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***“Fire cast on the Earth—Kindling”:
Being Mercy in the Twenty-First Century***

MERCY FIRE KINDLED IN GUYANA—APRIL 1894

STILL BURNING—2007

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1. MERCY IN GUYANA – Beginnings, 1894

On 23 April 1894 three Sisters of Mercy, two from Midhurst, West Sussex, England and a Guyanese postulant, enkindled with the fire of Christ's love and zeal, landed in British Guiana bringing with them Mercy unto thousands. The country into which they arrived was a land of "many waters", of vast forests, land of indigenous peoples, the Amerindians, a land of many needs. This was a land which through the beginnings and development of the sugar industry had brought to its shores African slaves, Portuguese, East Indian and Chinese indentured servants. After the Abolition of Slavery in 1834 and indeed even before that time, efforts had been made to educate the people. Throughout the nineteenth century missionaries from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Church Missionary Society, and the London Missionary Society were active in the interior of the country, Christianising and educating the Amerindians. In 1847 the Ursuline Sisters arrived and ten years later, the Jesuits, both of whom opened Secondary schools. The need for education was acute and Bishop Anthony Butler of British Guiana invited the Mercy Sisters who had first gone to Barbados in 1892 to work in the schools. They settled in a poor area in Charlestown and, in true Mercy fashion, immediately carried out one of the chief functions of the Order, that of teaching.

They began teaching in the government school, later named Carmel R.C. School and shortly after opened a private school for girls in the centre of the city. The school blossomed and later became a grant-in-aid school, later one of the leading elementary schools in the country, Sacred Heart R.C. School. In 1897, in the community room of their Charlestown convent, the Sisters offered four classes in secondary subjects. This marked the beginning of St. Joseph High School which was to become one of the leading Secondary Schools in the country. Many a future vocation to the Sisters of Mercy was nurtured in that school; many future leading citizens of the country received their education from the Mercy Sisters who, as well as providing first-class education, imbued the students with a lasting love of the poor.

With the arrival of more Sisters from the British Isles, the Sisters branched out into other government-aided schools, St. Mary's, Brickdam in the city, Victoria and Kitty on the East Coast, Henrietta, Essequibo and, in the interior, Santa Rosa and Morawhanna. In the 1920s a number of local women joined the community in Charlestown. In 1910 at the request of the Bishop, three Sisters left Charlestown to establish a mission among the Amerindians at Takutu, Rupununi, in the far south of the country near Brazil. One of the Sisters of the Takutu foundation was the later well-known and respected Sr. Teresa Fernandes, M.B.E.

In the 1930s as the educational work increased and the number of Sisters remained constant, the Charlestown community requested permission to join the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the USA. The Scranton province generously accepted the GUYANA MISSION as part of their province, and in October 1935 10 Sisters arrived in the country to work in the schools and at the Mahaica Hospital which cared for patients suffering from Hansen's

disease. Between 1936 and 1946, nineteen more Sisters arrived to work in the schools, St. John Bosco Orphanage, Mahaica Hospital and St. Joseph Mercy Hospital. They injected new life into the Mercy community and consequently there was a spate of vocations between 1935-1970 when young Guyanese women entered the Mercy Novitiate in Dallas, Pa. and returned after their First or Final Vows to work in their country's schools and orphanage. I can proudly attest to the fact that I was one of those Sisters, working first in the elementary schools, then the High School and later at the University of Guyana. Other Sisters worked at the Government Training College and in a Government Ministry-the latter being an Amerindian trained by the Sisters of Mercy in Santa Rosa.

But education was not the only avenue of mercy. In 1902 the Sisters were asked to take charge of the St. John Bosco Boys' Orphanage, at Plaisance, a village 8 miles from the city. One hundred and five years later this work, so dear to the heart of Catherine McAuley, is still under the care of the Sisters, though presently there is a lay administrator trained by the Sisters. Hundreds of boys have experienced the loving care of the Sisters –many return to visit, to remember and show their appreciation.

In 1945 the Mercy Sisters were asked to administer a hospital founded by the Sword of the Spirit Movement. Today, in its 62nd year, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital is one of the leading hospitals in the country still with a Mercy Sister as its Administrator.

