HOPE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

RESPONDING TO COVID-19 THROUGH A MERCY LENS

A Publication of Mercy International Association

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019 SARS-CoV-2
CRM	Community Resiliency Model
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDP	Internally-displaced person
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPU	Inpatient unit
MECPATHS	Mercy Efforts for Child Protection Against Trafficking with the Hospitality Sector
MGA	Mercy Global Action
MGP	Mercy Global Presence
MIA	Mercy International Association
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSG	United Nations Secretary General
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

"COVID-19 came upon us like a furtive shadow, a whispered threat, red dots on the globe showing shocking numbers of deaths, medical warnings, and then the announcement of severe restrictions! How have we met this silent, invisible assault? It is believed that adaptation is central to evolution; care for others and mutual cooperation have meant that creative adaptation has happened throughout our province."[1](Mercy Sister, Ireland)

Sisters of Mercy, Associates and Partners worldwide mourn the loss of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. We acknowledge that over 680,000 lives have been lost, leaving so many bereft and many others in an ongoing crisis.[2] The pandemic has called us to a new consciousness and to listen to stories of the pandemic and its impacts from around the Mercy World.

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners have comforted each other and accompanied others, including the traumatized, the grieving, the sick, the isolated and, particularly, those most marginalized. They have provided care and offered sympathy to many who have lost family and friends. Sisters, Associates and Partners continue to accompany, listen, support and pray with those who are anxious, lonely and confused, especially when family members cannot visit each other due to "social distancing" measures.

Our shared experience of loss and isolation unites us worldwide. We acknowledge that while the virus is indiscriminate, its impact is proportionately different across the globe, ranging from inconvenient to catastrophic.

Likewise, the silence and stillness of the pandemic have deepened our relationship with Earth. The major disruption to the fast pace of life has provided opportunities for pause and reflection. Through the silence, we recognize the sacredness of Earth and the wisdom of traditional understandings of land and water. We understand more fully that how we act and the way we live contributes to the degradation or flourishing of Earth.

Just like our founder Catherine McAuley, we have been moved with compassion, challenged by inequalities, and called to care for people and Earth. In continuing to respond to the pandemic in all its dimensions, the Mercy World is called to reflect and contemplate what has been revealed and where we stand. This publication seeks to bring together the experiences of many Sisters, Associates and Partners throughout the Mercy World through a theological and human rights lens, to provide a resource for further reflection, and to offer stimulus for advocacy at all levels.

PART ONE

What has been Revealed?

1

Blatant Inequalities have been revealed

2

The Sacredness of Earth has been revealed

3

A Pandemic of Kindness has been revealed

1 Blatant Inequalities have been Revealed

Stories and experiences of the pandemic have revealed widespread and deeply-rooted injustice and inequalities, as well as highlighted systems of oppression, exclusion and marginalization. While all these existed long before this global public health crisis, they have been further exacerbated, putting many at risk of being "left behind." The spread of COVID-19 and government policy responses have completely altered our way of life, inflicted significant social, economic and political harm, and changed the way we relate to the environment.

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is more than just a public health crisis. The socio-economic crisis that has accompanied the spread of the virus has had wide-reaching and devastating effects on people around the world who have never had and may never contract COVID-19. The pandemic has exposed gaps and weaknesses in public services and social protection, and has underlined the need for universal and portable social protection systems that can deliver benefits efficiently and at scale and reach people who have lost their livelihoods.

Globally, Mercy communities working on the ground with women, girls and families, have learned that lack of access to essential social protections such as income security, health care, food, water and sanitation, housing, employment and education can put vulnerable communities further at risk. As the pandemic has worsened, it is now recognized that those most vulnerable to health and socio-economic impacts include people of color, those experiencing homelessness, migrants, women, children, refugees, indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups.

"The pandemic is presented as a health crisis, but it is more than that. The pandemic has laid bare the economic, social and existential crisis that the neo-liberal, patriarchal, militaristic and racist system has brought to the majority of planetary citizens."[3] (Mercy Sisters, Latin America)

In times of crisis, people look to their governments for leadership and assistance. The role of governments in protecting people and Earth and guaranteeing economic, social and political rights has never been so evident. Those governments who have invested in robust social and economic infrastructure and responded quickly with policies grounded in science and solidarity have demonstrated their capacity for resilience. Yet, some governments continue to fall short in their duties to their people.

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic is grounded in systemic oppression and exploitation. Social, political and economic systems that place profit over people and the planet perpetuate socio-economic inequalities and the degradation of Earth. It is up to us to work together to challenge these systems, to work for transformative change, to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized, and to uphold the rights and dignity of people and the planet.

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Physical and Mental Health

On 11 March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO). Those initially determined to be at the highest risk of developing serious illnesses from contracting the virus were the elderly and those with underlying medical issues. Since the public health emergency began, there have been almost 17.5 million cases of COVID-19 reported worldwide and 680,000 deaths.[4] The stark reality is that these numbers are continuing to increase and will continue to do so until the large scale spread of the virus is under control or a vaccine becomes available. "Keep your distance from others, clean your hands, avoid crowded and enclosed areas, and wear a mask where recommended" are the key measures encouraged by the World Health Organization (WHO) for public safety.[5] Countries and states which are adhering to these guidelines are reporting less cases of the virus and are controlling its spread.

As the virus has spread across the world, weaknesses in health care systems have been exposed and many health care facilities have become rapidly overwhelmed. The rate at which the virus spread accelerated in places with poorer healthcare systems. Lack of preparation and lack of resilience in medical care have resulted in overcrowding in hospitals and clinics, a lack of availability of personal protection equipment (PPE), limited testing capacities and overburdened staff and resources.

A Mercy Partner from the Amazon spoke of her experience of contracting COVID-19. Her account highlights the vulnerability of health care and the need for family support:

"The medicine was bought at an overvalued price because there was not enough to go around. The pain of not being able to breathe was so bad, but it was even worse to see the anguish in my family's faces when they would see that the oxygen was already all gone and they still hadn't been able to get their hands on more to replace it. I spent two days in the hospital. As there were not enough doctors and nurses to care for all the people, in those two days I saw more than 30 people die beside me. It was horrible to hear the screams of relatives asking for help, and this gave me huge anxiety thinking that I would be next. I am lucky as my family decided to take me out of there and care for me themselves. Now, I am on my 45th day and the headaches are slight but I am happy because I am winning this battle by the grace of God."[6] **(Mercy Partner, Peru)**

As health care systems and their capacities entered crisis levels, temporary hospitals, clinics and morgues were built in some urban areas to relieve distressed facilities. Ethical questions have been raised in relation to decision-making, the supply of medical resources, and the deeply sensitive issue of post-mortem procedures. For those living in rural communities and indigenous settlements, COVID-19 has posed a greater threat because access to healthcare and medical resources is already limited.

"Our communities are very vulnerable as our health systems are already not sufficient and struggle treating diseases such as Malaria and Dengue, which have known treatments, yet, we still have many deaths from them.... We are aware that even just one person entering into our community infected would be catastrophic and could cause communities to be wiped out."[7] **(Indigenous Mercy Partner, Amazon, Peru)**

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners in Nairobi continue to express their concern over the medical challenges and shortages which they are facing in their clinics.

"We run a clinic for Mukuru residents. It has an average of 150 patients a day although the numbers are higher now. Due to Covid-19, we had to have a hand washing stand or sanitizer before the entrance of the clinic. We also placed a tent for a nurse, so the temperature of patients could be taken before they mixed with other clinic staff and patients. Only one patient was found to have high fever and he was referred by government directive to the nearest government hospital where he was found to be positive. The biggest complaint among patients is concerning respiratory ailments, coughs, cold and flu. As we do not have testing capacity, we are unable to say whether or not these ailments are COVID-19 related. Until recently testing was very limited but due to increase in testing it has been found that 70 percent of those positive do not have symptoms. The danger is that those without symptoms or only slight symptoms may spread the virus to those who are old or frail. The residents are depending on the clinic for their medication and treatment as they cannot afford to be hospitalized. They are treated for the symptoms they present. We do not have special PPE equipment, but are trying to get some. Staff wear re washable scrubs and face masks. So far, thank God, none have got sick. We had to appeal for help for the basic drugs required."[8] (Mercy Sister, Kenya)

As the pandemic is felt across the world, many have struggled with fear of contracting or spreading COVID-19. This is causing many to feel emotionally distressed, as the rate of asymptomatic transmission is still unknown and some of those who have contracted the virus have become infectious before feeling ill.[9] The full impact of the pandemic on psychological well-being is not yet determined. However, the many stressors of poor mental health during lockdown have included social isolation, job loss, grief, housing insecurity and quality, and lack of access to mental health services.[10] Consequently, emotional well-being and mental health have also been at the forefront throughout the pandemic.

"We live with the anxiety and fear of being infected and infecting others. Our emotions are being crisscrossed between gratitude and sadness, between tears of appreciation and hope, and pain and strength."[11] **(Mercy Sister, Peru)**

"On the first day, I had a severe headache. My throat was a little sore and started coughing, but no fever. I took some cough medicine and drank plenty of water. The next day, I got up from bed with my body aching all over. My headache was gone, but I was still coughing. I continued with my cough medicine. I can't help but think that I might be infected. I started to feel my chest getting heavier. It became harder to breathe. All I could do was cry it out. In the next few days, my panic attacks got worse. I could literally feel [my] heart palpitating harder and harder. I almost collapsed. I was enveloped with the fear of death. There is nothing I could think about aside from dying. I was scared. On the sixth day, I thought of using Community Resiliency Model (CRM). I took a few deep breaths. I thought of my family. I thought of fighting for a life with them. I prayed. Eventually, my negative thoughts died down until I recovered from my ordeal. I won over my negative thoughts and fears. Because of COVID and this experience, I realized how important my health is, my mental health included, and that I should prioritize it."[12] **(Mercy Partner, Philippines)**

The overwhelming emotional strain and physical exhaustion which frontline workers have experienced, threatens both their mental and physical health. Some have been exposed to the frontlines of hospitals and clinics without access to PPE and others have been working around the clock without having adequate time to rest. Additionally, the trauma of treating and losing patients in distressed circumstances could have a profoundly negative impact on the well-being of healthcare workers in the long run.[13]

Mercy Sisters from Mercy Hospital, Illigan City, in the Philippines reflected on their service and described the mental and emotional stress, and burnout of working in healthcare:

"We went to the hospital every day and spent most of our time there. At the start, there was a feeling of panic—fear that one or all of us would be afflicted with the virus and even fear of death. Our co-workers were scared to continue working. The doctors stopped their out-patient consultations. Everyone was afraid and giving up. In spite of all of these uncertainties, we did our very best to be their inspiration, to put on happy faces and be a hope to them."[14]

Our sisters in Panama have expressed concern for many who do not have one meal a day let alone three. Many have struggled with the impacts of trauma, family separation, the grief of lost family members, abuse and domestic violence. This has had a huge impact on their mental and physical health.

Bereavement and loss are true tests of our human resilience especially during these strange times of social distancing and isolation. Disruptions to funerals, burials, rituals and mourning traditions are causing increased sadness, anxiety and personal trauma for many. The comfort of community and togetherness during grief and loss has been stripped away by the virus. It has denied many people the precious final moments with dying loved ones.

"It has impacted all. For example, indigenous people in Aotearoa New Zealand (Mãori) have the tangi which is an opportunity for all those who knew someone coming together - telling their stories and grieving together the life of a loved and respected person. There is hope that once Aotearoa New Zealand moves to level one - the opportunity to get together to grieve and send off appropriately loved ones will continue."[15] **(Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)**

"There was no anointing of the sick; there was no funeral Mass. The hearse pulled up outside the convent and we followed it to the cemetery. Family members (from abroad) were unable to attend. It all seemed so short and so sad, though we knew her sufferings were over and she was rejoicing in Heaven. It brought home the terrible anguish and suffering of the many millions all over the world grieving for loved ones who had died alone and who they had not even been able to bury."[16] **(Mercy Sister, United Kingdom)**

The Mercy World has had to learn to adapt in saying farewell to loved ones.

"On a personal aspect, we had two Sisters of Mercy die (not from COVID-19), and as a group of Sisters we gathered on Zoom to share

stories and remember our Sisters. This was followed up later with a video done at the graveside with a designated Sister and the funeral director. The opportunity to gather as a group throughout Aotearoa New Zealand using technology enabled a sense of solidarity for all of us. Many I know are planning belated memorial services for loved ones."[17]
(Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)

A Mercy Sister from Ireland also recognizes the importance of supporting those who are grieving. As a practicing social worker and psychotherapist and as the founder of a children's grief center, she states:

"The Covid-19 pandemic is impacting greatly on our economies, but the emotional impact which it is presenting must also be acknowledged...Now, more than ever, it is essential that children and young people know that they are not alone...The demand for the Children's Grief Centre's service is ever growing and many travel from different parts of the country to avail of their support..."[18]
(Mercy Sister, Ireland)

In response to this need, this Sister and other staff at the center decided to reach out to the children and young people who had been visiting the center by sending each one a personalized letter from their support worker to let them know that their service is still here. The younger children received a COVID-19 workbook with their letters while the older children were given a diary. The staff received great feedback from both parents and children who told them how important it was to know that someone was thinking of them.

The rate at which COVID-19 has spread across the globe has revealed the gaps and weaknesses in our public and private health systems and the unequal distribution of resources, especially to low income communities. COVID-19 threatens so much more than our physical health. The isolation, anxiety, grief and stress have heightened our need for psychological resilience and self-care. As we have recognized the distress which our frontline workers have endured, we must continue to value them and monitor their well-being going forward. We are being presented with the opportunity to learn from the lessons of our weak health systems and change the way we provide healthcare to underserved and vulnerable populations.

