



**MERCY  
GLOBAL  
PRESENCE**

## Reflections at the Beginning of Segment Two –Month Three: Mercy and the Displacement of Persons

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“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36). These words from Jesus’ parable in the Gospel of Matthew set the context for our reflections on *Mercy and the Displacement of Persons*, the third in our four-part series on “Mercy” in “Mercy Global Presence.”

### **Glimmers of Light from Last Month’s Reflection ~ Mercy and the Degradation of Earth**

In the second part of our series on “Mercy,” we focused on Mercy and the Degradation of Earth. We noted that the degradation of Earth is well-described as a three-layered emergency: global climate change, approaching tipping points of ecosystems (Amazon, Arctic, Australia, and Antarctic), and the unprecedented threat of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction. The theologian, Carmody Grey, challenged us with her words: “The mission of the Church can no longer be separated from addressing ecological devastation. If the defacement of the poor is a defacement of God, in the same way a defacement of Earth is a defacement of God. . . From now on, caring for the environment has to be understood as being at the core of what mercy is, of what mercy asks us to do.”

The artist, Mary Bilderback rsm, in beautiful images and poetic words lamented even the language we use, “I am uneasy with the statement that Earth is degraded. . . She has been ‘Good’ for nearly 14 billion years, gracefully orbiting a benevolent star, open to whatever comes next. . . We are learning from birds and beasts, and presently an invisible virus, how to belong and behave here. . . Just maybe we will learn to live out the sacred song inside us — the same catchy tune that fills the violet and the tree frog with the will and un-degradable gift of being alive.” Gabrielle Scanlon rsm introduced us to the students at Our Lady of Mercy College in Parramatta who are so aware of the environment and the importance of maintaining it, respecting it, and allowing it to regenerate. She challenged them and us with her questions:

- ✓ Beautiful oceans, lakes and bays are struggling. They are suffocating. *Who will speak for the environment if you don’t?*
- ✓ The flora and fauna that God has so beautifully created are versatile and useful. But they are fragile and threatened. *Who will speak for the environment if you don’t?*
- ✓ How many precious resources can be removed from our Earth before we say enough is enough? *Who will speak for the environment if you don’t?*

Bridget Crisp rsm gave us profound new insights into the traditional expression of the corporal works of mercy. She enlarged our thinking about feeding the hungry to include food security, not only for humans, but for all living species; about giving drink to the thirsty to include water (now becoming so scarce) as a right for all living species. She reminded us that the fabrics of the very clothes we wear are made of micro-plastics which, when washed, can pollute the sea. She emphasized that housing is a human right, noting that is endangered even by urban sprawl. In this time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of zoonotic diseases, visiting the sick takes on completely new meanings as does visiting the imprisoned when so many are jailed for their efforts for climate justice. How do we ritualize burying the dead in ways which are more responsive to the times in which we live? And our newest corporal and spiritual work of mercy, given us by Pope Francis, challenges us to find new ways to support planetary health.

Margie Abbott startled us with the introductory words to her presentation, “We are in Need of Respirators Urgently!” She introduced us to the moving video “Season of Creation: Storm” created by the Rahamim Ecological Centre in Bathurst, NSW, Australia. Adele Howard rsm prepared the reflective prayer which reminded us, “It is through these two aspects of living Mercy, the ‘practical-active’ and the ‘reflective-spiritual’ that we can make a committed and integrated response to healing the degradation of Earth and its creatures and, in so doing, heal our human community.”

Having just ended the week of celebrations for the fifth anniversary of Laudat Si’, we were conscious that, “A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment so as to hear both the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor.” In writing these words, Pope Francis was echoing the theme of a book written by the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*.

### **Mercy and Displacement of Persons**

It is in this awareness that we move to our reflection on *Mercy and the Displacement of Persons*. Usually when we use the term “displaced persons,” we are thinking about globally displaced person: refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons. However, our engagement in the *Mercy International Reflection Process* taught us that there are displaced persons in our local realities as well: homeless or precariously housed persons, persons with cognitive impairments, persons who are trafficked, persons subjected to domestic violence and elders moved to long term care facilities against their will. The one quality that they all have in common is their sense of belong nowhere.

### **Mercy and Displacement of Persons: A Global Lens**

In 2019, there were 272 million migrants crossing international borders. Among them were 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons: 41.3 internally displaced persons, 25.9 refugees and 3.5 asylum seekers.<sup>i</sup> These numbers for all groups are steadily growing over time without any sense of reaching a peak.

