

Mercy Global Action: Presence in Ministry & Community

Cecilie Kerns (Americas): ‘Embracing a Culture of Encounter’

In times of hardship, uncertainty and fear, we rely on those around us for solidarity, support, guidance, information and empathy. Despite physical isolation and institutional barriers, community and care for our neighbor are more important than ever. During this time of global crisis, and faced with systemic inequalities and the disproportionate suffering of marginalized communities, it is clear that when one person is vulnerable, we are all vulnerable. Thus, community and solidarity, expressed in service to people, are vital at the global as well as the local level. The current pandemic has offered us an opportunity not only to reflect, but to act – to overcome the walls that separate us, to foster community, and to minister to others. Love for our neighbor compels not just a desire for actions on behalf of others in need, but leads to seeking transformation of our ability to address those needs both individually and communally.

These messages are central to Mercy Global Action’s recent publication, [“Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Responding to COVID-19 through a Mercy Lens,”](#) as well as Pope Francis’ new encyclical, [Fratelli tutti](#). Both of these documents emerged from a process of listening, theological reflection and analysis of expert writings. Both highlight the inequalities that persist in our societies, challenge us to act against unjust economic and political systems that exploit people and planet, and emphasize the importance of kindness and solidarity in overcoming these challenges to ensure that all people can live with dignity and exercise their universal human rights. Both documents also call for improved international cooperation, as “nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved. Poverty, decadence and suffering in one part of the earth are a silent breeding ground for problems that will end up affecting the entire planet” (FT 137). As members of one human family, we have a responsibility to care for one another.

Central to *Fratelli tutti* and “Hope in a Time of Pandemic” is the parable of the Samaritan, which challenges us to reflect on our relationship with those different from us and those who are suffering. Pope Francis calls upon us to reflect: “Here, all our distinctions, labels and masks fall away: it is the moment of truth. Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others?” (FT 70) The parable calls us to reject isolation – rather than observing the suffering of others from our place of comfort and privilege, we must actively reach out to those in need, even if they are different from us, or excluded by society. “The decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside can serve as a criterion for judging every economic, political, social and religious project” (FT 69). How do we as people of Mercy include, integrate and lift up those who have fallen or are suffering in our ministries?

In “Hope in a Time of Pandemic,” the Mercy World has 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, including providing essential services and assistance to people in need, as well as providing emotional and spiritual support to one another. 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 and community. There is a heightened awareness of the value of connecting with and caring for others.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis also references the importance of kindness, likening it to a star “shining in the midst of darkness” that “frees us from the cruelty... the anxiety... the frantic flurry of activity” that prevail in the contemporary era (FT 222, 224). The chapter on “*Dialogue and friendship in society*,” further emphasizes a “culture of encounter” with everyone, even with the world’s peripheries, because “each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable” (FT 215). The culture of encounter requires us to place the human person and respect for the common good at the center of all political, social and economic activity.

Entering into a culture of encounter is not an easy process, but the pope's call to break down walls resonates with our daily work to build bridges of dialogue and accompaniment and find common humanity between people. In a world plagued by poverty, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of systemic marginalization, Mercy ministries exemplify a culture of encounter that emphasizes the dignity and rights of all people, and works to reduce social, economic and political inequalities. In the spirit of Catherine McAuley, 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.

Being truly present to one another, and being open to a mutual encounter with the other who comes as a stranger, is a prophetic act in today's divisive context. True dialogue, indeed, is what allows one to respect the point of view of others, their legitimate interests and, above all, the truth of human dignity. This approach is vital to ensuring that people have the agency to participate meaningfully in their communities. We are called to action and to deeper solidarity, which “means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights” (FT 116). During this difficult time, and as we seek the transformative change that will enable us to build back in a more just, equitable and resilient way, solidarity and a deeper commitment to community can help us to restore hope and bring about renewal.