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Mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought most of the world to a stand-still and has fundamentally changed global human mobility. Governments around the world have introduced measures to "flatten the curve" of infections including travel restrictions, border closures, the suspension of labor migration and the slowing of migration processing and assistance to asylum seekers.[19]

While the COVID-19 virus knows no borders or immigration status, the impacts of the pandemic have highlighted the systemic inequalities that persist in our society. This is particularly true for many people on the move: migrants in irregular situations; migrant workers, especially those in the informal economy; victims of trafficking in persons; and people fleeing their homes because of persecution, war, violence, human rights violations or disaster, whether within their own countries — internally-displaced persons (IDPs) — or across international borders — refugees and asylum-seekers.[20]

Exclusion from social protection systems has negatively impacted many migrants' ability to take preventive measures against COVID-19 and to receive medical care if they contract the virus. Many support and care services run by civil society organizations have been closed due to lockdown policies. This has led to decreased access to essential services including healthcare, shelter and crisis response for those experiencing abuse or violence. Particularly affected are undocumented migrants who may be reluctant to enter medical facilities or other public services for fear of being reported to immigration authorities.[21]

Crowded living environments also affect the implementation of preventive measures such as social distancing. This is the case for irregular migrants in administrative detention, refugees in

camps or migrant workers in highly populated migrant labor housing who experience inadequate sanitation and limited access to health services. In Melbourne, Australia, some social housing towers, considered to be housing many vulnerable people, were put into lockdown and residents were not allowed to leave their homes for any reason. This was because COVID-19 contact tracing had been linked to these towers and the Chief Medical Officer recommended strict quarantine. While this measure was undertaken for the benefit of those living in the towers and the general community, some residents were traumatized by the presence of police who were securing the towers. Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners responded generously to an invitation to provide financial assistance, in particular, for newly settled African families who lived in the towers and needed extra care and support.[22]

The lack of inclusion of migrants and refugees into public health strategies has further exacerbated existing inequalities.[23] Information-sharing has had a significant impact on migrant communities because some communications on COVID-19 were not available to people in a language they could understand. Misinformation and politicization of issues has led to the stigmatization and exclusion of migrants from response and recovery measures.[24] These have led to higher risks of contamination, and entail longer-term consequences for migrants' integration and social cohesion. The loss of control being felt across communities worldwide due to border closures, restrictions on movement or feelings of social isolation provides insights into the daily struggles faced by displaced persons around the world every day.

Many people on the move tend to have few, if any, reserves that might soften socio-economic shocks. Migrants are, therefore, among the hardest hit by reduced incomes, increasing unemployment, increasing expenses and price hikes for basic commodities. Migrant workers were among the first to be affected by lay-offs and lockdowns that closed businesses. In the United States, for example, many migrant workers and their families have lost their employment-based health insurance.

"Migrants are the most vulnerable population during this pandemic. What a paradox life is. They left fleeing hunger and misery and now a virus, minuscule in size... The most painful thing is to see families with their small children, walking for days without access to a hot meal, eating only soft drinks, water and cookies. Frequently they tell us, 'We haven't had hot food in over a week.' A nine-year old little girl said, 'I haven't had a shower for a month.'"[25] **(Mercy Sister, Peru)**

In many countries, migrants are ineligible for government-provided unemployment benefits, welfare or stimulus programs. Loss of employment among migrant workers is compounded by the fact that they are often not covered by protections of standard labor law or social protection systems and the risk that layoffs could trigger the expiration of visa or work permits, forcing them into undocumented or irregular status or to return to their home countries.[26] The pandemic's socio-economic consequences are affecting, in particular, those migrant workers and refugees in the low-wage, informal economy who are excluded from decent work and social protection measures.

The loss of livelihoods for these migrants not only impacts their lives in their countries of destination, but also their families in their countries of origin.[27] The World Bank estimates that in 2020, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to drop by around 20 percent, crippling the economic lifeline to migrant families and communities, which will lead to an increase in poverty and limit households' access to much-needed health services.[28]

While foreign-born migrants face loss of livelihood, discrimination and barriers to basic services, people moving internally are also experiencing hardship and discrimination due to COVID-19. Strict lockdowns, and "stay at home" orders have sought to protect people from community transmission, but some regimes have taken the opportunity to further suppress their people's freedom of movement by ramping up restrictions.

A personal account from the Philippines illustrates the impact of border controls on the life of struggling families within their own countries:

"I invited my younger sister and her family (live-in partner and child) to live with me and my husband in Talisay City during the lock-down period. I thought this would be good to keep them from contracting the virus as there are more reported cases in Cebu City. And, more importantly, so that I can provide for their daily needs and milk for their little baby. Both of them are out from their usual source of income because of the pandemic. However, my neighbors learned that they have moved in with us and harassed us demanding that my sister and her family go back to Cebu City. I negotiated hard but to no avail. Our neighbors and the local council still forced the ejection of my sister and her family. I felt immensely sad, guilty and helpless."[29] **(Mercy Partner, Philippines)**

Across the world, people on the move and their families have experienced policies and public discourse, including rhetoric from politicians, that seek to keep the virus—and especially the people who carry it—away from "us." We can expect even more of an "us first" approach in politics: "our" vaccines, "our" PPE, "our" health, "our" borders, "our" people first. This betrays the fact that the COVID-19 virus does not discriminate based on nationality and does not care about political borders. In a public health crisis, such as this, exclusion of any person or group of people is detrimental to the whole of society – if one person is sick, we are all at risk.

In the face of the pandemic, rhetoric must change from discrimination to solidarity. We need a conversation about the future of our economies and societies so that care workers, fruit pickers, nurses and all people on the move are recognized and valued for the contribution they make regardless of their country of origin or ethnicity. Policies must actively counter xenophobia and discrimination in all its forms and measures must be put in place to remove barriers and facilitate migrants' access to labor markets, social protection and basic services.

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Livelihoods

Globally, due to COVID-19 risks, governments have enacted measures such as social distancing, movement restrictions and both market and border closures to reduce the spread of the disease and to lessen pressure on stressed healthcare systems. While these have been effective in suppression of the virus, they have severely impacted the livelihoods of many people. The ILO has estimated that working-hour losses for the second quarter of 2020, relative to the last quarter of 2019, had reached 14.0 percent worldwide (equivalent to 400 million full-time jobs).[30]

While many governments have tried to put in place policies to extend unemployment insurance and to minimize job loss through short-term work schemes, the pandemic has highlighted the particular vulnerability of those working in the informal economy, especially women. Policymakers have difficult decisions to make on when and how to ease lockdowns, as they consider the trade-off between the health of their citizens and the health of their economies. Political pressure means some economies are opening up before it is safe to do so, thereby, prolonging the crisis and putting more lives at risk.

Households experiencing the death and/or illness of the breadwinner face acute financial stress. Amidst massive unemployment, increased household expenditures significantly impact vulnerable households. Many people fear not having money to buy adequate PPE, medicine, health services, food and for funeral costs as they struggle to gain income for basic needs. In order to survive, families with few savings, loss of income and additional healthcare costs may be forced to sell productive assets. This leads

to many long-term consequences which further entrench their poverty.[31]

"Medicine has become inaccessible because of its high price, and it is almost impossible to find oxygen balloons. It is evident that the most poor and vulnerable have no access to resources and their life is depending on luck.... it can be said that without an economic income to sustain family expenditure; many of these families don't have anything to eat from day to day, they can't afford to buy masks or alcohol sanitize..."[32] **(Mercy Sister, Peru)**

Many who work in the informal economy depend on trading and interacting in local environments. In this scenario, small-scale transactions can take place daily and provide a small regular income for the family. However, with no interaction with customers, some families are left with no income and have been dependent on government subsidies or charity.

"Apart from the fear of the disease, additionally, our only income is from the sale of handmade crafts which has stopped abruptly due to the halt of tourists passing through our area. Since the 17th of March, when the state of emergency began, we have not received any visitors. This worsens our situations without financial resources, the fear of a family member getting sick and not being able to afford the medical expenses has already affected our mindsets. We also cannot sell our farm products to help our economy in any way. The demands have fallen as markets are closed. The central government has forgotten about us. And the same is happening in other communities here in la rivera del rio Marañón."[33] **(Mercy Partner, Peru)**

Social protections and the security they provide are often not available to women given that social norms and stereotypes frequently limit job opportunities. Around the world, 60 percent of women work in the informal economy (e.g.,

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domestic work) which is characterized by decreased opportunity, low wages and a lack of social protections (i.e., guaranteed vacation, maternity leave, social security, health insurance or unemployment benefits).[34] Working without social protections leaves women vulnerable to discrimination, poverty and violence. Social protections are necessary to prevent women from being left behind especially as governments work towards recovering from the coronavirus by stimulating their economies. A safety net provided by social protections will free women from dependency and increase economic opportunities which will prevent further abuse.

Owing to entrenched gender stereotypes, women carry most of the burden of both paid and unpaid domestic and care work which is exacerbated by lockdown or stay-at-home orders, the closure of schools and other public and social services. Those in the healthcare sector and those caring for the sick and the elderly at home face an increased risk of contracting the virus because they are likely to be in direct contact with persons who may have COVID-19. Migrant women are particularly impacted as they are likely to work in the informal economy, especially domestic service and the care sector, and be excluded from labor protections which results in insecure contracts, no paid leave or the ability to work from home.[35] Lack of assistance and protection mechanisms for women migrant domestic workers along with social isolation due to language, cultural difference and the limited availability of accurate information heighten their vulnerabilities during the pandemic. The extra burden of unpaid care work on women needs to be addressed as part of a comprehensive response to the pandemic.

Besides the health sector, the crisis has disproportionately impacted other industries, including food and hospitality, retail and wholesale, tourism and transport, and manufacturing. These industries largely depend on the labor of women and migrant workers. While many have lost their employment and their livelihoods, others have been deemed "essential workers," putting their health at risk.

The casualization of the workforce has meant that some workers are not staying home from work when they show signs of illness. This is because they have no sick leave or superannuation and are dependent on the income they receive for hours worked. These "flexible" work arrangements have highlighted that these kinds of conditions lack any long-term security for the worker and their families. While employees may benefit from these "cost effective" arrangements, the burden is on the worker to remain healthy in order to have a continual stream of income. In the case of COVID-19, these arrangements have meant that some workers have risked infecting others in the community because they are faced with the dilemma of attending work while sick in order to feed their families or staying home but having no income. Ultimately, these workplace conditions put not only individuals at financial risk but also endanger the wider community.

Workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic run many critical sectors which include our healthcare systems, our food production and distribution, and our care economies. Because of their vital work, these workers, and especially informal and undocumented workers, are exposed to higher risks of contracting the virus and lack basic labor protections. These frontline workers have been celebrated as heroes during the pandemic, but their work has always been essential - they are the backbone of our societies and economies. The COVID-19 pandemic offers opportunities to evaluate the positive contributions of people in these essential jobs and to adequately value their work.

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Housing

Housing and "stay at home" orders have had a significant impact on those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. About 1.8 billion people around the world lack adequate housing.[36] The right to adequate housing is fundamental for the enjoyment of other human rights. In this time of COVID-19 and social distancing, adequate housing is a matter of life and death. It is important to realize that protecting the health and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness or living in informal settlements and shelters will also help flatten the curve of COVID-19.[37] We must ensure that no one gets left behind in this crisis.

"When I hear 'stay home', my heart breaks for my companions who remain street homeless or who stay in shelters that are open only at night."[38] **(Mercy Sister, United States)**

All shelters, hubs and services which seek to improve the safety and wellbeing of homeless people have had to scale back during this time of pandemic. Pre-existing challenges which those experiencing homelessness face, alongside the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, will likely cause a significant increase in the number of people vulnerable to homelessness.[39]

"It deeply saddens us to realize that our guests are now suffering the deprivation of the many necessary services which The Gathering Place offers. It is indeed a privilege to serve the poor in these ways and to offer them in Mercy some of the necessities, comforts and supports which so many of us often take for granted."[40] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

It has been forecasted that many will experience eviction due to the inability to keep up with rent payments because of loss of livelihoods. This, in turn, will put people at risk of homelessness.

During the lockdown, we have witnessed some local and national governments making it a priority to provide homes to people experiencing homelessness as well as placing moratoria on mortgage and rent payments. It has taken a pandemic for governments to begin to address the ongoing homelessness crisis. This presents advocates with a unique opportunity to encourage governments to focus on permanent, adequate, inclusive and non-congregate housing because adequate housing is a basic human right.

Protecting those who live in informal settlements is a much greater challenge because the implementation of social distancing and high-quality sanitation is more problematic. Those living in cramped conditions and poverty are at higher risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Locking down overcrowded urban areas is both difficult and dangerous for the well-being of those living there.

"Due to very high population density, it's not possible to observe social distancing in slums."[41] **(Mercy Sister, Kenya)**

"We Papua New Guineans are communitarian people; we live together in one house making social distancing an almost impossible challenge. We do not have space in our houses, churches, classrooms or on public transport such as the Public Motor Vehicles (known locally as PMV's) which are small buses and trucks. There are few private vehicles which mean most people use the public transport."[42] **(Mercy Sister, Papua New Guinea)**

Leilani Farha, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, stated "housing has become the frontline of defense against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation."[43] In response to the pandemic, we must address both the root causes of the already existing homelessness crisis and the vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness by providing resources, safe shelter and testing for COVID-19 symptoms to those in communal shelters and slums.