The causes of this significant global displacement are many and are diverse. They include natural disasters caused by climate change, crop failure, sea-level rise, desertification, deforestation and land degradation. Embedded in the spirit of Sisters of Mercy is the memory of the Irish Potato Famine in the early 1800s. In our more recent memory, we hold the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 which has marked the people of Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka; the 2005 Hurricane Katrina which devastated Louisiana in the United States; the 2011 East African drought which wrought havoc on the peoples of Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Environmental disasters include the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in Russia in 1986 and last year’s Amazon fires. Human-made displacements are caused by criminal organizations such as drug cartels and gangs, by political conflicts and, somewhat ironically by development projects such as large dams, new mines and irrigation systems. The ethnic cleansing of the Holocaust and forced resettlement of Indigenous peoples continues today in tragedies related to the Palestinian refugees and Rohingya people. Human trafficking and human smuggling mark the use of people for sex, domestic service, agriculture, and construction --- use that is disrespectful, inhumane, and tragic.

The 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development* of the United Nations recognizes for the first time the contribution of migration to sustainable development. Eleven out of seventeen of the Sustainable Development Goals contain targets and indicators relevant to migration or mobility with special inclusion in SDG Target 10.7 which calls for the facilitation of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.

The most recent cause for displacement relates to the impact of climate change. In a report for the Brookings Institution, Walter Kälin, the then representative of the United Nations secretary-general on the human rights of internally displaced persons, echoed the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He stated that rising sea levels, in addition to a higher frequency of storms and floods, will have an impact on tens of millions of people in coastal areas and on islands. Water availability will be reduced especially Mediterranean and Middle East, Southern Africa and Latin America, exposing hundreds of millions of people to water stress. Crop yields will be reduced in certain parts of Africa, increasing the likelihood of additional millions of people at risk of hunger. And the areas most affected by climate change will be Africa, the Asian mega deltas and small islands.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Mercy and Displacement of Persons: A Local Lens**

The sculpture of the “Homeless Christ” by Timothy P. Schmalz starkly reminds us that homelessness is real in the most expected and most unexpected places. For the first time in its history, the United Nations is preparing a resolution on homelessness or lack of habitable space in the context of human rights and justice (reflected in *New Urban Agenda* and *Sustainable Development Goals*). The most recent step taken in February 2020 was the acceptance of the Human Rights Council report at the 58<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission for Social Development: “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness.” This will eventually lead to the presentation of the resolution at the United Nations Assembly.

Three themes from the United Nations documents leading to this resolution illustrate the reality of homelessness globally today:

- ✓ Homelessness, an extreme violation of human rights, is not being addressed with urgency and priority. It is a violation of rights to adequate housing, nondiscrimination, security of person, health, protection and family, and freedom from cruel and inhumane treatment.
- ✓ Homelessness is interrelated with poverty, lack of productive employment and access to infrastructure, and a loss of family, community and a sense of belonging.
- ✓ There is a pervasive presence of homelessness in developed, emerging and developing economies; in prosperity as well as in austerity.<sup>iii</sup>

Domestic violence or family abuse has been described as a deliberate choice to exert control. It includes all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence or controlling behaviours committed by a family member or intimate partner. And it includes partner abuse, child abuse and elder abuse. Domestic violence is among most underreported crime globally for both men and women. Underlying this crime is the belief that abuse (physical or verbal) is acceptable. It is exacerbated by substance abuse, isolation, unemployment, mental health problems, lack of coping skills, and excessive dependence on the abuser. Abuse within our Church falls within this domain of domestic violence.

Human trafficking or trafficking in persons has many faces and many forms and has been called the world’s fastest growing industry. Those most at risk include Indigenous women and girls, LGBTQ2 persons, persons living with disabilities, children in the child welfare system, at-risk youth, persons who are socially or economically disadvantaged, and migrants and new immigrants.

Older persons exhibit among themselves the same diversity as do younger persons and middle- aged persons. However, we are being made more aware of the vulnerability of older persons to physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse. One of the many tragedies of the present COVID-19 pandemic is its impact on older persons, especially those living in nursing

homes and residential care facilities. A study completed by the *International Long-Term Care Policy Network* in May of this year shows 42% to 57% of all deaths linked to COVID-19 were among care home residents in Italy, Spain, Ireland, Belgium and France.<sup>iv</sup> In United States, newspapers report that those living in nursing homes or residential care facilities (1.6% of population) account for 40% of all COVID-19 deaths. And in Canada, studies are showing that older persons represent almost 80% of COVID-related deaths.

