

INSTITUTE JUSTICE NETWORK

From the depths of God's mercy we are continually called to conversion of heart, as partners in all creation, awakening reverence for life, impelling the hunger for justice, through contemplative apostolic service.



Justice as Service - “Our Hearts Centered in God”

Celestine Pooley RSM

This reflection, ‘Justice as Service’- “Our Hearts Centered in God”, came out of two separate conversations, seemingly unrelated except that they both concerned our commitment to justice. The first arose at the Institute Mercy Justice weekend in February. In the context of looking at strengthening our commitment to justice we considered how we could bring new life to the IPC statement made in October, 2000, *justice is recognised by us all as a constitutive dimension of Mercy life and ministries*. What followed was an energetic conversation around our universal call to apostolic service. The second was a conversation I had with a sister in one of our aged care homes, “I wonder why God is allowing so many of us to live to an old age – is there a purpose for us,” she asked. This was a woman who had given many years of dedicated active service in teaching young children and had quietly and lovingly helped countless families in need. She had lived justice and compassion in her apostolic service. Her sincere question didn’t call for any clichéd answer. She deserved a more meaningful reply. As I left her, promising we’d talk again, I thought of the thousands of Catherine’s daughters like this sister, and their years spent in loving service to their God. I also recalled that earlier conversation at the justice weekend around our Mercy call to justice and apostolic service. What follows is my attempt to bring deeper meaning to both those conversations.

The Call to Apostolic Service

While some Mercy groups did not take the fourth vow of apostolic service, I believe all of us are conscious that Catherine saw apostolic service to the most disadvantaged as an imperative call for all her daughters. It was the driving force behind her commitment to the service of God’s people. Catherine was a deeply spiritual woman with a highly developed sense of social justice, fuelled by the desperate poverty she saw around her. This was the impetus that led her to build the first “House of Mercy” as a school for the education of poor young girls and a residence for homeless girls and women. It would eventually lead her, after long deliberation, to establish the new religious Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, thus giving their way of life and their work in health, education and welfare, canonical standing and stability. She established new foundations all over the country and beyond, to ensure that the mercy of Jesus would continue to flow, through her sisters, to those in greatest need.

In Catherine we see the lived expression of the gospel values of justice, mercy and compassion in her apostolic service to others.

A Purposeful Living into Older Age

Following the example of Jesus, Catherine's first priority and ours is to stand with and act for the poor and marginalised in our society. It will always be challenging, but the imperative is a given –not an option. So, clearly my attempt to search for the 'new' within the notion of 'service' is not in any way suggesting it as a substitute for 'justice'. Rather, the question that challenges me relates to that question asked by the sister in aged care. How can I continue to live the call to 'live justly' and minister to others in older age? Does my call to apostolic service cease when I am no longer able to continue to be in active ministry? After founding the Institute, Catherine had only ten years to accomplish her work, and she continued tirelessly until her death at the age of 63. She did not have to face that situation.

Today a majority of us are living to an older age, so the question is a valid one, "What is God's purpose for us in our ageing, given that there is always a purpose in God's Divine plan?" It seemed a question worth exploring. Perhaps, in the light of our journey towards reconfiguring it becomes even more relevant, given that a large number of sisters in every Congregation are in the aged category.

'Being' prior to 'Doing'

When I think of service I wonder, is there ever a time when I cease to be called to the service of others? If we equate 'service' only with activity, then it would seem when our days of active ministry cease we retire from apostolic service. However, if a sense of social justice has been central to my active ministry, do my attitudes change or does my mind cease to be attuned to a world crying out for justice? I don't believe so. In exercising any ministry the 'being' of *who* I am is reflected in what I 'do' and how I do it. When people recall those who ministered to them it is of the *person* who helped or cared for them they speak, even if he/she was unable to change their circumstances, but continued to just walk with them! No matter where we are, or what age we are, we're all given opportunities in the daily interactions of our lives to 'be' there for others – a listening ear, a kind word or welcoming smile - is to offer service. The marginalised person comes in many guises – 'the difficult' one, the least popular. If we look hard enough, the outsider can usually be found in every group!