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Food & Water

COVID-19 has presented us not only with a health pandemic but also a pandemic of hunger. Food production and supply systems have collapsed leaving many communities at risk of acute food insecurity. Many families are unable to support themselves as they have lost their sources of income. Their children are also missing out on school meals and assistance.

"The pandemic has affected families' economic income because they work independently. It is worse for the families with children but they are somehow surviving on their farms. Food availability is limited, especially the purchasing of oil, rice, sugar etc."[44] **(Mercy Partner, Peru)**

School children are unevenly affected by the virus due to the mitigation measures which have been put in place to stop the spread of infection. Closures of schools and education systems not only interrupts children's learning opportunities but also their access to school meals, health programs, and social and financial supports. The pandemic is undoing the many achievements which have been made over the last number of decades to combat hunger, to lower child mortality rates and to strengthen literacy levels and education systems.[45]

Although it is still too early to know the full scale of the economic impact of COVID-19, the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan April – December 2020 projects that we may see the first increase in global poverty since 1990, resulting in 270 million people facing starvation by the end of 2020.[46] The countries with Mercy

presence which face the greatest challenges in regard to food security and nourishment include Kenya, Honduras and Haiti.[47]

"Many are hungry. 90 percent of slum dwellers lost their casual work on the 16th March and those working in transport, hotel, restaurant, bars, house-work, small private schools were soon let go without pay. Within a few days they were hungry. The elders of the village asked what could be done. We had bought food worth 10,000 euro to feed the 6,000 students' lunch just before the schools closed. We decided to distribute this food stock to the hungry. Sr. Kathy also launched an appeal for immune- boosting food packs containing soap and toilet paper as well as food, costing ten euro each for those coming to the clinic suffering from signs of malnutrition. Some Kenyans, seeing the desperation of the people, came to our aid with various food donations."[48]
(Mercy Sister, Kenya)

Food security, safe drinking water and adequate sanitation services are essential to combating COVID-19 and the spread of infection. Good handwashing practice is encouraged by governments and the WHO as an essential protection measure. Consequently, COVID-19 has highlighted the inequitable access and availability of safe water and sanitation. According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the WHO, approximately 4.2 billion people do not have safely managed sanitation services and 3 billion lack basic hand washing facilities. Adequate water and sanitation services (WASH) are not only lacking in households but also in many healthcare and education facilities.[49]

"There is a shortage of water in the city, but as we are near the rivers the one thing we have a supply of, under the ground, is water. The Government of Kenya, due to the urgency of the shortage in slums, drilled bore holes in two of our schools to supply water to the schools and the surrounding slums."[50]
(Mercy Sister, Kenya)

The human right to water and sanitation is a core concern of the Mercy World.[51] We continue to advocate to change systemic failings that prevent water being available to all. These systemic failings and injustices include the privatization of water, poor water governance, unsustainable agricultural practices and gender inequality. Women and girls tasked with the collection of water cannot adhere to "stay at home" and social distancing measures and, thus, are at greater risk of contracting the virus, in addition to risks of gender-based violence (GBV) already associated with a lack of water infrastructure. Access to WASH is crucial to achieving gender equality and reducing violence against women.

COVID-19 has exposed the weaknesses of our current food and water services. The Mercy World advocates for the right to food, aiming to address current agricultural systems with long-term sustainability goals. This includes food security that ensures the physical, economic and social access to sufficient and nutritious food. Catherine McAuley stated: "Water is a free beverage."[52] Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners recognize the human right to water and address unjust systems that limit access to, the protection of and preservation of clean water and sanitation. For the sake of people and Earth, food security and water management must be a priority for governments, the private sector, and local communities.

Violence

Sadly, the pandemic has also revealed the many ways in which people have been subjected to or at risk of violence. Family violence has been named as a significant issue in many countries. Perpetrators of violence often take advantage of situations where women are isolated or separated from the community and/or the extended family. The pandemic has heightened this scenario and made it more difficult to identify victims due to "stay at home" orders. Some countries have raised awareness of this issue through television campaigns and other forms of awareness raising.

Likewise, women and children who are experiencing marginalization, isolation and financial hardship are said to be at greater risk of human trafficking. Loss of employment, increased poverty and socio-economic stress, lockdowns and travel restrictions, a lack of access to social protection and a rise in online interactions leave them more vulnerable to being coerced by traffickers. Children are no longer being monitored in educational settings where daily interactions with trusted teachers and other workers takes place. This leaves them especially vulnerable to exploitation and enables traffickers to offend with impunity. Advocates argue for more collaboration and conversation about these increasingly hidden realities.

"As the number of cases of this pandemic increases, so does the disease which accompanies it. We have heard interviews from women who are being offered sex-for-rent from their male landlords. COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence abusers as numbers of incidents rise within our province. Women are at increased risk while isolating at home. Social workers are concerned as fewer calls to women's sexual

assault centres doesn't mean fewer incidents. Women are in a position where they can no longer make those calls. Advocates want more collaboration and conversation with governments about solutions in respect to the surge of abuse rates."[53] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

COVID-19 and lockdowns risk increasing the rate of gender-based violence and make quarantine more painful and deadly for some women and families than the virus itself. Last year, 243 million women and girls experienced sexual abuse or violence at the hands of an intimate partner. This violence is increasing in our new reality.[54] The "stay at home" orders increase the risk of violence to women especially when they are isolated with their abusers, lack access to support systems, medical care, justice and shelters. As a direct result of quarantine rules, agencies around the world have reported a 30 percent increase on average in calls to domestic violence hotlines.[55] The lack of access to necessary resources makes the isolation worse for women experiencing GBV. Many have no way of escaping the escalating violence in quarantine as authorities have deemed some services non-essential and converted some shelters into COVID-19 treatment overflow spaces.[56] Services for women and families experiencing GBV are imperative. Governments, therefore, must recognize these services as essential and keep them operational during the pandemic.

Education and safety were at the heart of Catherine McAuley's concern for women seeking shelter at the first House of Mercy. The women she encountered struggled to find safe employment where they would be free from sexual abuse. Before Catherine opened the House of Mercy, she found herself unable to help a woman in need and was deeply troubled by the lack of safe spaces for women. This experience roots Mercy's call to serve women and girls in vulnerable situations.

"A psychologist has been based at McAuley House... Her counselling sessions have been crucial in addressing underlying trauma; 80 percent of women living there have mental health issues, and more than 40 percent have experienced childhood or sexual abuse. These vital sessions have continued online, keeping the connection going and ensuring those who are now living in the community are less alone."[57] **(Mercy Partner, Australia)**

The rights of children are increasingly in danger of being violated during the pandemic. The longer many children spend out of school, the less likely it will be that they will return. Economic instability and conflict increase their chances of experiencing domestic violence and child labor exploitation. Girls are increasingly vulnerable to situations of child marriage in order to help their families cope with the economic turmoil. This strips them of their childhood and rights to health, education and freedom. We must stop children from falling through the cracks during this pandemic. Independent UN Human Rights experts are calling on States to safeguard the well-being of children and increase child protection measures during the pandemic.[58]

A representative of Ireland's Mercy Efforts for Child Protection Against Trafficking with the Hospitality Sector (MECPATHS) states that they have been particularly conscious of the children who find themselves in environments of abuse and who lack any access to social supports and services because of lockdown measures and school closures. We must be mindful that restrictions on movement do not impede child trafficking and that any child *"moved as little as one, two, three feet for the purpose of exploitation is a victim of trafficking."* MECPATHS call on us to remember that *"those who find themselves in modern day slavery are not gone from the minds of the many people who continue to challenge and fight for their rights."*[59]

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners continue to raise awareness of issues of violence, abuse, GBV and human trafficking especially during the pandemic. We strive to eliminate these issues by addressing the lack of prevention, access to essential services and other social protections. We seek to empower women and to strengthen their capacities to claim their rights. Through individual, local, national and global mobilization, we can challenge harmful gender narratives that justify violence against women and stigmatize survivors. Like Catherine McAuley, we will continue to work with women and girls to form a just and inclusive world.

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Political Institutions

To tackle the COVID-19 crisis, governments around the world have taken on extraordinary powers which limit people's ability to move freely or to assemble in large groups. Given the magnitude of the human, social and economic impacts of the pandemic, many governments have understandably increased their executive authority. People around the world have sacrificed their individual freedoms to benefit collective public health outcomes. Indeed, international human rights law permits restrictions on liberty in times of national emergency that are necessary and proportionate.[60] Nevertheless, in all regions of the world, authoritarian-minded leaders have capitalized on public distraction and reduced oversight to use this expansion of power to erode and weaken democratic norms and practices or to reinforce and strengthen their reliance on authoritarian politics. They have seized the opportunity to silence dissidents, to restrict civil society activities and to consolidate power in the name of public safety. Increased use of surveillance technology and contact tracing may provide other ways to gather data and to analyze civilian movements.[61]

Corruption thrives when democratic institutions such as a free press and an independent judiciary are undermined; when citizens' right to protest and join associations or engage in initiatives to monitor government spending are limited. It is vital that the checks and balances on executive power return to normal as soon as possible. In many places, however, there are worrying signs that the pandemic will leave in its wake increased authoritarianism and weakened rule of law.

Some women religious in the Philippines have expressed serious concern about the government's passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 "which has the potential to quash any opinions or social dissent against the government."[62]

In times of crisis, people's health depends at minimum on free access to timely, accurate information. Censorship and misinformation propagated by certain governments around the world has not only led to the spread of COVID-19 but in some places has created public distrust of scientific expertise which functions to protect public health.

Hate speech and xenophobia have also led to terrible acts of violence around the world as people of Chinese or Asian descent and international migrants have been vilified and blamed for spreading the virus. This has sometimes been reinforced by government leaders who have been keen to attribute blame for the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the horrific witness of the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Abery, and George Floyd in the United States has put a national and global spotlight on police brutality and systemic racism. A massive movement has challenged societies around the world to expose and to dismantle racist systems, and to work actively towards racial justice. In the United States, protests across the country demand the defunding of police departments and accountability for the perpetrators of police violence and killings of Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

"In the midst of this truly viral event, we are witnessing the virtual viral explosion of our awareness of violence against people of color. George Floyd's death at the hands of police in the United States, has sparked worldwide protest against police bias and violence toward people of color."[63] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

Data in the United States shows that racial justice is linked closely with the effects of COVID-19. Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put some members of racial and ethnic minority groups, including Black, Hispanic and Indigenous, at higher risk of getting COVID-19, being hospitalized or dying than non-Hispanic white persons.[64] Lockdown measures have also disproportionately affected people of color in the United States as shown, for example, when police used excessive violence when arresting people of color for social distancing violations.[65]

The Mercy World has heard many stories that illustrate the pain, frustration and discrimination that many people have experienced in response to police abuses of power amid lockdown.

"I have a neighbor who has 9 children. She has no work, while her husband is a carpenter. During this COVID time, they are totally dependent on the government aid which still could not suffice for the whole family. One afternoon, their 15 -year old son went out to the seashore to gather seashells for dinner. Upon coming out from the water, he was arrested by the local police officers due to quarantine violation as minors and senior citizens aren't allowed out. He was jailed with his wet clothes on. His mother went to the police office begging for her son's release. The police officer required her to bail him out or he will stay detained for a few days more. The family did not have money so the boy remained jailed. It was nerve-wracking. The seashells the boy gathered were kept by the police officers for them to eat."[66] **(Mercy Partner, Philippines)**

The health crisis will eventually recede but autocratic governments' dangerous expansion of power may be one of the pandemic's most enduring legacies. It is now paramount for people around the world to care not only about the health of the individuals around us but for the health of our government institutions as well. In order to achieve the structural transformation necessary to address inequalities, to reach excluded and marginalized people and to protect the environment, we will need strong and inclusive democratic institutions that are responsive to the needs of all people and the planet.

"We need to ensure that the fruits of all social constructs – politics, economics and other social systems – benefit all people in an equitable fashion, as these entities use the resources of our one planet, resources that belong to all of us, not just to the elite and powerful."[67] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

2 The Sacredness of Earth has been Revealed

"This is a Kairos moment when we need more than ever to trust in the gracious love present throughout the Universe. Perhaps this is best experienced through the natural world, now liberated from carbon emissions, vehicular noise; hustle and bustle."[68] (Mercy Sister, Ireland)

Border closures and "stay at home"" orders have forced society to take a step back from the flurry of everyday life. Social events have been cancelled and fear of contracting the virus has grown. As panic and disruption, however, spread across the world many have become gripped by moments of stillness, calmness and reflection. For many, this has been a time of transformation where a heightened sense of the value and sacredness of the Earth has been realized. We have been reminded of traditional knowledge and wisdom about the land and water, and our relationship with them.

"This pandemic is an opportunity, a challenge, and a warning – to stop what we have been doing... to find real answers...It is causing us to slow down in many ways in order to listen to the inner, not the outer voice. This pandemic is causing us to slow down to Mother Earth-based pace so that we can hear what she is saying."[69] **(Mercy Partner and Unangan Indigenous Activist, Peru)**

The pandemic has brought the Mercy World and families closer together. Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners around the world have emphasized that it has been a time to stop and appreciate the presence of God, revise our lifestyle and reflect on the importance of our relationships with one another and with the planet.

"[We] belong to one another...we are discovering that our individual actions do have consequences of global proportion."[70] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland).**

COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease, which means it was transmitted between animals and humans. Environmental degradation and changes in land use are the main drivers of disease transmission. Rising CO2 levels, severe weather events, extreme temperatures, air pollution and poor water quality exacerbate health risks for humans and all ecosystems and increase the likelihood of disease outbreaks.[71] Human activity such as urbanization, globalization, trade and unsustainable agriculture also play a great role in the emergence of infectious diseases.[72]

COVID-19 is not the first health pandemic and health experts predict it will not be the last. The increase in zoonotic diseases highlights the complex network of interconnected relationships between the world's ecological processes and human processes while also shedding light on the fragility of our world.