COVID-19 is also having a more negative impact on globally displaced persons than on persons generally. Because they usually live in cramped conditions, they cannot safely self-isolate. Even though they have many health conditions which make them more vulnerable to the impact of the virus, they have difficulty accessing healthcare services. They have limited access to good information either because they distrust persons in authority or because of language barriers. The humanitarian supply chain of relief workers is disrupted by closed borders and restrictions on work outside the home. Money normally used to support displaced persons is being redirected to efforts to respond to the pandemic.

Nathan Denette of the Canadian Press presents a listing of twenty questions, the answers to which quickly focus the inequality of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable persons:

- ✓ Who can work from home?
- ✓ Who can practice social distancing?
- ✓ Where are the healthcare workers?
- ✓ How much does staying safe cost?
- ✓ Who can access the internet?
- ✓ What happens in remote areas?
- ✓ Who can legally access health care?
- ✓ Who has access to ventilators?
- ✓ Who gets emergency response benefits?
- ✓ What happens to Indigenous communities?
- ✓ Who are essential workers?
- ✓ Who must stay at home?
- ✓ Who gets blamed?
- ✓ Who loses assistance?
- ✓ Who does the housework?
- ✓ Who is at risk of abuse?
- ✓ How do children learn?
- ✓ Who can distance in place?
- ✓ Who has access to water?
- ✓ How is lockdown enforced?

### **Response in Mercy – Where and With Whom Do Mercy People Minister?**

Some examples of the response by Mercy people to the challenges faced by displaced persons include ministry among the Venezuelan refugees in Peru, with migrant children and families at southern border of the United States, with women and children who are trafficked, with sponsored Syrian families, with elders in long term care facilities, with persons who are homeless or precariously housed, in shelters for abused women and among persons with cognitive impairment. Each reader of this article can add many other ministries to this set of examples. The voices contained in the reflections in this month's presentations will give more careful and more thoughtful responses to the question about Mercy's response to the displacement of persons.

## Response in Mercy Rooted in Scripture

The response of Mercy to the reality of displaced persons, globally and locally, is grounded in the Scriptures. In the book of the prophet Zechariah, God says, “Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another” (Zech 7:9-10). In the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s Gospel, we read, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Lk 10:36-37). A most profound parable illustrating the response in mercy is found in Jesus’ parable in the Gospel of Matthew, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36).

This introduction to the theme of *Mercy and the Displacement of Persons* is being written in the days leading up to Pentecost. Despite the enormity of displacement in the world today, confidence comes in trusting God’s promise of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, indeed not just the coming but the pouring out of the Spirit. The South Korean theologian, Chung Hyun Kyung, concludes the introduction to this theme with her profound nuance on the coming of the Spirit when she says, “With humble heart and body, let us listen to the cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within it. . . Without hearing the cries of these spirits, we cannot hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Statistics taken from the website of the UNHCR, the *United Nations Refugee Agency* and accessed at <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Kälin, “Displacement Caused by the Effects of Climate Change: Who Will Be Affected and What Are the Gaps in the Normative Framework for Their Protection?,” Report for the Brookings Institution, 10 October 2008, accessed at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/displacement-caused-by-the-effects-of-climate-change-who-will-be-affected-and-what-are-the-gaps-in-the-normative-framework-for-their-protection/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Leilani Farha (Canada), *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context*, presented to the Human Rights Council, 31<sup>st</sup> session, 30 December 2015; Leilani Farha, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living and on the right to non-discrimination in this context*, presented to the Human Rights Council, 40<sup>th</sup> session, 25 February–22 March 2019; Report of the Secretary General, *Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness*, presented to the Commission for Social Development, 58<sup>th</sup> session, 10-19 February 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> Adelina Comas-Herrera, Joseba Zalakaín, Charles Litwin, Amy T. Hsu, Natasha Lane and Jose-Luis Fernández, “Mortality associated with COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes: early international evidence,” *The International Long-Term Care Policy Network*, 03 May 2020, accessed at <https://ltccovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Mortality-associated-with-COVID-3-May-final-6.pdf>.

<sup>v</sup> Chung Hyan Kyung, “Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation,” Address at the *Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Canberra, Australia, 1991.