

Global Contemplation on the Integrating Poster: *Mercy and Faith Traditions*
Reflection from the Guiding Team
27 – 30 July 2020

During the last week of July 2020, the vision statement of Mercy International Association came alive as “the inspiration and energies of the Sisters of Mercy, our associates, colleagues and partners worldwide” were gathered in a reflection on “Mercy and Faith Traditions.” This theme was month one of segment two of Mercy Global Presence, a segment which focused on Mercy in varied expressions. For the first time in our history, members of the Mercy family in more than twelve countries gathered by Zoom in three regional conversations to move more intentionally into the reality of Mercy Global Presence. Young and old, women and men, associates and partners in mercy sat at three tables of Mercy and shared experiences of learning from world faith traditions and indigenous religions. Coordinators from each institute and congregation facilitated the conversations. Anne Walsh and Adele Howard rsm enlivened the technology.

A poster which echoed paintings and a poem, words from the Quran, prophetic voices from students and indigenous peoples, and images of diverse faiths was the touchstone for global contemplation on right relationships, richer appreciation of our own house of faith, personal/community/social transformation, and a sense of the sacredness of all life (human and other-than human). For three moments in time, “the longings and efforts of the entire Mercy family” echoed through English and Spanish voices and the profound resonance of the Maori word, *whakawhanaungatanga* (right relationship).

Over two hundred participants listened, shared life experiences, spoke prophetically, imagined new ways of Mercy, and delighted in the ways in which global and indigenous religions connect Mercy, creation of the cosmos, and Earth. The greetings and the chatting that the participants shared in the presence of each other were touching. In the midst of a global pandemic and worldwide protests about exclusion, this was a welcomed expression of a Mercy worldview rooted in an integral ecology which hears the cries of Earth and the Poor, sees them as one, and answers with passion and justice. God spoke, “My mercy embraces all things,” and we promised, “To be your mercy.” Mercy International Association birthed new depth and richness during this July week. Catherine’s words found new and hope-filled meaning, “The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us and oh what a blessing. . . the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us.”

Global Contemplation on the Integrating Poster: *Mercy and Degradation of Earth*
Reflection from the Guiding Team
10 – 13 August 2020

“We are in Need of Respirators Urgently!’ Thus Cry Out the Oceans of the World” – these disturbing words precede a video shown in Month Two of Segment Two of Mercy Global Presence: *Mercy and Degradation of Earth*. The images of oceans and marine species suffocating from plastic debris, our experience in this pandemic time with hospitals struggling to find enough ventilators to support very ill people with the COVID-19 virus, and the stark memory of the death of George Floyd crying out “I can’t breathe”, all come together to remind us yet again that the cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor are visibly and sadly one. More than two hundred and sixty participants echoed this connection in their conversations during the second week of August 2020 in three regional gatherings centered on the integrating poster for *Mercy and Degradation of Earth*.

Voices in many Spanish and English accents from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Guyana, Honduras, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Romania, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States spoke to the realities of this world today which demand that Mercy be lived and shared in myriad new ways. The engaging conversations were held in the large group and in small break-out groups with older and younger participants, women and men, and Sisters and Associates and partners in mercy. There was frequent mention of the wisdom of listening more attentively and carefully to the voices of Indigenous peoples who have much to teach from their ancestral memory and their lived experience close to Earth.

The images on the poster – the suffocating ocean, the drone image of degraded landscapes, and the tree frog and the violet – were a study in contrasts. So, too, were the conversations. Taking to heart Mary Bilderback’s words, “I am uneasy with the statement that the Earth has been degraded,” some challenged that it is not Earth who is degraded, but it is people who are degrading her. Some pleaded passionately for more emphasis on the practical-active aspect of living Mercy to effect desperately needed change in the here-and-now. Others celebrated the bringing together of the practical-active with the reflective-spiritual to ensure transformation for the long term. Hearing the words from the prophet Hosea, some lamented that “the land mourns and all who live in it languish” while the wild animals, birds and fish are perishing. Others focused on the pain of the pandemic for people in ways that could never have been imagined: increasing poverty, deepening hunger, increasing sexual exploitation, and inequitable impact on the most vulnerable persons.