The current pandemic has revealed the urgency to put the needs of Earth first and respond to biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. According to the World Economic Forum, over the past 50 years, the planet has lost 60 percent of its wildlife.[73] In terms of health, the report states that the number of infectious diseases has quadrupled over the last 60 years. These alarming statistics should be a wake-up call to the stark reality of the suffering of Earth that has been caused by human activity.

Deforestation, mining and other extractive industries continue throughout this crisis. These industries deplete biodiversity and nature which underpin healthy and sustainable ecosystems and livelihoods. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been reports of increased deforestation in Asia, Africa and Latin America.[74] The expansion of the activities of extractive industries puts many rural and indigenous communities at risk of contracting COVID-19 because mining workers may act as carriers and transmit the disease to these communities. Decisions that place profit over the rights of people and, indeed, of the land should be challenged.

"Mining and other extractive industries are deemed essential services and continue operating despite pleas of indigenous communities fearing the influx of workers bearing disease."[75] **(Mercy Sister, United States)**

In an open letter, the World Council of Churches establishes a clear link between human treatment of earth and its devastating outcomes:

"Scientists monitoring biodiversity and the health of our ecosystems remind us that ' [r]ampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases.' Furthermore, the exponential spread of the coronavirus due to urbanization and global air travel exposes 'the human hand in pandemic emergence' in which "[COVID-19] may be only the beginning."[76]

Governments and mining companies have put greed for profits ahead of the safety and health of all people and Earth. A healthy, resilient and prosperous response to COVID-19 depends on the needs of the planet being put at the center of the Earth's recovery.

The lockdown and deceleration of economic activity and movement have had positive environmental impacts among which are reduced pollution levels in many urban areas. We must, however, not depend on this progress alone to tackle the current climate crisis but actively move forward with a green economic transformation.[77]

"At the same time that COVID-19 has made its way into the human population causing sickness and death, it has had unexpected beneficial effects on the environmental health of the planet. Skies are clearer and cleaner, as are waters around the world. Birdsong can be heard in places that have been silent for decades. These are the obvious changes that are easily observable because of their

scale and planetary pervasiveness."[78] (**Mercy Sister, Newfoundland**)

The Mercy World has further reflected on the beneficial outcomes of "closing down" and the importance of an ecological lens when assessing the impact of COVID-19.

"Once again, we are being graced with a moment of planetary significance, this time coming from the microcosm that forms the web of existence as we know it. A virus is letting us know that everything is connected, from the non-living to the living, from the rich to the poor, from the first world to the fourth. The task that lies before us is to first acknowledge the need to respect and protect the unity of that web of life by creating and preserving a balance in the seas, rivers, soil, and air."[79] (**Mercy Sister, Newfoundland**)

"As we now look towards the future, we are very aware that life in our world will not be the same as it was before the virus: We will not be the same, and the way we will work and plan together will also be different. The 'pause' offered by COVID 19 has been for us, and continues to be an opportunity to reflect, review, and assess our way forward as an Eco Congregation Committee. We have become more tuned in and receptive to the emergence of a new reality in our world and in our church."[80] (**Mercy Sister, Ireland**)

We have opened our minds and hearts to new relationships with nature that favor mutuality and sustainability over exploitation. At this moment, Earth can regenerate itself. The Mercy World is recognizing the value of stepping back from the many activities that so often distract us from the sacred.

"Come to a stop; allow the time in which life can find the opportunity to regenerate itself. Come to a stop; allow the stillness, be at home, reclaim personal time that will enable us to reflect. Be quiet – feel, think, pray, meditate, read, plant, cook, sing, dance, exercise, make handicrafts and communicate with the help of technology. This is an opportunity to rediscover our relationships and adjust our lifestyles so as not to return to normal."[81] (**Mercy Sister, Latin America**)

Youth across the Mercy World have also voiced their concerns and hopes in the light of COVID-19. Concern for the sustainability of the planet and people is often uppermost in their minds and they must be given a platform for their voices to be heard. The inclusion of youth in planning for the future is essential to ensure that they are not left behind.

A Mercy student in the United States described conversations among her friends in which they acknowledge that they are making sacrifices to keep older people safe and they wonder why their elders are not willing to make sacrifices to ensure a stable climate for them and future generations.

We must use the economic revitalization effort to build environmental protections into the "new normal" that will emerge after the pandemic. All efforts to recover economically and socially after COVID-19 must include an intergenerational and "ambitious, measurable and inclusive framework, because keeping nature rich, diverse and flourishing is part and parcel of our life's support system."[82]
We can no longer afford to miss any opportunities to protect the health and stability of Earth.

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3

A Pandemic of Kindness has been Revealed

"And when this time has passed may we say that love spread more quickly than any virus ever could. May we say this was not just an ending but also a place to begin."[83] (Christine Valters Paintner)

While COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities, it has also revealed a "Pandemic of Kindness," demonstrating the human capacity for transformation and calling forth great acts of resilience, kindness and creativity. We have witnessed and heard accounts of incredible acts of kindness throughout the Mercy World and beyond.

Across the globe our strongest assets are compassion, solidarity and cooperation.

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Renewing & Strengthening Relationships

While the pandemic has been devastating to health and disrupted many aspects of our lives, it has brought about a renewed sense of the importance of relationships. There is a heightened awareness of the value of connecting and caring for others. New ways of being with each other and supporting those in need are emerging.

"People now make more of an effort to say hello and smile (yes even behind a mask you can tell a smile if you look at the eyes). Staff enquire about how each other are doing, and people take the time to actually answer with depth. People pause for a conversation, even if just for a few minutes, that is not merely perfunctory. It is an acknowledgement that because things have changed, we are all vulnerable now and more care is now required of us. How transformative can a dialogue be that not only speaks, but also listens! That is mercy."[84] **(Mercy Partner, Newfoundland)**

Families are uniting more closely as the virus threatens to wreak havoc across the world. People are becoming more active in their local communities by reaching out to their neighbors and providing assistance to those in most need.

"On the smaller scale, though probably just as universally pervasive, are more subtle changes that also deserve recognition. Families are spending more time together; in the Western world this often means that for the first time in the lives of all family members, there aren't as many outside obligations and as a result, family members know more about

one another than the demands of their outside commitments. Parents and children are talking to one another and can often be seen going for walks together. Our streets aren't as busy, so it is possible to hear the sounds of nature that have always been there but have been drowned out by the noise of traffic and construction. Meals are being cooked, often from scratch, and being shared together. Bread is being baked and stories are being told."[85] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

Resilience has been part of the Mercy story since our founder, Catherine McAuley, first responded to her call to serve. The way she coped with her own struggles throughout her life are testimony to such resilience. Catherine was very familiar with the experience of death and dying. She lost both her parents at a young age and under strained conditions she lovingly cared for her sister's children. She kept her faith despite attempts to convert her. She opened the House of Mercy even after being questioned about its viability. Despite all these struggles she persevered. Sisters, Associates and Partners have shared stories of incredible adaptivity in the face of adversity.

"The pandemic has the capacity to paralyze the entire world. But people are resilient and people are compassionate as offers of food, drink, clothing and accommodation lead us to become a generous nation. Each day I see men and women outside my back door waiting for meals. This speaks volumes of our Mercy ministries."[86] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

Perseverance, participation and communication are key to building resilience in communities. Catherine's great legacy has held the Mercy World in good stead for responding to COVID-19 in a way that brings life and enables all to flourish.

In a statement revealing great resilience, a Mercy High School Student from Jamaica states:

"I was unable to go to one of my favorite places due to the closure of schools caused by the pandemic. Of course, I was devastated, but my health is more important...As I move into the next chapter of my life after high school, I hope to remain the resilient individual that I am, and even in the midst of any storm, I will press on for the greater good. ...This pandemic has made my faith stronger, and I am even closer to God... 'The Storm won't last forever...The Sun Will Shine Again.'"[87] **(Mercy student, Jamaica)**

Physical distancing has been the catch cry of the world during this global pandemic, therefore, the Mercy World, like many others, has embraced technology in a new way in order to connect. Communication has been revolutionary in many ways as Sisters, Associates and Partners have communicated virtually across local communities, ministries and in some instances across the globe.

"The future seems so much more uncertain and, as an ageing community, we sometimes feel there is very little we can physically contribute, but technology has given us a window that is enabling us to communicate, share with and accompany others in a way that we had never thought of before."[88] **(Mercy Sister, United Kingdom)**

"Links were provided to a video by Vimeo where all could view the visitation and funeral service from the funeral home either by iPad or on a large television set which was connected to a laptop computer. Seeing family members, viewing photographs, listening to tributes as well as the ritual prayers and priest's homily offered much comfort for the Sister."[89] **(Mercy Sister, Ireland)**

Expressions of comfort were common responses to those experiencing grief and loss. Mercy communities offered consolation and support to Sisters unable to attend virtual family funeral services.

"Providing caring and sympathy to a Sister in a nursing unit after hearing the news of an unexpected death in her family brought much comfort to that Sister in her days of sadness and loss. To help the Sister in her grieving process, over twenty community Sisters and staff gathered with her in a quiet, prayerful atmosphere throughout several days. Following the [virtual] services, condolences, and the singing of the Suscipe of Catherine McAuley for acceptance of God's will was a source of strength and consolation – Truly "Mercy in Action."[90] **(Mercy Sisters, Ireland)**

Mercy Sisters from the United States gather to give thanks for their essential health workers at the Rhode Island gratitude parade.[94]

Gratitude for Essential Workers

Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners have come together to pay tribute to essential workers by singing songs of gratitude and hosting meals, assisting and working to raise emergency funds for those who were left hungry and homeless. Many have made face masks for those who need them most. Some Sisters who received stimulus payments from their governments made the decision to donate to people in need of support including the homeless, refugees, asylum seekers and many others.

Mercy communities all over the world have expressed their gratitude to healthcare and other essential workers by providing vital amenities and care to those in need.

"Mercifully offering and sharing our resources with those who have the least, taking care of other men and women, protecting them by making masks, providing food and snacks for all the healthcare staff, the "bugoday" (regional police) and others who are giving their lives, risking their health 24 hours a day, every day, just to take care of our health. All these people live Mercy."[91] **(Mercy Sister, Panama)**

"We had the opportunity to pay tribute to our essential workers who provided such loving, dedicated care during the pandemic... That celebration with our staff helped us realize again the debt of gratitude we owe our very dedicated essential workers. Hopefully, we will carry this deeper experience of appreciation with us as we move forward to the time when the pandemic has passed."[92] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

Some Mercy Sisters are frontline workers in the health sector. A Mercy Sister from the US, who is a family medicine physician, reflected on the dilemma she faced about possibly infecting

patients she visited in their homes during the peak of the pandemic:

"But still, I go! I don my protective gear and, in the tradition of the walking nuns who went out into the community during cholera, during Spanish influenza, during HIV, I go! And bring Mercy presence to those who are already so isolated and frightened. Am I fearful? Yes! God's grace and the solidarity with all health-care workers, especially those working in hospitals, give me the inspiration and courage to not be paralyzed by fear. I know that God will always provide people who answer the call to serve God's most vulnerable ones. I am honored and humbled to stand on the shoulders of all the Sisters of Mercy who have blazed this path ahead of me. I trust in the words of Catherine: "We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back."[93] **(Mercy Sister, United States)**

The experience of working in Mercy Hospice enabled a Mercy Sister in Aotearoa New Zealand to express deep pain on having to isolate patients from their families. Despite these feelings, her encounters with families indicate incredible human resilience:

"While working in a Mercy Hospice in Aotearoa New Zealand, on the day of lock-down we spoke with the families who had loved ones in the Inpatient unit (IPU) and explained that we could still allow one family member to be with their patient but that the family had to choose this one person who would live in with us as part of our IPU bubble. The chosen person needs to be with us and not leave the site; we provide for their meals and laundry needs – they become an integral part of our IPU family. These conversations are without doubt the most difficult conversations I have had in the 44 years of my nursing career – and I have some hard conversations in hospice care."[95] **(Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)**

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Photo courtesy of Siobhan Golden

The Inspiration of Catherine McAuley

"To be a Sister of Mercy in these times is being present with the people on the deserted streets, even if you have no words, but they know you are there, and that is what we have shared in this quarantine."[96]
(Mercy Sister, Panama)

The above quotation expresses the importance of presence as an expression of Mercy. During this time of quarantine and often isolation, the gift of presence has been paramount to many. The creation of Mercy Global Presence (MGP) has been foundational to the work of the Mercy World for some time and is core to Mercy International Association's (MIA) Vision Statement.[97]

Mercy worldwide is a beacon of hope during what is a critical juncture in the world. This time has provided the opportunity to revisit the Mercy International Association Vision Statement and reflect upon the new and unfolding ways that Mercy Sisters, Partners and Associates work together rooted in the Gospel and spirit of Catherine McAuley.[98] We are called to celebrate the values of our intrinsic interdependence, compassion, kindness, justice and equity and use this time to focus on new creation and a new order.

"[We must] release our creativity to organize ourselves, support one another and continue walking with our people. Changing inside and out can stop the resurgence of this authoritarian, inhuman and biocidal global system."[99] **(Mercy Sister, Latin America)**

The spirit of Catherine McAuley and the charism of Mercy has provided consolation and inspiration to many throughout the Mercy World. Knowing that Catherine and the early Sisters of Mercy faced a pandemic of global proportions provides solace and energy to respond as she did in her time: with empathy and compassion.

