

Theological Imaginings: New Foundations in Mercy

Dennis Horton (Aotearoa New Zealand)

Covid-19 has taught us, like nothing else in human experience, that we are all vulnerable. Recalling Mercy's founder, who reached out to the victims of Dublin's cholera epidemic so soon after her Congregation had been founded, we have had to reflect deeply on how Mercy might respond in this moment of worldwide vulnerability.

What does it mean for us to be a source of strength and healing in our communion with all creation? Committed as we are to care for our common home, how should we stand with the displaced and model a world of welcome and inclusion? How will our Mercy charism and our global presence give us the energy for an earth that is in such need of God's compassion and mercy?

Even as borders are protected and we seek to isolate ourselves from the global pandemic, we sense the call to make others safe, to reach out in expanding circles of Mercy from the conviction that together we can do more, act better and more wisely, than we ever could on our own.

Living down under, where distance confers both isolation and a sense of security, we rejoice in the courage of our Mercy pioneers who brought the spark of Catherine's vision to the other side of the world, even to what historian Michael King, in the title of his account of Catholics in New Zealand, has called 'God's Farthest Outpost' (Penguin, 1997).

New Zealanders can understand why English poet and story-teller Rudyard Kipling, in a poem to celebrate cities he visited around the world, described Auckland as 'last, loveliest, loneliest, exquisite, apart.' Many of them grow up waiting for the 'great OE' or overseas experience, a rite of passage from this remote Pacific nation aimed at opening their eyes to the larger world. But lots of them return to Aotearoa, land of the long white cloud, knowing this is the place that truly identifies them and allows them to stand tall.

Land confers sense of identity

It is the land – te whenua – which gives Māori, New Zealand's first people, their sense of identity. They will greet those they meet with details of their closest mountain and river before giving their names. Māori are known as 'tangata whenua' – people of the land. Identity for Māori is secured by land and binds human relationships; in turn, people learn to bond themselves with the land. In the best of Māori tradition, land does not belong to people; people belong to the land.

No better illustration of this relationship is provided than the struggle of the Māori people of Whanganui, petitioning Parliament in the 1870s to have their links to their river officially recognised. They were finally successful in 2017, with a landmark decision conferring 'legal personhood' status on the Whanganui River, the third-longest river in New Zealand.

It was the first river in the world to gain the same legal protections as a human person, and the decision brought an end to a 150-year struggle. The Māori people of the region have a saying, 'Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au' – I am the river and the river is me. '

The first Sisters of Mercy arrived in New Zealand from Ireland in 1850. They came in response to a karanga, a call of welcome, carried by the French bishop Jean-Baptiste Pompallier from Māori leaders of that time. It was because Christianity sanctified the whole of life that Māori came to faith, according to Sir Eddie Durie, prominent academic and the first Māori to serve as a High Court Judge. 'The main attraction of Christianity for Māori was its pervasive sense of spirituality, reaching across the whole of life,' he told a conference of Sisters of Mercy and their partners in mission in 2017. 'In fact, that spirituality was already there; the missionaries simply enhanced it. We took to Christianity not because it would replace our values but because it would strengthen them.'

Without knowing it, Sir Eddie anticipated teaching at the heart of the Synod on the Pan-Amazonian region held in Rome in October 2019, which noted that the Spirit of God had nourished the spirituality of indigenous peoples long before the Gospel was proclaimed to them 'and moved them to accept it in their own cultures and traditions.' (Pan-Amazon Synod Working Document, par 120)

From their first days in this country, Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand included Māori women and girls in their outreach through ministries of education, health care and social services. But they were quick to realise that for mission to be effective it must be a two-way process, receiving as well as giving, being enriched as well as offering empowerment to others. Key Māori values have been integrated by Sisters of Mercy into their own spirituality and vision, and they have made growth in understanding their relationship with New Zealand's first people a cornerstone of their mission.

Mercy charism shaped by Māori values

Long before interculturalism became a byword in Catholic thought and teaching, the Mercy charism was being shaped by aroha (love, compassion), manaakitanga (hospitality) and whānaungatanga (family relationships). Kaitiakitanga (guardianship, especially of the natural world) and a deep respect for all forms of life were also lessons which Mercy saw strengthened from its close connection with Māori.

The involvement of laity in their ministries has enabled women and men to place their diverse talents and levels of expertise at the service of the Gospel, fulfilling the vision of Vatican II to see all the baptised engaged in transforming the world and working to restore all things in Christ. The Sisters of Mercy have developed a spirituality that sees God at work in the unfolding of creation, drawing new forms of life and service from their willingness to share their charism with others. From the chaos and entropy that are part of all creation, new life emerges from a willingness to die to self.

A key insight for the future of Mercy ministries has been whakawhānaungatanga, the building and nurturing of right relationships with God, with other people and with the whole of creation. Whānau is the Māori word for family or kinship. Whānau Mercy has become an important phrase for describing Mercy's extended family, in which sisters and their partners

in ministry, their students, staff and volunteers are able to rejoice in sharing the one and same charism, handed down from Catherine McAuley by the pioneer sisters who brought the seed of Mercy to these shores and planted it in the lives of all those they touched, especially through their ministries of education, healthcare and community service.

In fact, Whānau Mercy Ministries has become the name for the ministerial Public Juridic Person which the Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand are now planning to establish. Through the formation of this PJP, our sisters are committed to welcoming lay partners in new and expanding roles of governance and leadership. 'We will open our korowai (cloak) to embrace the growing diversity of Whānau Mercy,' they declared at their 2019 Chapter. And they quoted from their Constitutions, 'we are called into a new way of living God's mercy, in courageous response to the needs of the times.'

In our post-Covid-19 world new foundations of Mercy are bound to emerge, as sisters and their partners seek together to respond in ways that Catherine could never have foreseen but in which she will most certainly delight. For the creation of a Mercy Global Presence is what will keep her founding spirit alive in this unfolding future.