WORK AMONG THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Yes, the major ministries of the Sisters of Mercy were in the service of the poor, sick and uneducated. It is impossible to indicate the breadth, width and extent of the works of Mercy carried on by the Sisters—the visitation of the sick, the comforting of the sorrowful, the compassionate listening, the material and spiritual help offered to so many of our people in every walk of life. But a very special ministry was that among the Amerindian people, numbering approximately 50, 000.

Three quarters of the county is forested-indeed Guyana possesses one of the last pristine forests in the world. In those forests and along its many rivers (numbering over 100) and in the savannahs live our Amerindian people of various tribes: the Arawaks, Caribs, Warraus, Patamonas, Macusi, Wai-Wais and others. The hardships shared with these people, living in the "bush" as it was called, sans the necessities of life, coping with various insects, being wary of the wild life, the jaguars and other animals, were gladly borne by the Sisters. The saga of this history has been written by one of those Sisters who served for years among the Amerindians. The Santa Rosa Mission in the north-west of the country was first settled by Spanish Arawaks who had been Christianised by the Capuchin missionaries and during the Bolivarian revolutions in Venezuela, had fled for safety into the Guiana territory. Today the majority of Catholics in Guyana are in the interior among the various Amerindian tribes. There is sadness among our 15 Sisters today that we have had to leave that mission field in the 1970s due to lack of personnel.

INDEPENDENCE OF GUYANA

In 1966 when Guyana gained independence the country experienced a period of intense Guyanisation with its by-products of anti-foreignism and unfortunately racism. Dr. Robert Moore rightly stated: "In the early 1960s as Guyana approached independence Indians and blacks came into conflict over who would inherit the British mantle of government. The conflict in some parts of the country became intense and brutal."¹

By the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s large numbers of people migrated to Canada, the USA and the UK. Socialism, under the government of Prime Minister, Linden Forbes Burnham, became the order of the day. Businesses were nationalized; in 1976 so too were the schools. Surprisingly, the Sisters were still encouraged to teach in them. But these Sisters were few, and according to government regulations, due for retirement. The future was, however, not all bleak. There were some vocations and some new vistas, a small school started under the convent's chapel, blossomed into the Stella Maris Preparatory School supported by a large number of parents who wanted their children to have the benefit of religious as well as sound education. A Night Shelter for Homeless Women was started but now, due to scarcity of our Sisters, is being administered by the Missionaries of Charity.

2. PRESENT MINISTRIES IN THE MIDST OF STRESSES AND STRAINS IN COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

In Guyana the social fabric of our society is severely eroded. Family life is dysfunctional. The gap between the rich and the poor widens; over 80% of the population exists below the poverty line. Many continue to emigrate. Recent statistics show that 83% of our University graduates migrate in search of greener pastures and away from the ever-increasing violence within the society; those who remain seem to lose the battle with the high cost of living and lack of employment opportunities; they turn to illegal trade in guns, drugs, sex. The drug scene has paved the way for an increase of violent crimes; daily one reads in the media of murders, robberies, rape. Many young people are in jail; others walking the streets and begging.

Many agree that much of this deterioration has been the result of the breakdown of the educational system. Guyana, from once boasting the highest rate of literacy in the Caribbean, now has shamefully reached a low. After the government take-over of the schools in 1976, there has been not only an educational but a moral decline to which most Guyanese attest. Morale among the teachers, not only at the elementary and secondary schools but also at the University, is low. The University, in particular, has suffered from such a malaise.

¹ Dr. Robert Moore, "Colonial Images of Blacks and Indians in Nineteenth Century Guyana" in Bridget Brereton and Yelvington, *THE COLONIAL CARIBBEAN IN TRANSITION* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999), p.126.

The concern of the Sisters of Mercy re this collapse of the educational system made them consider new avenues where they could especially help the young.