"[Our work] feels very much like the work that the Sisters engaged in during the typhus epidemic and it allows me to make a connection with our Mercy past, but more importantly, despite the very real risk of transmission amongst our community and possibly to myself, I am resolute that I won't abandon them, because what you 'do to the least you do to Christ.'"[100] **(Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)**

Throughout the Mercy World, people have expressed a deep need for Mercy today. This has been particularly relevant in the area of aged care.

"I have a strong belief that the ministry in aged care is as relevant today as it was in Catherine's day. It is a ministry in which we as Mercy women can make a difference to other lives. It is a call to make a space in our hearts for another."[101] **(Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)**

The importance of hospital ministry has featured prominently in the Mercy World with many reflecting the spirit of mercy that Catherine passed on through her care of the sick.

"Catherine McAuley's spirit of mercy and compassion and her great courage were sources of my deep desire to continue my hospital ministry during the COVID -19 pandemic.... Sometimes, besides the nursing and doctors, I am the only face that patients see. During my prayer with the patient, I remind them that God's love and mercy surrounds them, and they are not alone. I have grown into ending my prayer with the Hindu prayer of 'Namaste' which means 'The God in me greets the God in you.' And the patient, through many tears and a smile, says a soft and gentle 'Thank-You.'"[102] **(Mercy Sister, Newfoundland)**

Photo courtesy of Siobhan Golden

"My time at McAuley [House] has been one of gentle Mercy. No matter how hard or heart-breaking, it has been about presence—laughter, new friendships, surprises and too many tender graces to count. Sometimes my heart has felt heavy and my eyes have welled with tears for those we have lost. I am grateful for the support and prayers I have received from the Mercy Community, my friends and my family. It has been an honor and a privilege to help care for my sisters at McAuley [House]. I know this is exactly where God means me to be. THIS is MERCY! I am blessed to be held in the merciful love of God."[103] **(Mercy Candidate and Nurse, United States)**

In a recent article on COVID-19 and its impact, featured in the Global Sisters Report, Mercy sisters in Panama are recognized for their ability to undertake capacity building in the face of challenging circumstances,

"In the town of Volcán in the eastern border state of Chiriquí, Mercy sisters are dividing their time between about 100 indigenous families in the comarca and a growing number of farm families of Volcán. They are supporting the farmers in procuring seeds and other needed items to plant vegetables now that the planting season has begun."[104]

Stories of Sisters, Associates and Partners have highlighted the value of language translation in assisting and supporting people during this time of pandemic. A story of a Sister in Peru making a video in the language of indigenous Aymara illustrates that there is a strong desire to provide all people with critical, relevant and correct information in their own language.

This empowering work, we have described above, was at the core of the new way of living God's mercy established by Catherine McAuley and her Mercy Companions in courageous response to the challenges of their time. They were always focused on enabling women to be independent and self-sufficient. We are urged to remember that in a very changed world comes a great call to Mercy.

"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."[105] **(Mercy Sister, Ireland)**

Photo courtesy of Siobhan Golden

Our founder, Catherine McAuley stated: "we must strive to do the ordinary things exceedingly well."

Personal Reflection:

- **What feelings and reflections are prompted after reading the COVID-19 experiences of the Mercy World?**
- **What does the COVID-19 pandemic allow me to see?**
- **What vulnerability needs my compassion right now?**
- **Throughout this pandemic, what am I grateful for?**
- **What makes me hopeful?**
- **COVID-19 has exposed violations to people's dignity. Write a reflection on what it means to live with dignity.**

PART TWO

What are we being called to, and where do we stand?

"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."[106] (Mercy Sister, Aotearoa New Zealand)

"A global pandemic can only be countered by a response that is grounded in global contemplation. Among the fruits of our global contemplation are wisdom, energy, new directions, new language, courage and new hope."[107] (Sister of Mercy, Guyana)

COVID-19 has provided the world with a common global context like we have never experienced before and it has revealed to us many vulnerabilities. The words above, eloquently shared by Mercy Sisters, call for all of us to identify both our personal and communal stance.

Empowered by our Mercy charism, Mercy worldwide is called to give voice to experiences of marginalization and stand in solidarity with those who have been rendered poor and powerless by the impact of the pandemic.

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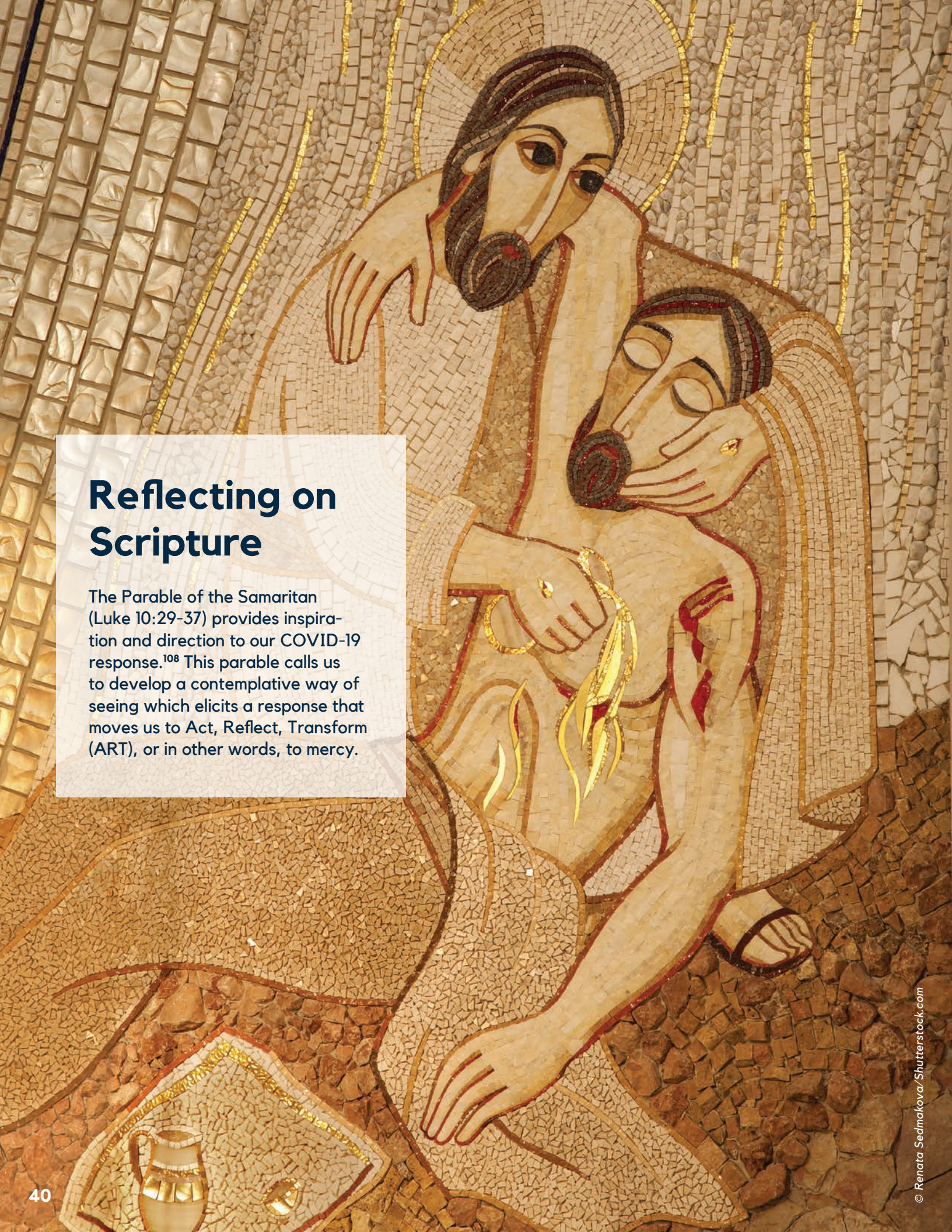
Sisters of Mercy, Associates and Partners are called to make a stand amidst this pandemic:

1. **WE STAND for ensuring that no one is left behind: "We are all in this together."**
2. **WE STAND for human and Earth rights, and for systems which uphold the dignity and protection of our common home.**
3. **WE STAND for an inclusive response to the impacts of the pandemic that builds a sustainable future benefiting all.**
4. **WE STAND with all who face discrimination and violence.**
5. **WE STAND for the rights of women and girls, and for gender-responsive approaches to a transformative future.**
6. **WE STAND for the well-being of families in all their forms.**
7. **WE STAND for safeguarding the dignity of all those who are dying and have died during the pandemic.**
8. **WE STAND with all those grieving the loss of loved ones.**
9. **WE STAND with those who have lost their livelihoods and all who feel vulnerable during these uncertain times.**
10. **WE STAND for the integrity and unity of all earth systems and the reduction of fossil fuel consumption in light of the lessons learned during lockdown.**
11. **WE STAND for human rights and the values of the Common Good which enable all individuals to have the food, water, shelter, clothing and health care required to live with dignity.**
12. **WE STAND for the development of collaborative relationships between central government, local governments and civil society that secures the social protection needs of ALL people within jurisdictions.**
13. **WE STAND for just and merciful leadership at all levels.**



Reflecting on Scripture

The Parable of the Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) provides inspiration and direction to our COVID-19 response.[108] This parable calls us to develop a contemplative way of seeing which elicits a response that moves us to Act, Reflect, Transform (ART), or in other words, to mercy.

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The story begins and ends with a wounded man (Luke 10:29,37) who is the focus for three persons of different classes on a journey. Only the despised Samaritan "had a heart moved with compassion" (*splagnizomai* 10:33). This verb, meaning being moved from depths of one's being, echoes womb-compassion (*rahamim*) which comes from the Hebrew word for womb (*rehem*). This leads us to discover a triad which frames "the one who showed mercy" (10:37) in this parable.

Elsewhere this triad is applied to Jesus whose life and actions are the incarnation of God's mercy (Luke 7:13; Matt.9:36; 14:14; 15:32): 1. A description of need; 2. A person is described as "having a heart moved with compassion"; and 3. Something must be done to address the need the heart has felt.

Mercy is portrayed as action-orientated, interactive and found in unexpected places. The Samaritan not only crossed to the "other side" of the road to the wounded one. He drew on all he had available to care for him: the medicinal qualities of oil and wine which are made by human hands from the fruits of the earth, as are the fabrics he used for bandages. His animal contributes by carrying the wounded man. The Samaritan not only took the wounded one to the inn but indebts himself, and gives himself and the man he helped, into the hands of an innkeeper, one whose occupation was considered disreputable.

At this time of pandemic, this parable can guide us into the works of mercy: we see a need, then "having a heart moved with compassion" something must be done to address the need the heart has felt. In a world of structural sin where immense harm is done to the countless majority of people through political and economic systems which function to benefit the powerful wealthy few, mercy takes us to the root causes of suffering and injustice, to the works of justice. Earth itself is robbed, exploited and wounded by human greed. According to Pope Francis, we are strengthened in our call by entering into "the great river of mercy [which] wells up and overflows unceasingly ... [f]rom the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God."[109] In solidarity, during this pandemic we give and receive mercy by focusing on those wounded by unjust political and economic systems. We are called to Act, Reflect, Transform.

Just as the Samaritan was moved by compassion, our reflective stance calls us to the conversion of our own hearts. We must reimagine our way of living and embrace the opportunity to contribute to the regeneration of Earth and people so that all may truly flourish. Steeped in a theology and spirituality of mercy, our call is to embrace all who are suffering and to provide hope. It is a time for Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners to recommit to working towards a just world, transforming unjust systems and speaking out against racism, hate speech, xenophobia, ageism and discrimination. In order to do so, we must nurture communities and focus on rebuilding economies focused on justice.

We don't want to "go back to normal" – the conditions from which the pandemic emerged.

"Normal is associated with the impoverishment of the vast majority, the imprisonment and death of those who defend nature's common goods. Violence against women, sexual violence and femicides are the normality. Exploitation of living beings, slavery and extinction of thousands of species in our planet are the normality. Waters cry out, woods die, Mother Earth is devastated due to the lifestyle imposed by this system."[110] **(Mercy Sisters, Latin America)**

Sisters of Mercy, Associates and Partners stand for a just and compassionate response to the impacts of COVID-19. This comes from a deep conviction that each and every person has inherent dignity which flows from the belief that we are all equal because of our uniqueness.

