Looking back on this unique event what comes top of my list is **Hospitality**:
Deirdre’s hospitality to us each day through the daily programme that unfolded, the food that awaited us at the Centre, the meals out we had together and the funding that went into the whole experience;
Mercy hospitality extended to one another within the group of 26 sisters gathered in the heart of New York. Quickly we gelled as daughters of Catherine McAuley, led by the light of her life, with much in common, searching for ways forward into the future;
Mercy hospitality that was palpable when we visited the Mercy Centre in the Bronx and Mercy Haven in Islip. It appeared that everybody involved with the work in these centres had come out to welcome us, to help us to see Mercy in action on the ground and to meet those with whom they walked and to whom they extended a hand up; those for whom they became a voice until they had reclaimed their own voice and those for whom they advocated with the powerful and with whom we prayed and reflected.

The purpose of this gathering was visually explained by Deirdre in her use of an **expanding sphere** to focus us on the desire of expanding our world view and to see and think outside the box. Mary Waskowiak, representing Mercy International Association (MIA) further challenged us by saying: ‘we cannot be in the cement of yesterday’ as the work of Mercy has got to be the work of fire, ‘a fire that disturbs my comfort’.

In dealing with people living in poverty, or in extreme poverty, a case was made by the Fourth World Movement, also called ATD* Fourth World, for the inclusion of people who are poor at every level of decision making that effects them. Their slogan is ‘with us not for us’ and the voices of these people are at the centre of all that is done. People who are poor do not have security. They fight humiliation that comes from accepting charity. On 17 October the Fourth World Movement enables them to tell their stories in different centres throughout the world. Vicki Soanes quoted one participant saying: “But to speak and to know that people are listening”, and that is what gives them courage.

We attend the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October in the United Nations building and heard people’s stories. Senolita Vakata from Tonga, one of our Mercy group, spoke on behalf of women in poverty. It was a moving experience which linked us all with pride, as we walk along with people who are poor in our respective countries. The Round Table Dialogue, also held that day, highlighted again the need for the participation of people who are excluded at all levels in order to effect their liberation. We need to understand the real life impact of policy, the consequences of that policy and the need for political will in governments and institutions that draw up these policies.

Earlier that morning Joe Donnelly, Caritas International’s Permanent Delegate at the UN, highlighted the importance of NGO representatives at the UN and their work there. The voice of the NGOs has opened up avenues, partnerships and relationships and people at the UN welcome ‘us’ NGOs. Mercy is the face of people who are poor in many countries and has a valuable place among the NGOs. Joe stressed: “When we do the simple things we know best to do, they lead to great things.” The challenge is to get Governments to reclaim their ‘political will’. They were reminded of this with the caption: ‘You said it, now you do it’. Our challenge is to link the local with the international.

* ATD Fourth World - _A Toute in Dîtresse—for all in distress_
The **Bent-over Woman** was presented to us on the second day by Ellen Vopicka, a Mercy associate member with a very touching story, and I found it a very powerful image. The bent-over woman, focusing on Christ, shuffled towards him, optimistic and hopeful, leaning forward to possibilities and to the future. This image was backed up with a photo of a statue depicting a begging person, with hand out-stretched. On a closer look one became aware that the person was ‘faceless’. Poor people on the streets are ‘faceless’, in other instances they are invisible. We are called to see Christ in each person: “For the lost, for the lame/ For those suffering in pain/ Let me see you in each face/ Through a broken heart.” These images hold for me the plight of the many women we heard and spoke about during the programme.

Carol Rittner further developed how women were in the world with her input on ‘Violence against Women’ where rape has become a weapon of war in many countries, where women are exploited and held as slaves in prostitution and the sex trade. Women suffer from many, many forms of violence. Millions of women struggle for life with HIV/AIDS. Eileen and Margaret explained to us the development and growth of the All African Conference: Sister to Sister (AACSS) and its positive impact on understanding and the growth of partnership among religious congregations in Africa. The problems are horrendous. AIDS makes poverty worse. It was felt that these people make a special claim on us in terms of our faith, a claim on our compassion and partnership and are indeed a challenge to Mercy.

