

Grassroots Ministry: New Foundations in Mercy

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Our foundress Catherine McAuley once said 'Hurrah for foundations they make the young happy and the old young'. I'm sure the above quote from Catherine in the early 1830s was understood very differently then compared to now. These were the early days of new convents and many young and eager sisters.

I teach in an all girls' secondary school of 720 in Mallow, Co. Cork, Ireland. I will probably be the last Sister of Mercy to teach in this school which was founded in 1932. I teach many classes of Religious Education and Catherine and her charism are part of the conversations throughout the year. The idea of Catherine inheriting a fortune and using it for the poor of Dublin is always a positive point of engagement with our students.

Last September prior to Mercy day before we ever heard of Covid 19 I asked two senior classes the following question:

If Catherine were alive in today's Dublin what would she spend her fortune on in order to help those most in need?

Given the ongoing problem of homelessness in Ireland the vast majority answered that this would be a priority for Catherine.

However, one of the responses I received is worth focussing on in the context of this article:

Invest in non-denominational spiritual centres to connect communities through interfaith. This could be effective in a society that increasingly moves away from conventional religion and often forgets the importance of spirituality in a capitalist culture.

Perhaps this might give us pause for thought in light of the oneness we have experienced throughout the world these last months.

Much will be written about and spoken of the Covid 19 pandemic in the months and years ahead.....an experience which united countries and continents, rich and poor, old and young. We will be changed forever. Since the first case was diagnosed in December our world has changed.

It is now Easter Monday and we have experienced it like no other. During Easter we shared a collective desire for hope and light as we lit our candles on our windows on Holy Saturday night in the country's 'Shine a light' initiative. The symbolism was poignant and emotional and never in our lifetime was it so longed for. Easter Sunday was experienced in this part of the world as a day of rain and gloom but that was penetrated by the emotion of the unforgettable concert of Andrea Bocelli dubbed as the most watched concert of all time. The empty cathedral in Milan and his haunting rendition of Amazing Grace spoke of our salvation on the day of resurrection.

"We will hug this wounded Earth's pulsing heart', were the words of Andrea and we surely did. God broke through in an incarnational moment of grace.

The glimpses of resurrection surely shone through in the multiple acts of ongoing kindness, compassion, reaching out, listening, connecting and caring for one another and hopefully in some ways mitigating the awful pain, isolation, tragedy and death that has bedevilled our world. Here in our country it has been amazing and heart-warming to see how our people at every level have reached out to help those in need. Thousands of our young medics answered Ireland's call to return and help in this crisis. Retired nurses and doctors offered their experience and expertise. New clusters of compassion are being created daily in the most creative of ways. The Spirit is blowing where it will. We constantly hear stories of neighbours looking out for one another, shopping, street cinemas, zoom meetings, virtual house parties, drive by birthday wishes, basic letter writing and texting. We have discovered each other in new ways; we have received and sent messages of concern, humour and good will offering hope that this too will pass. Existing services have reinvented themselves. For example, the local tourist offices on Achill island Co. Mayo, Ireland have become hubs of service for the local community reaching out in compassion, care and solidarity to the local residents who were isolated in many cases.

Pope Francis spoke of new kinds of hospitality in his Ubi et Orbi address on March 27th. 'It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.'

I'm very aware as a Religious Education teacher of the importance of our Christian narrative. One of the most neglected parts of scripture as I see it is the aftermath of the resurrection of Jesus. To read again the experiences and stories in the Acts of the Apostles leaves me in no doubt that something extraordinary had occurred. This event propelled the terrified disciples to leave that upper room on fire with the Good News of new life. It was palpable, it was energy, conviction and fearlessness that could not be held back. Pope Francis alluded to a revolution of tenderness during the year of Mercy. Perhaps we had to experience pandemic Covid 19 to truly see this tenderness in action. Yes, in so many ways tenderness, compassion and caring have won the day even when the outcomes resulted in the death of so many loved ones into new life. We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song!