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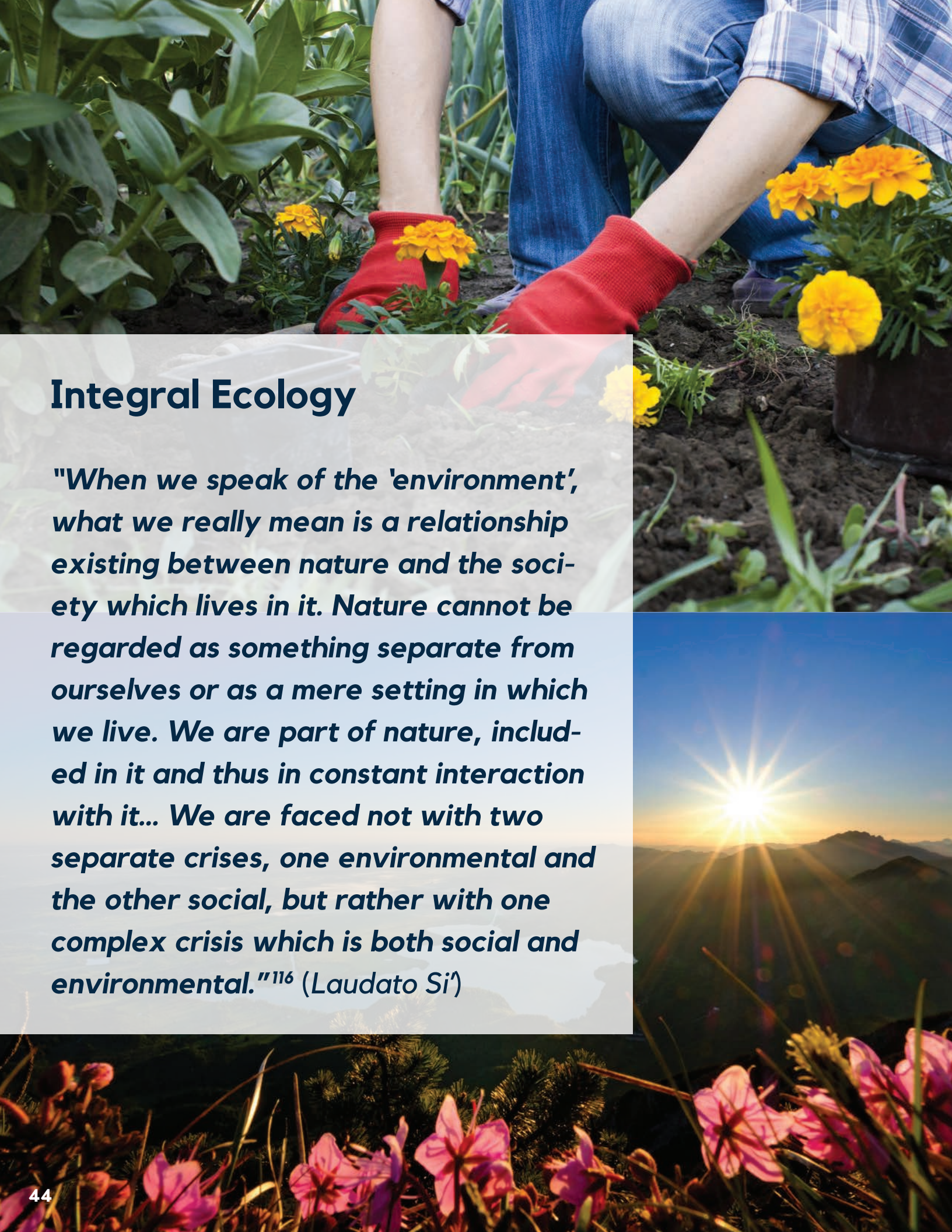
Human Rights Approach

"Our shared human condition and values must be a source of unity, not division. We must give people hope and vision of what the future can hold. The human rights system helps us to meet the challenges, opportunities and needs of the 21st century...It must never be a pretext for power or politics; it is above both."[111]
(António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations)

At the heart of the Mercy World is the recognition of human rights, the human dignity of all and the rights of nature. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action states: "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated." We affirm the wellbeing and flourishing of all especially women and girls. In particular, we recognize the unique needs of migrants and refugees and the significance of the human right to water and sanitation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we also acknowledge the unique needs of those experiencing homelessness, of older persons, of those with disabilities and of indigenous people.

The human rights-based approach is a conceptual framework that evolved with the idea of human rights and human development. Human rights as "'universal legal guarantees of... fundamental freedoms, entitlements, and human dignity' are vital components of human development.[112] The realization of all basic freedoms, which are also human rights, make opportunities for development possible for all."[113] By placing people's agency and dignity at the center of policy design, implementation and follow-up, a human rights approach seeks to address inequalities that are the root cause of development problems and to address discrimination and unjust distributions of power.

We affirm the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[114] the international human rights instruments[115] and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG). These tools provide both effective ways in which governments must be transparent, responsive and accountable and ways in which civil society can play an essential role in keeping our world inclusive and sustainable. These frameworks reflect state obligations to ensure that no one gets left behind while mitigating long term impacts of the pandemic. They can be used for recommendations and for guidance towards systemic transformation as well as for policies and laws which are to be adopted to "build back better."



Integral Ecology

"When we speak of the 'environment', what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it... We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."[116] (*Laudato Si'*)

Integral ecology provides the framework to understand this relationship of mutual care. Just as the human rights framework recognizes the dignity of each person as central to reducing inequalities, integral ecology recognizes that Earth and people are intimately connected and, therefore, vital to sustainable development.

Our current economic systems are unsustainable. We are intertwined with the ecosystem and the intricacies of our human dependency with Earth have become increasingly clear. As a result, there is an emerging legal movement recognizing "the inherent rights of Nature to exist, thrive and evolve."[117] The legal framework moves from our modern ideas of property and dominion over the earth to the understanding that Earth is a "rights-bearing partner with which humanity has co-evolved."[118] Laws that recognize our fundamentally symbiotic relationship as necessary for both human and planetary survival are emerging at the local and national levels.

Everything from everyday acts, to corporate investing and international advocacy matters in our ministries to save our common home and all life. This realization has been heightened during COVID-19. God's call to care for creation takes on new life within our charism of mercy, in the context of *Laudato Si'* and through the inclusion of the Eighth Work of Mercy, "care of our common home." Now more than ever, the call of the gospel of creation must not be ignored: "The way in which [we] relate to the earth is a test of the way we relate with God, just as it is when [we] respond to the poor, the hungry, the lonely, or the imprisoned."[119] People, creatures and resources of Earth are all integrally connected. We live only because we are cradled by the web of life that God wove out of and into creation. Seeking to continue the work of Mercy begun by Catherine, the Mercy World has the opportunity to reaffirm our personal vocation of ecological conversion with commitment and "recognition of our responsibility to ourselves, our neighbors, creation and the Creator."[120]

A student from a Mercy High School in Omaha, Nebraska reminds us to use this opportunity to rebuild and to prepare for a more environmentally resilient and just future. Transformative change for a healthy population and planet means that the root causes of environmental degradation must be addressed.

"Despite the past actions of generations, their current attitudes and the ongoing global pandemic, the lessons from the global response to it can and must also be applied to the climate crisis... As young people, we are asking older generations to begin to step up as we are now stepping up for you. Take the initiative, spare lives and act for the wellbeing of our shared planet. In order to fight coronavirus, we all have to be as healthy as possible. In order to fight the climate crisis, our Earth must be similarly healthy, and its inhabitants prepared to cultivate a united front against environmental injustice and exploitation."[121]
(Mercy Student, United States)

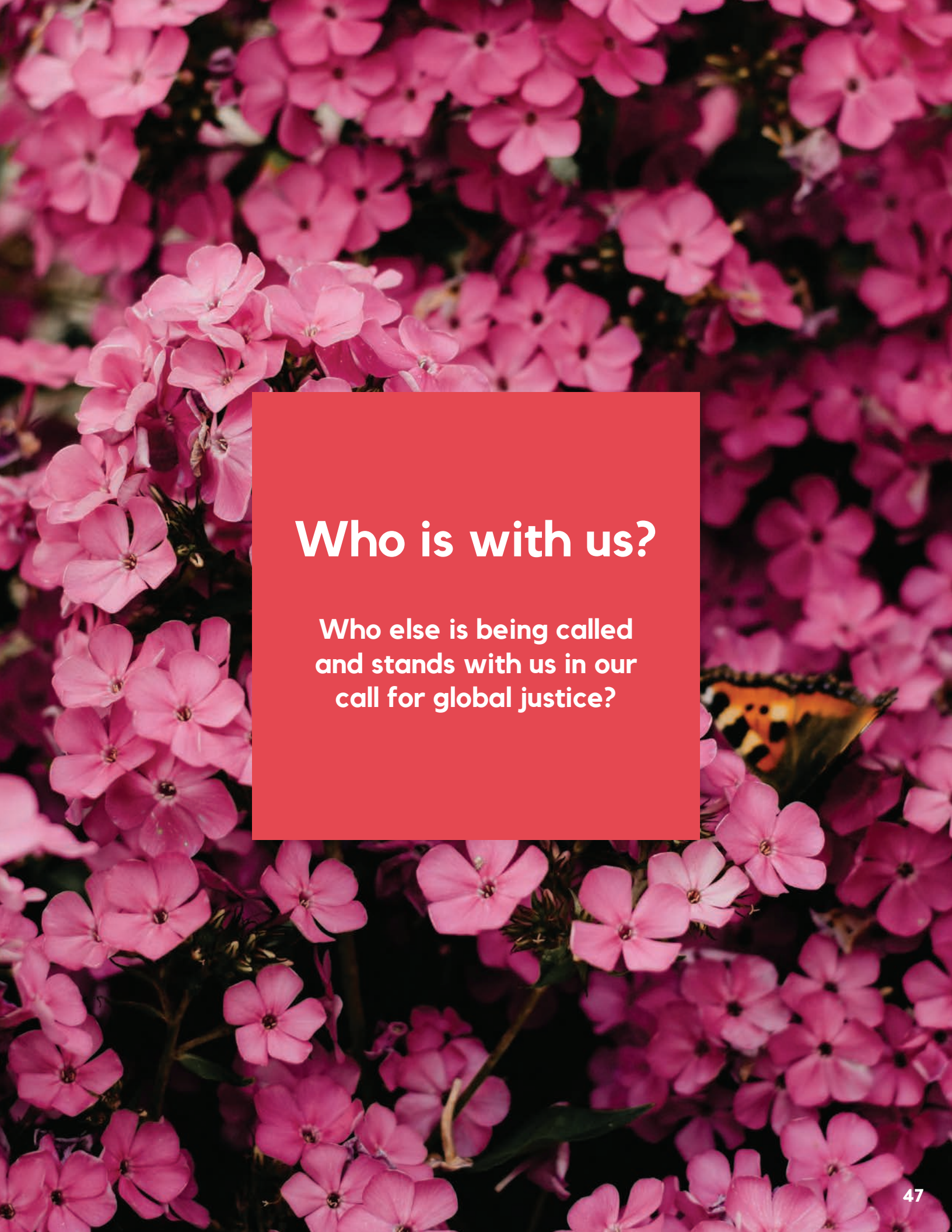
COVID-19 has revealed the sacredness of Earth. Integral ecology demands that Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners come together for the common good to respect the human person and the sustainability of Earth into the future. According to Pope Francis, this "cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice... Where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes...a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters."[122]

Personal Reflection:

- **Where do you stand amidst the pandemic? As you read the Mercy World stance can you identify a time you have taken a stand?**
- **What do you believe the Mercy World is being called to at this time?**
- **Who is with you on this journey of justice? People? Organizations?**
- **How do you understand radical change and regeneration?**
- **How are you being called to act during this time?**
- **Read through "A Just Recovery."[123] Write your own response.**

Toolkit and Individual Actions to Respond to COVID-19

- Pray for vulnerable people and communities affected by COVID-19
- Give thanks and pray for those on the frontlines
- Take care of yourself in order to care for others (observe social distancing, wash your hands and wear a mask)
- Connect with family, friends and neighbors via text, phone and email
- Reach out to those in isolation. Do they have the support they need? Perhaps video chat, offer to buy groceries, send a card
- Explore ways to volunteer virtually - look up your favorite organizations to find opportunities to volunteer or donate online
- Organize a fundraiser for a friend/family/organization/ community who need aid
- Reallocate unused funds to local charities
- Assist at a local food bank
- Sew and donate masks
- Taking time to live more simply and sustainably
- Plant a tree
- Give blood
- Start a community garden
- If you need to shop make it local to assist small businesses
- Share your skills and knowledge with others
- Join or host a webinar on how to help during the pandemic
- Combat misinformation online
- On behalf of the community, write to local newspapers about local social and environmental issues
- Share positive news and the acts of kindness of your community



Who is with us?

Who else is being called and stands with us in our call for global justice?

At the heart of Justice work is the recognition that we do not work alone but join with the many others who yearn for Earth and people to flourish. What we have learned, especially during the time of pandemic is that to truly work for global justice, we must come together. "Without the great work of our partner organizations, the uphill battle towards economic and social justice would be a lot more challenging. When we recognize the value of community, we are all able to combine our unique strengths to work toward a common goal." [124]

The Guiding Group of Mercy Global Presence has highlighted the many 'Circles of Mercy' which have been formed in the hope of preventing and healing the infections.

"Circles [of mercy] 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." [125]

"Let us release our creativity to organize ourselves, support one another and continue walking with our people. Changing inside out can stop the resurgence of this authoritarian, inhuman and biocidal global system." [126]
(Mercy Sisters, Latin America)

As Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners are located in over 30 countries across the world, we have the opportunity to collaborate with various sectors in our response to COVID-19. In addition to the communities, ministries and institutions in which we work, we are strengthened by our connections with the Church, civil society, faith-based organizations and governments worldwide. Through just and merciful leadership and our collective voice we can strive for intergenerational action to regenerate and make radical change.

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Just and Merciful Leadership

"Without global empathy and better global leadership the poorest countries and the poorest people will only be made poorer by this invisible enemy."[127] (Mercy Sisters, Aotearoa New Zealand)

Strongly influenced by our Gospel Tradition and Mercy Spirituality, the Mercy World affirms that all forms of leadership in this time of pandemic should be just and merciful. Leaders, whether local or global, are called to be unifying and adaptable, to recognize the most vulnerable, and to respond to their needs. As has been illustrated during this time of pandemic, there are many unknown factors at work and leaders need to be open to a spirit of change.

COVID-19 has accelerated unprecedented change. The need for just and merciful leadership has never been more urgent than in the midst of this unfolding crisis. It is evident that leaders must put their people before themselves and act steadfastly when making decisions. To be a merciful and just leader one must stay grounded in the realities of people and Earth and be responsive to the range of physical and mental health distress caused by COVID-19. It is important for leaders to accompany and serve their people while also being bold in their own vulnerability. It is too easy for them to get lost in the haste of making quick decisions which may cause the well-being of many to be lost and left behind.