Global Mercy was alive and well, diverse and inclusive, realistic and visionary in these regional conversations which connected all corners of our planet in energizing and hope-filled ways. In the words spoken, the faces animated in joy or in empathy, and the brief but moving words in the chat room, we responded to Catherine’s challenge to us, “Speak as your mind directs and always act with more courage when the ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ is in question.” How blessed we are to be invited to live new expressions of the works of mercy in this new time!

Global Contemplation on the Integrating Poster: *Mercy and Displacement of Persons*
Reflection from the Guiding Team
25-27 August 2020

“What a paradox life is!” The opening words on the poster for *Mercy and the Displacement of Persons* set the context for the three global conversations on this theme which is at the heart of Mercy ministry. Held during the week of August 24, 2020, the conversations were reflections on the voices and images from Month Three of Segment Two of the Mercy Global Presence process centered on “Mercy.”

The paradox was visible in the very images portrayed and words used in the poster. The participants noted the captivating image of smiling Syrian children, living in the midst of a refugee camp, brought tears to our eyes even as it gave hope to our hearts. The modern-day Pietà entitled *Good Friday 2020*, with the healthcare workers holding the respirator to the face of Jesus and knowing that all their efforts were in vain, gave us yet another window into the suffering of this pandemic time. The young aboriginal boy with his coloured drum in the apparently dry desert gave more hope in “Reclaiming Place: Continuing the Story.” It linked the displacement of persons back to the previous conversations on the degradation of Earth – the cry of Earth and the cry of the Poor are one. The image of the mother of Mercy holding in her embrace those with the COVID-19 virus, their loved ones and the healthcare workers, was yet another source of hope and a reminder of the depth of our tradition in grounding that hope. The invisibility of the Homeless Christ (male or female) touched many in the conversation circles. One participant quoted Pope Francis, “On the one hand, it is essential to find a cure for this small but terrible virus, which has brought the whole world to its knees. On the other, we must also cure a larger virus, that of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization and the lack of protection for the weakest.”

The paradox was expressed in heartfelt ways as participant after participant spoke of displaced persons in her or his reality – from the Mexico/United States border to the borders of Peru to the rural areas of Australia to the streets of St. John’s NL to the communities of northern Ontario to the cities of Australia to the towns of Peru to the long term care residences of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The displacement was highly visible and subtly invisible. It was within countries, and it was international. The ministry was heart-breaking and hope-restoring. Over and over again, the participants showed their struggles with being people of privilege in a world where so many have so little. Over and over again, they mirrored Mercy alive in the darkest places. One participant spoke of an Indigenous group who greet each other with the words, “How are the connections?”

The paradox was evident in attempts to balance contemplation and action. How can we not act when there is so much suffering and we have so much? How can we not create the connections that make action more effective? How can we not act when we call ourselves people of Mercy? And, yet, how can we act unless we also find systemic ways to change cultures and attitudes? How can we change systems and the hearts of people unless we ourselves take time to reflect on the realities of which we are part and to which we contribute by our own privileged lifestyle? How can we act and reflect if we do not time apart to find our way? The quotation from Jeremiah spoke to participants about standing, looking, asking, listening, and walking.

All three global conversations had returning participants and new participants, numbering in total 247 persons who were distributed fairly across the three groups. It seemed to all that we were finding a rhythm in our gatherings, learning to forget that the technology was there and leaning in to touch each other in these vibrant circles of Mercy.

