

Reflection on the Chapter Statement of the Sixth Institute Chapter

First Reflection:

The theme “Longing for God’s Mercy” strikes a chord with my deepest desire, with my most profound hope. It evokes for me echoes from the scriptures, images of Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son”, of Millais’ engraving of “the Lost Piece of Silver”, memories of the moment in which I first heard Bach’s “Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring”, or first read T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”. It evokes for me those privileged and profound moments of sharing in the dying and death of sisters - of friends in different congregations- for whom I think longing for God’s mercy became assurance of God’s mercy, “the expanding of love, beyond desire”.

The Chapter statement speaks of “a new moment”, “a new heart”, “new eyes”, “new possibilities” “new consciousness”; of “yearning to relate”, “imagining new possibilities”, “being impelled to respond”, “living the gospel”; of “fidelity”, “personal and communal conversion”, “of hearts centred on God”, of “a world longing for God’s mercy”. The passages from the Constitutions which follow emphasise the praxis of contemplation, conversion, communion, ministry, exercising a public voice, partnership and collegiality, and remind us of the ecclesial identity of our charism.

Second Reflection

The voices of the statement are those of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. This is a momentous change. A bi - national identity locates us clearly within the Asia- Pacific. However, apart from the opening lines, I am struck by the absence of a historical context in the statement. “In a world longing for God’s mercy”, such it was when Jesus came, or when Catherine McAuley confronted the new forms of poverty attendant on the agrarian and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century. Apart from the opening, could the statement have come from the Chapter of 1981? I note the implicit reference to a new cosmology, to deepened theological insight in relation to the mysteries of divine revelation, creation, communion, to justice, peace and ecology, and the contemporary speech forms, but were the aspirations and the praxis of the first Mercy communities in Australia essentially very different? On the one hand it is fitting that there should be a certain timelessness about expressions of the charism, on the other, we exist within specific cultures, at a particular moment in history, to serve the changing needs of specific people.

Third Reflection

Over time I have spoken with a number of the Chapter delegates. For most of them the Chapter would seem to have been a painful and exacting, yet extremely life giving experience. For them the attitude and expression of deep respect, of genuine acceptance, of sympathy and empathy for the other, for sisters with differing perspectives, was palpable. They spoke of a felt experience of communion in the deliberations, the exchanges, the meals that were shared, in prayer and ritual, in the Eucharistic celebrations. Some of them said this was a qualitatively different experience from earlier Chapters; that it would not have been possible to have had this experience in 1981. Some of them spoke of the unfinished nature of the proceedings: it was only possible to achieve so much, with such an agenda, in so limited a time frame.

Fourth Reflection

The Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea are a community of faith. The Chapter statement illuminates who we are as a community of faith. We are, however, in the process of establishing an international organisation, with a sizable membership, a range of significant ministries and affiliates, property holdings and investments and a whole series of external relationships in the wider environment of international Mercy, of church and society. The question we need to ask is: how will we define ourselves, our purposes and policies relative to the wider environment in 2011, in a way that gives a mandate to the leadership, direction to the members and makes sense to the external communities and agencies in church and society? I have found the Direction Statement of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas from their inaugural Chapter, dated though it is now, quite instructive:

Direction Statement

Animated by the Gospel and Catherine McAuley's passion for the poor, we, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, are impelled to commit our lives and resources to act in solidarity with

- *the economically poor of the world, especially women and children*
- *women seeking fullness of life and equality in church and society*
- *one another as we embrace our multicultural and international reality.*

This commitment will impel us to:

- *develop and act from a multicultural and international perspective*
- *speak with a corporate voice;*
- *work for systemic change;*
- *practice non-violence;*
- *act in harmony and interdependence with all creation; and*
- *call ourselves to continual conversion in our lifestyles and ministries*

and the list of their critical concerns.

Critical Concerns

- *to deepen and assimilate more consciously the practice of **nonviolence** as an integral aspect of the charism of mercy;*
- *to deepen our response to the unrecognized and unreconciled **racism**, past and present, within our community;*
- *to reverence **Earth** and work more effectively toward the sustainability of life and toward the fundamental recognition of the right to water;*
- *to continue to embrace our particular concern for **women**;*
- *to stand in solidarity with **immigrants**..¹*

¹ The Mission Statement which precedes the Direction Statement is as follows:

Sisters of Mercy are women who commit their lives to God, deepening their relationship with God and serving God's people, especially those who are sick, poor and uneducated. In the spirit of the Gospel, our mission is to help people overcome the obstacles that keep them

Fifth Reflection

Last month it was commonplace to hear people saying in relation to the Royal Wedding how much the world had changed in thirty years. How much it has changed in a decade! We have only to recall the naive hope that many of us had, as the twentieth century closed, that the world would turn the page on horrific violence, and of how soon it was dashed. Violence on a massive scale still “stalks the earth” driven, on the one hand, by greed, manifest in militarism, drug trafficking and human trafficking and on the other, by revolt at the injustice of global poverty. In this context, the Vision statement of Mercy International Association takes on a particular resonance:

“Today, Sisters of Mercy, through Mercy International Association, use their resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide”.

