded**

**The wisdom we seek is to leap together
Pushed, prodded, guided, encouraged, partnered,
By one another into more than we saw,
into more than we knew moment to moment
In more dimensions than any of us can comprehend forever.**

**There is no preparation for this
Everything we’ve ever done is preparation for this.
Perhaps there is something to know about doing this elegantly.
But no one can teach it
Because every teaching is another chain, another blindfold
Unless we leap**

**Isn’t this what we’re doing?
Even when we think we’re doing something else.**

Tom Atlee

