



Mercy Global Presence: Gift In This Troubling Time of COVID-19

Guiding Group

For the first time in human history, every woman, every man and every child on Earth is vulnerable. Persons worry about safety in their own homes while homeless persons have no place to stay. Older persons with COVID-19 worry that they will be denied priority while infected younger persons worry that resources will run out. Wealthy investors see the steep drop in the stock market while administrators seek to find just ways to treat employees as programs and offices close. Health care workers serve without proper protection, and government officials struggle to develop nation-wide responses. Persons with serious illnesses fear that COVID-19 patients will take all the attention and resources. Public health officials give their best advice without clear evidence, and ordinary persons try to protect each other. Congregational leaders seek the best way forward, and individual Sisters cope as best they can to follow these difficult ways. Not one person on this planet is able to live the way of life that had become comfortable for them. In the midst of this global vulnerability, does our Mercy Global Presence bring any hope or any wisdom?

At the heart of our exploration today is COVID-19, a disease spreading across Earth with very few countries now free of the virus and with the potential to infect up to 60% of the population. This disease has no known vaccine and no known cure. It spreads rapidly. Older persons, persons with other medical conditions and persons with compromised immune systems are especially vulnerable. Closed borders, national emergencies, isolation protocols and quarantines are among the large system attempts to control the spread of this pandemic. Handwashing, disinfecting high-touch surfaces, social distancing and avoidance of travel are among personal attempts to prevent the infection.

Goodness abounds in the response to the pandemic. Government leaders, public health officials, health care workers, first responders, grocery store clerks, pharmacy workers, garbage collectors, janitors, researchers, teachers, ministers, computer specialists, electricians, postal workers, bus drivers, police officers, delivery persons, investment managers and bank officials are among those who continue to provide services for persons confined to their own homes or health facilities. Goodness is visible in those who care for the children of essential workers when their schools are closed. It is visible when people take seriously the advice to keep others safe even when it causes them to make sacrifices about their own comforts.

In her touching [poem of praise](#) given to all whose goodness is making this journey easier, Christine Valters Paintner includes others beyond the human who give us strength to go on, "Praise be our four-footed companions, with no forethought or anxiety, responding only in love; Praise for the seas and rivers, forests and stones who teach us to endure. Blessed is the water that flows over our hands and the soap that helps keep them clean, each time a baptism. Praise be the birds who continue to sing the sky awake each day, praise for the primrose poking yellow petals from dark earth, blessed is the air clearing overhead so one day we can breathe deeply again."

Mercy words such as the Sanskrit *dayaa* ("suffering in the suffering of all beings") and the Hebrew *rahamim* ("compassionate womb love") are visibly present in the response of so many struggling

to end this nightmare. Circles of mercy are being created in their efforts to be more effective in preventing and healing the infections. These circles are bringing together the most unlikely partners, all focused on the same goal of prevention, protection, healing and ending the virus. The awareness has finally come that all social systems need to be working in harmony if we are to reach this goal. From the small circles within our congregational houses to the large circles at the World Health Organization, the circles of mercy keep growing and widening – all convinced that together we can do more and do it more wisely than we can alone.

Abounding goodness and increasing circles of mercy are leading us to the strong conviction that the global pandemic can only be countered by a response which is grounded in global contemplation. We have been blessed as a community of Mercy to have engaged in global contemplation for several years through the Mercy International Reflection Process (MIRP) and now the Mercy Global Presence (MGP) process. In more than forty countries, women, men and children have participated in small groups and larger groups to explore our varied responses to the cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor. Among the fruits of our global contemplation are wisdom, energy, new directions, new language, courage and new hope. Now, when we can no longer gather in small or large groups, we know that we must and we will find creative ways to continue our global contemplation in a time when it is needed more than ever.

In her poignant poem [Pandemic](#), Lynn Ungar says it so well, “What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath—the most sacred of times? . . . Do not reach out your hands. Reach out your heart. Reach out your words. Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.’

One of the deepening learnings from MIRP was that we – the entire universe, every dimension of time and space (spiritual and material), galaxies, stars, planets, black holes, ecosystems, animals, plants, humans, molecules and time – are all part of the sacred communion of all creation. Thomas Berry told us, “The entire universe is bonded together in such a way that the presence of each individual is felt throughout the entire spatial and temporal range of the universe.” If the presence of each one is so important, this means that every good deed we do becomes a source of strength, energy and healing for the whole cosmos! Our prayer, our personal and communal contemplation, our suffering, our ministry in response to the cry of Earth and people, our advocacy for social and ecological justice, our creativity and our love are among the gifts we humans bring into the sacred community.

Richard Hendrick speaks to the last of these gifts in his poem about the pandemic which he entitles [Lockdown](#), “Yes there is even death. But there can always be a rebirth of love. Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now. Today, breathe. Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic. The birds are singing again. The sky is clearing, Spring is coming, And we are always encompassed by Love.”

Flowing from the first four months of the Mercy Global Presence process at the end of 2019 is a new understanding of “deep incarnation.” The theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, explains, “Deep incarnation is the radical divine reach in Christ through human flesh all the way down into the living web of organic life.” The biblical scholar, Norman Habel, adds, “God becomes flesh, the Creator becomes clay, the Word becomes Earth. In Jesus, God joins the web of life, becomes part of Earth’s biology.” He goes on to say, “God not only creates, God also suffers. The God whose presence fills Earth and who suffers with creation is also the God who through Christ is restoring creation and reconciling the alienated ones in creation.” Our hope comes in knowing that God suffers with us through this pandemic and will lead us into restoration and reconciliation. Today, the words from Paul’s letter to the Romans (8:22-24) have an entirely new meaning, “We

know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.”

And, so, we ask again, “How does Mercy Global Presence become a source of hope and wisdom for us in this time of global vulnerability?” Mercy Global Presence gives us yet another way to see with our hearts the realities around us, the realities of this global pandemic. We see the goodness of so many who are responding to the threat and who are giving us strength in the midst of tragedy – goodness which is an expression of mercy in all its diversity and in all its intensity. It gives us the possibility of joining in a global communal response, linked with bearers of mercy around Earth. It deepens our certainty in knowing that, no matter what our life experience, we can be a source of strength and nourishment for the sacred communion of all creation. It gives us the consolation of knowing that God walks with us in this journey, truly suffering with us and inviting us to reconciliation and hope. Trusting that this is so, we pray passionately and persistently in these Lenten days of pandemic time as we echo Catherine McAuley’s words, “Pray for your portion of Easter Grace before the extra Treasury is closed. Pray fervently and constantly. Do not give up until all is given you.”

We find new meaning in Pope Francis’ word “mercy.” As Sisters of Mercy, Associates and partners in Mercy, we promise to follow a way of living and being that takes its energy and its hope from the mercy of God poured out on all creation, on Earth and on all of humanity. We can make such a promise so easily in good times. Now, we are mercying into a future which would have been unimaginable even six months ago, a future that is uncertain, bleak and frightening. Truly, faithful to our promise, we are mercying! Yes, we are mercying!