They started a Saturday school for young children in the premises of one of the convents. The concern was, above all, for the youth—the youth who had neither the ability nor the funding to attend Secondary Schools. Thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in 2000, a Mercy Wings Vocational Centre was opened in one of the poorest areas of the city, to train young men and women in various subjects, above all, Home Economics, Child Care, carpentry, masonry, etc. In the same year a Mercy Boys' Home was established to provide accommodation and continuing support to boys leaving our Orphanage at 16 and having no one and nowhere to go. The boys here are given a start in life, either jobs being assured them or continuing education until they reach the age of 21. Also a small school connected to the Orphanage assures the young boys of a solid and basic education—most of the boys at the Orphanage have been abandoned at birth by mothers either unable or unwilling to support their offspring. All these works are generously supported by many benefactors, both from within the country or overseas who were once Mercy students. Much financial help is also given by members of the diplomatic corps and local businessmen. The Sisters have always subscribed to Catherine's dictum that one must connect the rich to the poor. In no other way could we help the many people within our care.

Guyana ranks third in the world after Africa and Haiti in the high incidence of HIV/Aids. Programmes and projects are in place at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital to give positive help and medical support to those suffering from the disease. A Mobile Clinic, operating from Mercy Hospital and with the service of its doctors and nurses, serves the poor and sick in the outlying areas of the city. Recently, a new project to help sick and disabled Amerindian children, who are flown in from the interior, has been started.

Previous mention was made of the work of the Sisters of Mercy at Mahaica Hospital among the patients suffering from Hansen's disease. In 1970, due to rabid Guyanisation (the Sisters were American) as well as lack of Sister personnel, the Sisters of the Baltimore Province in the USA, who had administered Mahaica, had to withdraw. It was a sad day for the patients for whom the Sisters were not only nurses, but also friends, comforters and confidantes. After the Sisters left the Hospital, Sisters Noel and Celine Marie continued to visit the patients, supporting them and, with the help of benefactors, assisting them in their needs. Over the past few years, other Sisters, among them the Administrator of Mercy Hospital, also visit the patients.

Since 1970 the needs of the patients have increased. As successive governments became more and more strapped for cash, the Mahaica Hospital has been low on their priority list. Above all, the government, as well as most of the Guyanese population, still have the Biblical concept of leprosy and do not visit the compound. Thus the patients rely on the Sisters, and have done, over the past years, for basic supplies, bandages, pain killers, various needed

medications, as well as foodstuffs, blankets, sheets, towels, soap, toothpaste, flashlights, thermos flasks, even wheelchairs, refrigerators and TV! The Sisters help to finance hospital bills and funeral expenses. Another work of mercy here is to literally bury the dead as the patients are unable to assist. Most of the patients are immobile, blind and generally helpless. This work is a key one which, undoubtedly, must continue throughout the twenty-first century as long as these wonderfully patient people need comfort, hope and joy.

Nevertheless, the patients have a wonderful philosophy of life and are cheerful. For us Mercies it is a tonic to visit these people, “the outcasts of society” as they are considered, who have nothing of the world’s goods, the forgotten ones in our society, yet who show us how to be grateful to God for blessings received through friends. Bereft of home, of family, of sight, of limbs, they look for Mercy in its every expression.

3. MERCY HOPES AND PLANS INTO THE TWENTY—FIRST CENTURY; CHANGED SCENES; UNCHANGING MERCY

Every day we read in the headlines of the world’s newspapers of torture, rape, death in every shape—the massacre of the old, the brutal killing of children, the destruction of hundreds of villages leaving thousands of refugees and homeless people:

Nations at war
Tribes at war
Classes at war

Families at war
Individuals at war

Millions are without food, water, shelter, work, medicine, schools, without a future, without a chance, without a hope. Never was Mercy needed more in every area of life, in every country where we live and serve. Never before in Guyana where the trends of violence, drug-related crime, dysfunctional families, street children, the escalation of HIV/Aids and racial and political disunity are rife, a microcosm of global trends, are people looking for Mercy.