A crucial question many leaders face during this uncertain time is: How to move forward? The just and merciful leadership of women during COVID-19 provides a great example. Women leaders have responded to the pandemic with strength and motivation by driving outcomes centered on human rights, equity and justice. They have called upon and uplifted individuals, partners and institutions to carry out essential services which uplift the lowly. Furthermore, they have demonstrated the resilience of their communities in the face of adversity. The pandemic has given renewed impetus for, and trust in, women's participation and leadership in political, economic and social spheres.

The Role of the Church - Providing Faith-based and Compassionate Care to all of Creation

The Sisters of Mercy were founded as a Religious Congregation, therefore, Sisters, Associates and Partners recognize the unique way in which we participate in, and contribute to, God's mission of mercy in the Church. We can look back over the past months of our COVID-19 journey and hear voices inviting us as church to a new consciousness of the household of God in the light of three interconnected household (*oikos*) words which come into our daily language through the German *oekologie*: ecology, economics and ecumenism.

The closure of Church buildings has meant that many have experienced separation from their local places of worship and, in particular, regular meetings with parishioners. For many in the Mercy World, foregoing Eucharistic Celebrations with parish communities was a great sacrifice. At the same time, many have reflected that the role of the Church extends well beyond the building. For some it was an opportunity to articulate the deepest meaning of Church:

"My Church is not shut down! Yes, the doors of the buildings are closed, and our liturgical celebrations may be coming to us via social media, with our prayer becoming more personal and private, but the Church has not shut down. It is alive and well because we—you and I—are the Church.... Our quiet actions are

a signal that our Church is NOT closed. It is alive and well in the people who are living the Gospel message. We know that soon the doors to our buildings will open. But it will be a changed community that gathers to worship. I hope we have learned the lessons that Love has taught."[128] **(Mercy Sister, United States)**

There are many signs of a deeply-grounded community spirit arising as members of parishes communicate more regularly and look out for each other more.

"We shared out the list of parishioners who were on their own and ensured they received a call each week to check that they were safe and well and to keep them up to date with what was going on in the parish. I believe that it has really helped to bring the parish closer together."[129] **(Mercy Sister, United Kingdom)**

Catholic institutions around the world provide ways for people to access vital goods and services in the absence of strong public social protection systems. People depend on Catholic schools, hospitals, humanitarian organizations and charities for education, healthcare, shelter, food and hygiene products. Parish communities and Catholic social service organizations are working to fill gaps in state protection and ensure everyone's basic rights are protected – such as the right to food, to health, to protection and to information. These services have earned people's trust through their practical witness of faith and concrete ability to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.

In a reflection on Easter in this time of pandemic, Pope Francis calls the faithful to act as one to create a lasting impact. The hope that the Pope expresses in his concluding remarks is that amidst the globalization of indifference that continues to threaten our societies, we might find "the necessary antibodies of justice, charity and solidarity. Let us not be afraid to live the alternative civilization of love."[130]

Sisters of Mercy, Associates and Partners have joined together with faith-based organizations and faith leaders at the frontline in efforts to promote cooperation at all levels of society. From-within the Catholic community, Pope Francis calls for cooperation and solidarity to ensure assistance reaches the most vulnerable.

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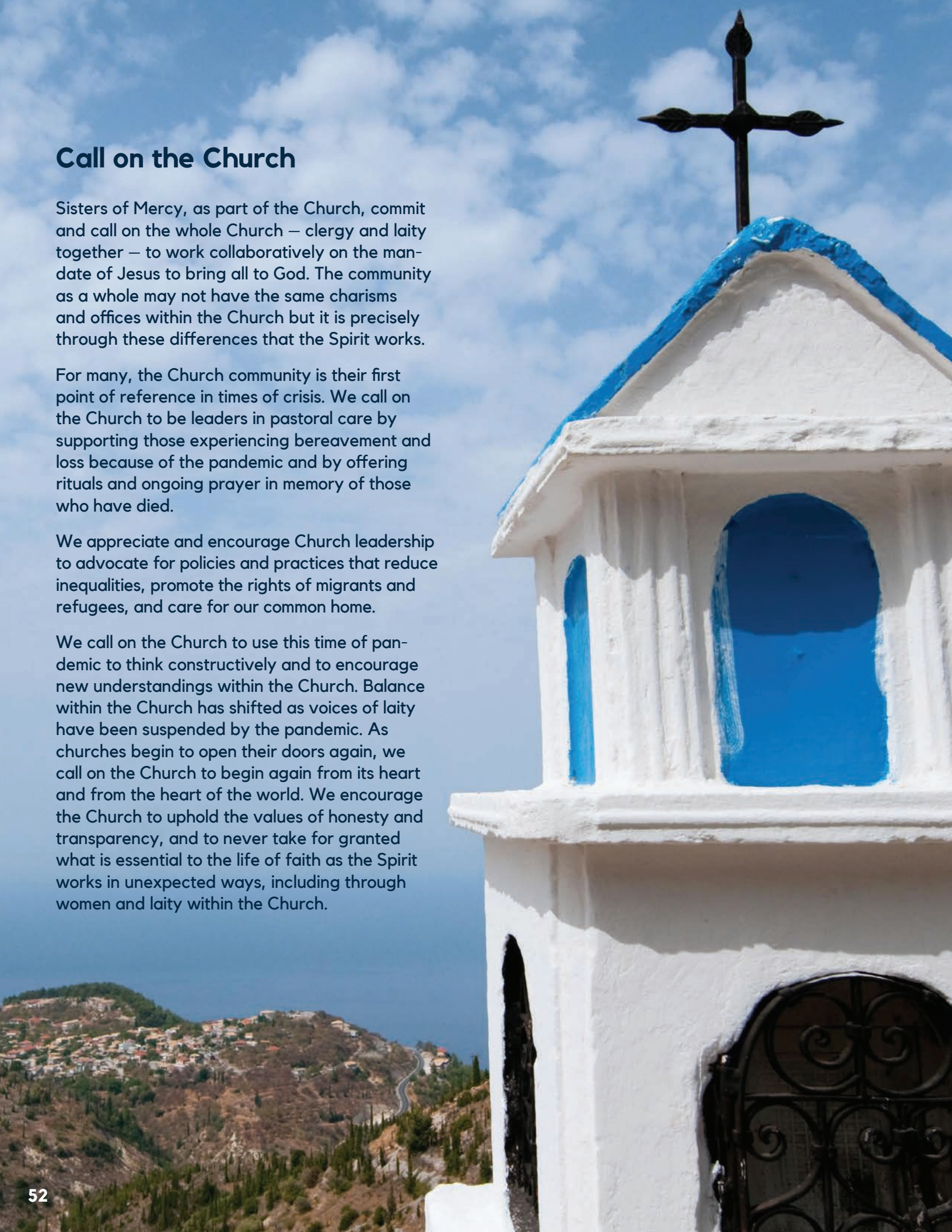
Call on the Church

Sisters of Mercy, as part of the Church, commit and call on the whole Church – clergy and laity together – to work collaboratively on the mandate of Jesus to bring all to God. The community as a whole may not have the same charisms and offices within the Church but it is precisely through these differences that the Spirit works.

For many, the Church community is their first point of reference in times of crisis. We call on the Church to be leaders in pastoral care by supporting those experiencing bereavement and loss because of the pandemic and by offering rituals and ongoing prayer in memory of those who have died.

We appreciate and encourage Church leadership to advocate for policies and practices that reduce inequalities, promote the rights of migrants and refugees, and care for our common home.

We call on the Church to use this time of pandemic to think constructively and to encourage new understandings within the Church. Balance within the Church has shifted as voices of laity have been suspended by the pandemic. As churches begin to open their doors again, we call on the Church to begin again from its heart and from the heart of the world. We encourage the Church to uphold the values of honesty and transparency, and to never take for granted what is essential to the life of faith as the Spirit works in unexpected ways, including through women and laity within the Church.



The Role of Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations - Delivering Services, Protecting Rights & Advocating for Systemic Change

In a recent statement, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres emphasized the importance of civil society and faith-based organizations. He stated: "We are all in this together. To effectively combat the pandemic, we all need to be part of the response. Effective participation in the response requires people to be informed, involved in decisions that affect them and to see that any measures taken are necessary, reasonable and proportionate to combat the virus and save lives. We all have a role to play but the most effective way to maximize participation is through evidence, persuasion and collective ownership."[131]

Central to civil society's role, during the pandemic and beyond, is protecting and providing services and support to people in vulnerable situations; holding governments accountable for violations of human rights; bringing deep technical expertise; influencing governments and institutions to pursue responsive, inclusive and equitable policy outcomes that focus on people and the planet; and ensuring words are met by action. Civil

society and faith-based organizations also play a significant role in awareness-raising campaigns to uplift the experiences and voices of affected populations and to counter misinformation.

Sisters of Mercy worldwide recognize that we are all in this together but not equally. We recognize that as members of the Church and of civil society, we must bring about awareness of the most vulnerable. Just as our founder Catherine McAuley responded in a time of pandemic so must we. We bring into focus the plight of women and girls. We work to promote life first and foremost and to reject the accumulation of wealth and profit at the expense of those rendered poor. We along with many other faith-based and civil society organizations work to ensure that "no one is left behind." We see this time of response to COVID-19 as an opportunity to regenerate. We acknowledge the extraordinary resilience of Earth and people and we want to further build on this resilience. This requires us to connect with all people within the community including local and global governments. We must raise awareness, educate and contribute to the uplifting of civil society.

Truly participative processes will be the only way to ensure that we can achieve a transformative agenda and this requires an enabling environment for civil society to fully play its role.[132] COVID-19 has provided the opportunity for civil society and faith-based organizations to join together. We have been resilient in increasingly limited decision-making spaces and have used our collective voices to mobilize, speak out and take action in the midst of the inequalities that have been revealed. We have challenged unjust political and economic systems and have uplifted the work of our grassroots ministries worldwide. We must continue to educate ourselves and highlight the best-practice models of our grassroots ministries to demonstrate new models of practice to governments and international institutions. The work of the Mercy World is strengthened through the collective processes and networks of civil society and faith-based organizations with whom we increase our legitimacy at the global table.

Resources: Civil Society and Faith-Based Responses to COVID-19

- World Council of Churches. 2020. "Calling for an Economy of Life in a Time of Pandemic." http://www.nrpe.org/uploads/2/4/4/7/24473122/calling_for_an_economy_of_life_in_a_time_final.pdf
- Just Recovery for All. 2020. "Webinar on Anti-Racism and a Just Recovery." https://justrecoveryforall.ca/anti-racism
- 350.org. "Open Letter: Principles for a Just Recovery from COVID-19." https://350.org/just-recovery
- The Global Catholic Climate Movement. 2020. "Catholic Activities for the Coronavirus Pandemic." https://catholicclimatemovement.global/catholic-activities-for-the-coronavirus-pandemic
- Schumaker College. "Earth Talks: Joy of Six". Youtube Playlist, May 6, 2020.https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWjwSWKH-GuTYRDIxpb_VNO2TTg3Y1UX9o
- OXFAM. 2020. "Beyond Covid-19: Could We Create a More Sustainable World?" https://www.oxfam.org.au/2020/04/sustainable-beyond-covid-19
- National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. 2020. "A Vision for a Better World." https://www.gsadvocacy.org/uploads/5/5/6/0/55602515/20nac-pr-a_vision_for_a_better_world.pdf
- Maryknoll Lay Missioners. 2020."COVID-2050": A Threat to Take Seriously." https://mklm.org/covid-2050

Call on Civil Society & Faith-Based Organizations

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Despite the political, social and financial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this is also an opportunity to mobilize and lead collectively based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity and focused on the rights of those left furthest behind. Now is the moment for civil society to come together and build on common goals. We have a responsibility to our constituencies to hold governments to account and shape what emerges in the post-COVID world in a transparent, just and sustainable way.

We call on civil society and faith-based organizations to continue to persist and organize during these unprecedented times. We must actively pursue opportunities to offer solutions based on existing good practices that highlight the power and expertise of people at the grassroots and support women's leadership. We must continue to share models and strategies that support capacity building and resilience.

We must build the necessary political alliances and unite with other actors to design and implement a new, transformative social contract that places people and the planet at the center and lays the foundation for just and sustainable societies. This crisis grants us a moment to embrace new ways of working together and with others to take action to shift power, improve accountability, build social connections and strengthen trust with an aim to be more responsive to the needs of the people we serve. We will need improved cooperation, collaboration and adaptability in order to emerge from the pandemic more resilient, more innovative and more impactful.

The Role of Government - Importance of State Leadership and Responses to COVID-19

Governments have had a critical role to play in responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Stable and effective government policies at the national, sub-national, local and international levels are at the heart of managing throughout this crisis. What governments do now will have immediate impacts on public health, social inclusion and the wellbeing of people experiencing socio-economic stress and uncertainty. Government policies will also have longer-term implications for the health and safety of families, communities, the economy and global stability. During times of severe and unprecedented crises, people look to their governments to take prompt, inclusive, science-based and evidence-based action to provide vital public services and protect their rights.

Around the world, weakened public health infrastructure and social protection systems have made people and societies less resilient to shocks and made the COVID-19 pandemic even more harmful. Under international human rights law, especially the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, governments have committed to take concrete steps to guarantee people's rights

using the "maximum of available resources." In order to urgently protect people's rights at risk from the pandemic and to build more resilient economies that will sustain people and the planet in the long-term, governments need to show leadership and political will by investing in universal health and social protection policies, not only in times of crisis, but also in order to be better prepared for future disasters.