Angela Hartigan and Selena Mbuli (Kenya) gave us a graphic picture of life in the diocese of Lodwar and Mukuru slums, life which is so far removed from what we in the First World experience. Hearing how the people got through the recent conflict gripped us. The poor in Kenya are invisible, not counted, despised, insulted and excluded. Selina’s input opened to us the life of the Masai people and Mercy’s involvement with them. I was touched by very mixed emotions: Overpowering helplessness in the face of so many complex situations and greed, while acknowledging the work that is being done; And pride in the growth of Mercy among the Kenyan people that was exemplified so beautifully by Selina. My searching question is: ‘How can Mercy in the First World contribute in a meaningful way, to the advocacy that is needed to bring about some change in the way the system is tilted in favour of the rich? With whom should we work in collaboration and partnership?

Coming with the Voice of the Earth Nellie made a plea for partnership on the grounds that human life and other species are intimately connected. We are made of the same building blocks. Humans can survive only with the survival of the other species. Today we are compromising the well-being of future generations. We heard a call to change our perception, to get a true sense of the interconnectedness of all living systems and to work daily for sustainability. It is also necessary that we are ‘in a way of peace and harmony as we live out our Mercy compassion.’ ‘When we think of people let us think of the planet.’ With this engaging input ‘partnership’ took on a new meaning for me: when hydrogen (H) and oxygen (O) formed a partnership, **water (H2O)** was created! Imagine a helium balloon and an oxygen cylinder equalling a glass of water! Can the mind conceive what can happen when Mercy works in true partnerships with others?

We had three sessions with Pat Hartigan and Martha Milner on the theme, “The Poor you will always have with you”, given with great enthusiasm and energy. They were wonderful sessions and we have much to learn from them. I would like to see this input being engaged with elsewhere, where we tease out the many issues involved e.g. working in solidarity involves: doing with - not for; working alongside – not leading; assisting – not rescuing; providing input
– not advice; facilitating – not controlling. We were reminded that “the needs of the Poor take precedent over the wants of the Rich” and that “the real person is often left out: as long as we say it, it is done; as long as it is written, it is real”. Powerful input! Can we act on it?

‘Advocacy’ came up frequently. Why advocacy? Because we want the world God desires. While we know ‘advocacy’ is part of the way forward we are unsure about how to go about it. Denise Coughlan contributed also to what we heard on the topic. Her experience on Land Mines saw the beginning of a global movement. This is being followed up with the current campaign to ‘Ban Cluster Bombs’. Campaigns like these can involve the global Mercy family. We know we need to hold our Governments and other political entities with which we are linked, to their commitments. What is needed is the ‘how?’ How do we go about this task effectively? Who gives leadership on it? Deirdre also shared MGC’s plan for Mercy to engage with the ‘Girl Effect’ programme. This offers many possibilities for global action.

Adele Howard and Anne Walshe, from Fraynework Multimedia showed us the difference that technology has made. Their question was: “What is it that Mercy communities can do to help bridge the gap of Mercy in the world to-day?” They outlined their hopes to expand access to our Mercy World. Ten thousand people already tap into it each month. What are they looking for? Reference was also made to common agreement on our core Mercy values. Our Mercy journey is all about passion and love, compassion which leads to fairness and harmony and a new respect for each other. Other speakers also introduced values e.g. justice and harmony, peace and harmony, and the need to speak the truth. We need to stand back and evaluate where we are and to identify the critical question for Mercy right now.

This conference was a wonderful experience. I have food for thought, prayer and reflection so that the key messages remain alive in me and influence my actions. With a positive justice experience behind me the content will influence my future direction for action. I would like to see a strong commitment to Mercy Global Action on one or two issues. I have grown in understanding and appreciation of MGC’s work at the United Nations and wonder how this can be further utilised from the ground up. Linking with the Global Mercy Family broadened my perspectives on our Mercy mission, on poverty and the part we can play on its eradication. I wonder how we can better contribute to bridging the gap between the First world and the Majority world.

We, as Mercy, need to be open to receive to the mercy and compassion of others. The ‘cup of suffering’ need not hold us back, but can clarify our steps forward. Partnership is the voice and heart of marginalised and disposed people and we are opening to it.

It was all a wonderful experience. Sincere thanks to all our presenters for their thought-provoking inputs; to Eileen Gannon for her listening ear and reports; to Cathy for her helpfulness; to Ellen Vopicka and all those who provided funding to made this journey, both outwards and inwards, possible.

Deirdre, a thousand thanks for your organisation and work in giving us this opportunity. Ripples will go out across the globe and people’s lives will be touched. May you continue to be blessed in all your undertakings.

I conclude, borrowing a quote from Barack Obama: “When we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can’t, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.”

Catherine Gibbons - Ireland