What is so remarkable is that in these last few months we are collectively speaking the same language no matter what our beliefs are! This is the language of compassion and kindness. Whatever news platform you look at or whenever you look across the world it is the same incredible acts of kindness that we witness. The Golden Rule is the ethical principle of treating other people as one's self would prefer to be treated. This rule which is one of the most famous and impactful teachings of Jesus can be found in verses Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31:

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." [Matthew 7:12](#)

"Do to others as you would have them do to you." [Luke 6:31](#)

This Golden Rule shared by all communities of faith is finding new ways of connecting in solidarity and compassion, responding to the immediate and critical needs of so many every day.

In the story of the woman at the well (John 4), the end of that scene between Jesus and the Samaritan woman speaks of the time when we will no longer worship in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim but will worship 'in spirit and in truth'. That line always stops me in my tracks! Never did we dream that we would be unable to worship in our churches or cathedrals but yet the worship didn't stop; it may have increased. Virtual communities of people around the world came together to worship in spirit and in truth. New clusters of mercy are the work of the Spirit and the Spirit has found new and innovative ways of bringing the whole world together and in the process the planet took a well-earned breather as we were forced by something unforeseen and invisible to the naked eye to stop, to pause, to hear the birds again, to see clear water again and to breathe clean air again.

I'm not sure at this moment what life will be like by the June date which this contribution is scheduled for. What kind of world will we have and what are the lessons we will have learned from Covid19 which will have a bearing on *New Foundations in Mercy*? One thing is certain there will be a tsunami of grief to be dealt with. Hurried funerals without the balm of friends to console or the liturgies of the celebration of lives well lived, leave a void and a grief that will need the ears of our hearts as we move forward in a very changed world. Our days of collective ministries may be gone but the need for precious time to listen, to heal, to comfort will be part of our new way of being mercy. Never before has this planet and the peoples who live on it been more in need of an experience of mercy. Catherine's time called for responses to a need of the 1830s...the cholera epidemic. The world of the 2020s will have needs that it never thought it would have. How we respond into the future will now be shaped by Covid 19. Needs around bereavement, solitude versus isolation, prayer, meaning of life, lifestyle, care for our common home will be the stuff of responding to future needs arising from this experience. Adaptation to need is key and the new ways in mercy will be born in ways undreamt of because our world will have experienced true core values of what is essential and truly important, based on the intrinsic reality of how fragile and interconnected our common home is. As my student last September perceived.... '*Invest in non-denominational spiritual centres to connect communities through interfaith*'.

Religious life as we have known it may be over so the title *New Foundations in Mercy* demands a new perspective. I see it as new connections in mercy in the context of the charism of mercy. My experience of being in school has taught me much of how that charism is lived out. The multiplicity of kind acts that occur on a daily basis; the words of affirmation; the looking out for the lost and sometimes very broken in our midst and the ownership of who we are as a school in the mercy tradition. What I write is not exclusive to St. Mary's and is replicated all over the world in millions of various settings beyond mercy ministries. Thus, my thoughts in recent years have been taken up with imagining mercy beyond borders, beyond the tangible. It is a leaven for good.

One of my hobbies that I am developing in recent years is that of gardening. Every time I plant a seed is like making an act of hope.....hope that new life will emerge. There is the

planting, the germinating, the growing time and finally and hopefully the harvesting. There is something very wholesome and special in respecting the earth, the air, the sun and the water which gives life. It teaches me that all I can do is create the space and plant the seed.... the rest is God's work.

Some years ago a group of sisters in the province set up a group which came to be known as the 'Gardeners'.....ultimately soul Gardening. The need for something more, something deeper was the desire. We drew on the wisdom of Paula Downey co-creator of Culture Work, a living systems approach to organisation and change for a world in transition (www.dya.ie). Her vision is to approach life as living systems. 'Living systems are self-generating networks of relationships that produce life. Healthy living systems exist in a state of dynamic balance in which the parts make the system as they serve each other's needs. The web of relationships is based on service: the bee serves the flower, the flower serves the bee. Relationship is the central organising principle of life. We know to our cost the danger of upsetting healthy living systems'.

If we imagine *New Foundations in Mercy* it must be in the context of how we relate to one another at every level and how we relate to nature. As Paula Downey says 'there are penalties for breaking the rules.' Again Pope Francis reminded us: 'you (Jesus) are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgement, but of **our** judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others'.

May we encourage one another to hold our breath and dive head first into the deep ocean of God's promises. May we find there the grace to live and love fully for the sake of the world. Amen. (LCWR 27th April)