Global Contemplation on the Integrating Poster: *New Foundations in Mercy*
Reflection from the Guiding Team
8-9 September 2020

An elegant Catherine McAuley rose, anchored by a strong green leaf, touched by a tiny raindrop/teardrop on its golden petal, and grounded by Catherine's tomb centered the global conversations on the integrating poster for *New Foundations in Mercy*. In this fourth theme of segment two in Mercy Global Presence, 241 women and men of Mercy from thirteen countries gathered to reflect on where Mercy is calling us today. Despite these times of chaos, uncertainty, anxieties, growing poverty, climate emergency and increasing disparity, the conversations spoke to hope visibly rising among us and around us. In the words of one participant, "My way of trying to announce hope is to seek to bring the new dream, new images, new spiritualities to the foreground of life rather than background." Hope is rising.

Hope is rising in the new ways of ministry in which Mercy is responding – new presence of Mercy along border crossings; new presence of Mercy to migrants, refugees, displaced persons and restoration of Earth; new ways of living the spiritual and corporate works of Mercy (even adding an eighth work of showing Mercy to Earth); and new ways of partnering in most unexpected ways of responding in Mercy.

Hope is rising in the simpler lifestyle to which the times are calling us. This call to simplicity comes as we are socially isolated for safety and protection during the global pandemic. Decluttering is happening in uninvited yet welcomed ways as simplicity becomes a new source of energy for community and for ministry, giving us the freedom to allow in the new.

Hope is rising through masks and social distancing which demand that we find new ways of communicating and relating. Facetime and Zoom have become metaphors for a way of communicating which we would never have imagined and which we would never have accepted if we had not been driven by the realities of the times. We have used those new technologies in wonderfully creative and freeing ways – no matter what our age or degree of familiarity with modern technology.

Hope is rising in our new sense of courage and a new solidarity which is emerging amid suffering. Tears of pain during one Zoom global conversation become tears of joy in the next Zoom conversation as we reach out to each other, offering support and compassion and gratitude. We are learning anew the joy that young people bring as, together, we listen and learn about care for our common home. The young student Sophie Snowball's sculpture of the fish swimming in the ocean and in the light and made from found materials of single-use plastics becomes a symbol of the "found materials" of our tradition now given new life. The Icelandic master storyteller and environmental activist, Andri Snær Magnason says one of the flaws of our civilization is its inability to see itself into the future. Young people help us see ourselves into the future.

Hope is rising in the growing appreciation of diversity and inclusion as we see, hear and share Mercy experiences from our lived experiences of Mercy flowing from one source but lived in many realities. The simple word *listen* has new layers of meaning as we realize how rich is the tradition which we are privileged to call ours and how rich are the traditions which we are privileged to receive from others. The simple word *stranger* has new layers of meaning as we heard again Maureen Murphy's poetic words, "Who are we if not kin?" Valarie Kaur's *See No Stranger* was named by several participants as another expression of "radical and joyful practices to heal ourselves and transform the world around us."

Hope is rising in our newfound confidence in our capacity within ourselves and with others. As one of us said, “We may be aged but we are well, alive and mercying!” Another reminded us that presence, encounter, and solidarity are the true marks of our living into hope. And yet another said that this newfound hope demands not only a new mindset but a new heartset!

This set of conversations ended with a global contemplation on the eight integrating posters. Words said aloud echoed themes threaded across all posters: “God dancing with creation,” “God mercifying the universe into being,” “Earth freed to restore herself,” “God’s infinite affection for us,” and “Were not our hearts burning within us?” Mary Sullivan’s words were quoted with joy, ““If we wish to sow the seeds of real hope in our world, I think Catherine McAuley would say: This is the way we must do it – one person at a time: one answering of the figurative doorbell, one opening of the figurative door, one embrace of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk – one person at a time.”

From the last week of July 2020 to the first week of September 2020, Mercy International Association’s vision was given new resonance and new energy in 12 global conversations on 4 themes by 1008 participants from 19 countries. We echo the wonderful Swahili words of thanks: *Asante Sana! Asante Sana! Asante Sana!*

—Elizabeth Davis rsm, Berneice Loch rsm, Anne Walsh