The future of any country lies with its youth. Thus Mercy must, above all, reach out to the youth of Guyana. As we no longer work in the schools per se, we have tried to reach them and are still trying to reach them through the work at the Mercy Wings Vocational Centre, at the Mercy Boys’ Home, involving our Mercy Volunteer Group, young people from the USA, who give immeasurable help in counseling, retreats, working with the boys at the orphanage, bringing a breath of “fresh air” and hope to our youth. Extremely conscious of the drug environment in the country and peer pressure on the youth, Mercy sees the needs of youth as crucial. With 15 Sisters only and of the 15 only 5 in active ministry, we have to have a realistic approach to the varying needs. But those few of us can, at least, teach our young people to reach out to the other with open hands, not clenched fists, not hands holding knives or guns.

In trying to show others the way to peace we Mercy Sisters have to be in the forefront of helping to stop domestic violence and violence in general. Some of us belong to various organizations, among them the Guyana Human Rights Association and Women in Black, which protest peacefully in street demonstrations against violence, especially against the abuse of women and children. If peacemaking belongs to the heart of our Christian vocation, how much more does it belong to a Mercy vocation? In dealing with Ministers of the government, with educators, with businessmen, we Mercy Sisters still find ourselves in a position to influence them in some small way, particularly as many of them had been educated in our Mercy schools and by Mercy at University level.

In Guyana there are multitudinous religious sects, apart from the main Christian ones. Sisters are involved in the ecumenical movement in the country, working with groups and attending ecumenical prayers and working sessions. Political and racial disunity are rife. Because of a personal relationship with members of the various political parties, a few of the Sisters serve on national committees and, in a very small way, help to bring peace in those pockets. If peacemaking belong to the heart of our Christian vocation, how much more does it belong to our Mercy vocation? As Henri Nouwen so strongly states:

When I listen to the sounds of greed, violence, rape, torture, murder and indiscriminate destruction, I hear a long, sustained cry coming from all the corners of the world. It is a cry of a deeply wounded humanity that no longer knows a safe dwelling place but wanders around the planet in a desperate search for love and comfort.²

Such a cry is being heard in our country today, and this is the challenge for Mercy there, to listen and respond to the many cries of anguish, to speak out against injustice, to bring hope, comfort and, above all, peace to our people in the schools, the orphanage, the hospital, the leprosarium, continuing the mandate of Catherine who always stressed “the kind word, the gentle compassionate look, the patient hearing of sorrows.”

Indeed, the multitudinous needs throughout the world as noted in all the papers submitted are staggering. No group of people, no matter how well-disposed and willing could hope to apply the bandages to every wound in their society. Again, we are in no position to stop a nuclear holocaust, but each Sister of Mercy in every single corner of the globe, enkindled by Christ’s love, can continue to share that love as He did, in healing both mental and physical wounds, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowful.

How well Sr. Mary Sullivan captured the essence of these goals:

If I were to summarize in the broadest terms Catherine McAuley’s embrace of cultural diversity and her legacy of hospitality to strangers, I

² Henri Nouwen, PEACEWORK: PRAYER, RESISTANCE, COMMUNITY. (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), pp.28-29.

think Catherine McAuley would say: This is the way we must do it—one person at a time; one answering of the figurative doorbell, one opening of the figurative door, one embrace of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk—one person at a time.³

The nineteenth century of Catherine McAuley differed in many respects but the twenty-first century is no different in the need for Mercy at every turn for Christ continues to come to our door in many guises. The fire enkindled by those three Mercy Sisters in British Guiana in 1894 still burns brightly in the country though not as widely spread. Each Sister has to ask herself continually; “What is the Gospel according to me, a Sister of Mercy?” Do I always show by my life that the Gospel is GOOD NEWS?”⁴

May I conclude by quoting Article 7 of our Mercy Constitutions:

We carry out our mission of mercy guided by prayerful consideration of the needs of our time, Catherine McAuley’s preferential love for the poor and her special concern for women, the Pastoral priorities of the universal and local church and our talents, resources and limitations.”

What an agenda for Mercy in any century!

³ Mary Sullivan, RSM, “Welcoming the Stranger: The Kenosis of Catherine McAuley,” MAST 6, no.3 (Summer 1996), p. 17.

⁴ Mary Noel Menezes, RSM, “Fostering Faith in Caribbean Culture,” Cultures and Faith, Vol. II, No.1 Pontificum Consilium de Cultura, Citta del Vaticano, Rome, 1944, p. 43.