"We need leaders now because we have failed to implement what was known to work, what would have prevented or mitigated the rise of hatred, violence, poverty and ecological destruction. We have not failed from a lack of ideas and technologies. We have failed from a lack of will. The solutions we needed were already here."[133]

Universal public healthcare policies must address shortages of supplies and equipment, increase support to hospitals and clinics, scale up testing and make treatments and vaccines available to all. Comprehensive social protection policies must include measures to protect the jobs, wages and benefits of all workers, including those in the informal economy; provide rent relief and mortgage assistance; give income support to ensure food security; and ensure that people experiencing violence can receive support and access to justice. Governments must make these policies inclusive and non-discriminatory in ways that give special attention to protecting the lives and livelihoods of at-risk and marginalized groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis of unprecedented scale. In our hyperconnected, globalized world, the public health and socio-economic effects of the pandemic have impacted all countries. Governments, however, have largely acted unilaterally with each country imposing varying degrees of restrictions and protectionist policies. A crisis of this scale requires a global response. International cooperation is, and will continue to be, vital for sharing expertise, medicine, equipment, research and development particularly in the provision of treatment and assistance to affected people and in the search for a vaccine. Cooperation will also be essential to mitigate the negative economic impacts of the pandemic. International organizations play an important role in spreading accurate information, providing humanitarian assistance and supporting global efforts to find a vaccine. As the United Nations celebrates its 75th anniversary, governments must recommit to multilateralism and support reform measures that will make the UN more adaptable and responsive to the challenges of the 21st century.

In 2015, all governments committed to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which encompass almost every aspect of human and planetary wellbeing and, if met, will provide a stable and prosperous life for every person and ensure the health of the planet. Countries will be better placed to recover from the human and economic devastation caused by COVID-19 by accelerating efforts to achieve the SDGs. The SDGs can serve as preventive medicine against future shocks. Responses, however, will have to deviate far from "business as usual" and use this pause to adopt more equitable and sustainable ways forward.

COVID-19 is forcing governments and stakeholders to revisit values and design development policies that truly balance economic, social and environmental progress. Leveraging this moment of crisis, when usual policies and social norms have been disrupted, governments have the opportunity to take bold steps to steer the world towards a profound systemic shift to a more sustainable economy that works for both people and the planet. It is up to governments to lead with strong political will and to mobilize resources to invest in policies and institutions that can turn the tide on inequality.

While deeply painful, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an opportunity for us individually and as societies to stop, to look inwards and to pursue transformative systemic change. In order to "build back better," governments must design relief and recovery packages that uphold the values of dignity and solidarity, remedy the inequalities that have been amplified by the pandemic, redistribute resources and put us on track for a more sustainable economy.

Call on Governments

The following are recommendations to governments in response to COVID-19 that are in line with their existing commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and relevant international human rights law.

Recommendations on Physical and Mental Health:

- Strengthen healthcare systems and provide access to universal healthcare. Ensure that access to adequate PPE, mental health services, and future treatments and vaccines is non-discriminatory and reaches the most vulnerable and excluded populations (SDG 3.8)
- Prioritize the health of people and the planet over profit when considering how and when to reopen economies (SDG 3.3, 11.5)

Recommendations on Social Protection and Improving Resilience:

- Honor and value the work of essential workers, those in healthcare, food production and distribution and the care economy (SDG 5.4)
- Invest in preparation of response plans for future pandemics that are inclusive of marginalized populations (SDG 3.D)
- Provide resources, including PPE, to educational systems and institutions that have had to adapt to virtual learning during COVID-19. Closely monitor literacy levels and other educational outcomes (SDG 4.8, 4.6)
- Recognize the unique needs of children at this time and uphold their rights to health, education and safety (SDGs 2.2, 3.2 4.5, 16.2)
- Implement and strengthen inclusive social protection systems, including floors,[134] that reach people in vulnerable situations, people living in poverty, people on the move, women, children, persons with disabilities and indigenous people (SDG 1.3)

Recommendations on Human Mobility:

- Regularize the status of irregular migrants and expand regular pathways for migrants in low-wage and informal employment, acknowledge the contributions of migrants and refugees to economic prosperity and ensure they are included in public health strategies and social protection systems (SDG 8.8, 10.7)
- Reduce remittance costs to ensure income security and financial access to healthcare for migrant families (SDG 10.c)

Recommendations on Livelihoods:

- Ensure labor protections which include access to decent work and safe working environments especially for migrant workers and those in the informal sector (SDG 8.5, 8.8)
- Accelerate action to end poverty in all its forms to ensure an adequate standard of living for all (SDG 1)

Recommendations on Homelessness:

- Enact policies that address the root causes of homelessness and protect the human right to housing by focusing on permanent, adequate, inclusive and non-congregate housing (SDG 11.1)
- Ensure all people have access to resources, safe shelter and testing for COVID-19 symptoms, especially those in communal shelters and slums (SDG 11.1)

Recommendations on Political Institutions:

- Combat racism, xenophobia and hate speech, and work to actively dismantle racist systems and pursue racial justice (SDG 10.2, 10.3, 16.b)
- Address the "pandemic of misinformation" and promote accurate health information regarding the spread of COVID-19 and eventual treatments and vaccines
- Ensure open access to information technology and communications thereby enabling people to exercise their fundamental rights including the rights to freedom of association, opinion and expression (SDG 9.c, 16.10)
- Strengthen democratic institutions by increasing transparency, promoting participatory decision-making from all stakeholders and implementing peaceful, just, and inclusive solutions for the benefit of people and the planet (SDG 16.6)
- Promote intergenerational dialogue and decision-making for the design, implementation and review of COVID-19 responses (SDG 16.7)

Recommendations on Food & Water:

- Bolster agricultural and food systems, maintain functional supply chains across borders and implement cash assistance programs to ensure people have physical, economic and social access to sufficient and nutritious food during the pandemic (SDG 2 and 12)
- Recognize the human right to water and address unjust systems that limit access to, the protection of and preservation of sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water and sanitation which enable people to maintain their well-being. Prevent the commodification and privatization of water, increase public financing for water and sanitation services and empower local communities to protect watersheds (SDG 6 and 12)

Recommendations on the Environment:

- Prioritize the health of the environment and accelerate commitments under the Paris Agreement and take urgent action to realize a green economic transformation (SDGs 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15)
- Oppose practices that damage the environment including large-scale extraction, deforestation and exploitation of the land and its people in order to shift towards renewable energy and nature-based solutions (SDGs 15.2, 15.5, 15.9)
- Incorporate local knowledge of the peoples in various communities by taking into account their human rights, responsibilities, gendered needs and ensuring conservation benefits are just and inclusive (SDG 16.7)

Recommendations on Gender-Based Violence, Abuse and Human Trafficking:

- Safeguard access to justice, counselling and safe shelters for victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and human trafficking by ensuring these are considered essential services during the pandemic (SDG 5.2, 8.7 and 16.1, 16.2)
- Eliminate harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate gender-based violence, domestic abuse, human trafficking and the unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care work (SDG 5.2 and 5.4)

While these recommendations are for individual governments, they cannot be met without global solidarity, cooperation and inclusive partnerships. To "build back better" post-COVID-19, governments need to be supportive, empathetic, inventive and collaborative. Governments must recommit to multilateralism and increase international coordination for the research, development and distribution of COVID treatments to support less developed countries; to implement monetary, fiscal and trade policy for inclusive economic recovery; and to improve planning and resilience for future disasters (SDG 16. a and 17.6).[135]

A whole of society approach is needed to curb the pandemic and to regenerate people and Earth.

Inclusive partnerships include the full and meaningful participation of civil society and faith-based organizations and incorporation of the experiences and good practices of local grassroots organizations in their responses to COVID-19 (SDG 17.16 and 17.17).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an uncertain future for both people and planet. Following a process of theological reflection by the MGA COVID-19 Response Task Force, this document seeks to reflect on various experiences of COVID-19 and its impact in order to contribute to the ongoing dialogue, debate, solutions, recommendations and hopes across the Mercy World and beyond.

In Part One, we reflected on these diverse experiences and identified what has been revealed. Following this, the document articulates a Mercy standpoint in dialogue with our faith tradition and spirituality. Alongside this reflection, a critical analysis details specific social, economic, environmental, cultural and political factors at work and identifies the need for radical systemic change. Significantly, this document also acknowledges and identifies faith-based organizations, civil society groups and other allies we have in working for justice. Finally, we suggest actions for individuals and make recommendations to numerous stakeholder groups including Church, civil society and governments. These recommendations seek to identify measures that will contribute significantly to a COVID-19 response based on the flourishing of Earth and people.

In reflecting on '*What has been revealed?*' through the numerous experiences of the Mercy World, three very significant themes have emerged. These are: Blatant Inequalities, the Sacredness of Earth and a Pandemic of Kindness. In exploring blatant inequalities, it is evident that while the impacts of COVID-19 are inconvenient for some, for others they are catastrophic. This chasm between inconvenience and catastrophe is shown through the analysis of key concerns raised by the experiences of the Mercy World. These include physical and mental health, mobility, livelihoods, housing, food and water, violence and political institutions. A critical analysis of each of these concerns reveals the need for strong leadership in addressing mass inequality and a sharp focus on the rights of people and the planet before profit.

Reigniting a love for, and relishing in the Sacredness of Earth was also revealed through the stories of the Mercy World. The slower pace of life during the pandemic has created an opportunity for reflection, renewal and change. Future transformation will rely on the importance of integral ecology, as expressed in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si,'* which emphasizes the significance of our common home, and is recognized as providing the framework for understanding a relationship of mutual care.

This report notes that COVID-19 is not the first health pandemic and that health experts predict it will not be the last. It points to a complex network of interconnected relationships between ecological processes and human processes while also shedding light on both the fragility of, and the capacity of Earth to regenerate.

Also revealed was a "Pandemic of Kindness." A plethora of stories unveiled unity and fidelity present throughout the Mercy World. This was illustrated through acts of deep kindness, the strengthening of relationships and deep gratitude for essential workers. The power of Mercy and the spirit of Catherine McAuley have provided inspiration for many during this pandemic and will continue to influence our responses to COVID-19.

In Part Two, we took a deep dive into where we as Mercy stand in the face of this crippling pandemic. We challenge the warped ways in which inequalities have been normalized by those in power. We believe that this pandemic provides us with the opportunity to work toward a more equitable society. As the World Council of Churches states: "COVID-19 could become the great leveler if we harness its revelation for a transformation which raises up those who have been cast down by exploitative and supremacist systems. This is a call to conversion, where we are called to listen to the groaning of all creation and its hope of redemption. (Romans 8:22,23)"

Drawing on Scripture and other parts of our Tradition, we acknowledge the opportunity for transformation at this time. Where there is injustice, the Mercy World is being called to raise others up with love and 'lift up the lowly' (Luke 1:46-55). Undertaking further critical analysis, we identify core values including the need for just and merciful leadership. In recognition of the various ways in which multiple stakeholders practice leadership, we make several calls to the Church and our civil society partners. We also propose targeted recommendations for government bodies at all levels to take urgent action and make the necessary changes to undergo a radical transformation that will make our societies more equal and resilient.

Finally, this collection of stories accompanied by reflection and analysis energizes and inspires us and leads us to move forward with great hope. Despite the loss, the grief and the pain that this pandemic has brought about, we have the opportunity to contribute to a future in which Earth will be regenerated and people will flourish. As people of faith, we find solace in the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "My plans for you, are for a future of hope, not disaster." (Jeremiah 29:11)

"My plans for you, are for a future of hope, not disaster."
(Jeremiah 29:11)

About Us

Mercy International Association (MIA) was founded in 1992 by the leaders of Sisters of Mercy Congregations throughout the world. The Sisters of Mercy are an international faith-based organization founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1831 and who now have members in over 30 countries and territories worldwide. We are committed to serving those who suffer from poverty and other forms of disadvantage and to empowering women and children to live full and dignified lives within their diverse social and cultural contexts.

Mercy Global Action (MGA), MIA in New York is the international justice arm of Mercy International Association. Through Mercy Global Action, we are able to expand our advocacy capacity and re-imagine ways in which the grassroots experience can influence global policies. With Mercy contacts on the ground, Mercy Global Action is able to exchange knowledge, identify best practices and bring the two chief areas of concern (displacement of persons and degradation of Earth) to the work at the United Nations where we enjoy Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In May 2020, Mercy Global Action set up a Mercy COVID-19 Taskforce to raise a voice about the pandemic in order to provide direction and leadership to the Mercy World on justice issues related to the impact of the pandemic and plans for regeneration. This includes:

- Reflection on the impacts of the pandemic through the lens of Mercy, including but not limited to, a human rights analysis and Catholic Social Teaching.
- Connecting with the Mercy World on justice issues at local, national, regional and global levels in relation to COVID 19, particularly regarding the degradation of Earth and the displacement of persons.
- Raising awareness throughout the Mercy World on those most at risk and/or vulnerable to COVID-19 impacts and opportunities for actions in response to the pandemic.
- Building capacity throughout the Mercy World by preparing materials for reflection and action on COVID-19.
- Advocating throughout the Mercy World on justice issues related to COVID-response using the Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach[136]
- Optimizing the Sisters of Mercy Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations on issues related to the pandemic.

Membership

This Task Force comprises the following members:

- Bridget Crisp rsm (Aotearoa New Zealand)
- Katrina Fabish rsm (Aotearoa New Zealand)
- Siobhán Golden (MGA)
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