Prayer - our most valuable resource – a lifetime engagement

It is because the compassionate God has graced us so richly with his goodness, mercy and love that we are enabled to reach out in loving service to others. We know that God's grace can never be earned, but must be nurtured in an intimate prayer life. Prayer, the most valuable resource we share in common, is a lifetime engagement. Older age is surely a time in our lives where we can seize the opportunity to deepen our prayer life and live with greater awareness of 'the God within'. Today, the media confronts us with the issues of our local and global world. With my heart of justice, I bring these intentions to my prayer. If I truly believe I am part of an expanding universe in which all things are connected then my prayer too expands outwards to touch the pain and suffering of humanity and the planet itself. Through prayer for our Sisters working in active ministries throughout the world I am connecting with and supporting them. Our religious communities are potential power-houses of prayer, witnessing to a world craving to find meaning in life. Perhaps we could remind and encourage each other to be more aware of this.

Contemplative Prayer – Contemplative Service

Then there is ‘contemplative service’. There is a new awareness and understanding today of the place of contemplative prayer in our everyday lives, and a considerable number of Christians have embraced this form of prayer. Such prayer is not a self-centred exercise, for the God within is the Creator God who always directs us outwards to embrace the needs of all his creation. That is surely a ‘service’. As Mary of Bethany sat at the feet of Jesus, totally absorbed in his Word, was her service any less real than Martha’s? Jesus didn’t seem to think so - he praised her for choosing ‘the better part’. From that we might speculate that there is still ‘the *best* part’, and I like to think that it might be what was at the core of Catherine’s spirituality – a lived ‘contemplative in action’. It is described in one of Mary Reynolds’ articles as “a fresh and fertile blending of the contemplative spirit and the compassionate heart.” [‘Like the Compass’ *Listen*, Vol. 27 No.2, p 3]

Contemplative service may demand even more of us than action since such prayer calls for a complete abandonment to God’s initiative – our response is in receiving his transforming grace. Ultimately, prayer is about Love. It is about giving love, and receiving love – and that is at the heart of our mission as disciples of Jesus and daughters of Catherine McAuley. Could it be that this call to contemplative prayer is the ‘new’ service, along with apostolic service, into which all religious women in today’s world are invited?

Giving and Receiving Service

For those of us who will reach frail age and need assistance to take care of our daily needs, we may have to learn to accept, and even rely on the service of others in ways we’ve never had to before. From our previous independence, a change like this may call on our deepest spiritual resources to be able to accept this service graciously and gratefully. This is the two-way aspect of service. At the Last Supper Jesus showed us in a practical way that the role of the disciple was one of service. He served them by washing their feet, and they were called on to respond in humility and *receive* this service – which some found difficult to do. Like the disciples of Jesus we have need for humility in receiving. A surrendering to God’s love in accepting our diminishing physical and mental capacities is surely a powerful sign of his transformative work within us – and a service that extends beyond ourselves and can only be explained by entering more fully into the greater Mystery of life.

An Answer to God’s Purpose

I believe that it is in being women of prayer, and each of us living as best we can the gospel values of love and compassion, that we discover the answer to the question of God’s purpose for those of us moving into older age. This, I believe, is a worthwhile ‘service’ to the world, for these prayers join those of the wider Christian prayer community and together are a powerful force intentionally directed to the needs of the world.

The Practice of Justice and the Gift of Service

Justice will always be at the centre of who we are as Sisters of Mercy, and continue to direct all our choices into the future. This reflection should not be read as an attempt to dilute what we have always understood and practiced as action for social justice in our ministries - responding to needs wherever they arise, locally and globally, and working to change the structures that keep people in these situations of need and deprived of human rights. This is our life commitment – in apostolic service and/or contemplative service. It is expressed in the straightforward and simple words of the prophet Micah: “...this is what Yahweh asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Some might see this reflection as drawing justice with such broad strokes as to undermine the essence of Catherine’s conviction that the works of mercy are “the very business of our lives.” Writing from the perspective on one who is approaching ‘older age’, my intention is rather to emphasise that the blending of the contemplative spirit and the compassionate heart is the work of a lifetime - and service is its natural response. I believe we don’t retire from this commitment until we hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful servant...”

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