Global estimates suggest that, currently, there are 15 million refugees and asylum seekers displaced because of wars and political oppression in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and South America. According to the United Nations, climate change will become the biggest driver of displacement both inside and across borders –an estimated 150 million people will suffer climate induced displacement, due to resource scarcity, desertification, droughts and floods and rising sea levels by 2050. Human trafficking is the fastest growing and second largest criminal activity in the world. The global estimates for those trafficked for slave labour(including sexual exploitation) annually, is 2.5 million, more than half of whom are considered to be in the Asia- Pacific.

The question we need to ask is: will the MIA vision be endorsed by the next Chapter? How will it be articulated by us in this part of the world? What implications does it hold for the use of our resources? What implications does it have for our networking with other Mercy Sisters in the Asia -Pacific?

Australia used to be considered as being at the end of the earth. As the global economic epicentre moves to Asia this is no longer the case. China, Japan, South Korea, India are our major trading partners. Students from Asian countries populate our universities; refugees and immigrants from Asian countries are now Australian citizens; many of our resources and businesses are foreign owned, often by Asian companies and, into the future, the jobs for a great many of our young people will be in Asian countries.

Australian, James Wolfensohn, former President of the World Bank, speaking on National television earlier in the year, considered that Asian economic dominance will entail changes for Australia that lead previous changes to pale into insignificance and that Australia is quite unprepared for what will confront us in the very short term. The tenor of his statement is reflected in the recent book, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, by Michael Wesley, Executive Director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. He sees that ‘Australia is entering a strange new world, for which it is nowhere near psychologically or attitudinally prepared’ and ‘if we are going to take the world seriously, it will take a shock’.

The majority of the newer members of the present Mercy Congregations were born in Vietnam, China, and Pakistan; the Sisters in Papua New Guinea have a much younger age profile. The

questions we need to ask are: what are the implications of this reality for our new bi-national institute? What will it take for us in our heavily mono - cultural communities to change our worldview? How do we prepare newer members for their leadership role in what will be a radically different future?

Andrew Hamilton, in a recent article in Eureka Street (March30,2011), comments on the gospel story of the good Samaritan:

“The story suggests that the question we should begin with should not be about identity but about how we meet the needs of the people who present themselves to us. Identity questions fix our attention on the group to which we belong. The question Jesus asks invites us to look through the eyes of strangers. Only from that perspective can we safely reflect on our group”

If we take seriously the question of how we meet the needs of people into the future we would find it imperative in very many instances, to engage in qualitatively different relationships with those associated with us, or with those who might wish to engage with us. Relevant quotations from our Constitutions within the Sixth Chapter Statement reflect this awareness.

The questions we need to ask are: what would have to change for us to invite people to work with us at all levels of the institute? How can we expand our networking and actualise our willingness to enter into a whole range of new partnerships with people working for systemic change? What would enable the Young Mercy Justice Tree to continue and flourish? What would enable other forms of engagement with young women to emerge? Does the conversion we espouse entail a commitment to the empowerment of other people to meet the needs of people long after most of us are no longer here? How can we expand our capacity for empowerment and enablement? What are the implications for the ways in which we use our resources?

Recent natural disasters, locally in Australia and overseas, remind us that our place on planet earth is tenuous and precarious. In what ways can we continue to foster a love for the earth and a commitment to simplicity and sustainability in our communities, within the new institute, within our networks? What would help us expand our hearts to value all of creation, including our ever changing universe?

Sixth Reflection

Catherine McAuley stands eminently with the foundresses and founders of religious communities inspired by the Gospel in the nineteenth century to meet new societal needs, including the needs of globally dispersed peoples. She is a contemporary of other philanthropists and social reformers of nineteenth century Ireland and England, such as Daniel O’Connell, Elisabeth Fry, the Earl of Shaftesbury, William Wilberforce, Charles Dickens . Deeply faithful to her Christian calling, like them, she had the ability to read the signs of her times, and the intelligence, business acumen, social and practical skills to inspire and empower others to respond with creativity and generosity, with the courage and resilience to take risks in the pursuit of the works of mercy. The question delegates for the next Chapter will need to ask is: what would Catherine McAuley, if she were alive now, address as a priority for the period 2012 -2017?

Doris Gottemoeller, rsm, considers that it is never easy to determine how to adapt one’s founding charism to changing needs, but “ whatever direction is chosen by an institute... it must be prophetic

and corporate...It requires a facility in drawing the gaze of the inquirer from ourselves to the Gospel that we proclaim and which animates us”.

“What is needed is deep discernment on the part of each congregation, leading to a clear vision, clearly expressed and vividly demonstrated. In the absence of that our future is indeed perilous”²

In her paper delivered at the Mercy International Theological Research Conference in 2007, she spoke again of “a need to reaffirm our corporate mission for our times, not necessarily to choose corporate ministries” and reflected that ... “The twofold test of whether a congregational mission is more than rhetoric is how effectively it shapes each member’s choices (and the leadership’s affirmation of those choices) and how much it contributes to the public perception of the congregation”.³

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to all the delegates of the Sixth National Chapter and to all those who have contributed much time and great energy to the reconfiguring process. In particular, I wish to acknowledge Nerida, Carli and Karen for the witness they have given us of steadfast love.

² Doris Gottemoeller, rsm quotation from “Religious Called to Imagine a New Future” www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns0700726.htm, 2007

³ Doris Gottemoeller, rsm: “Lessons from the New Ecclesial Movements” p.12 <http://mercyworldorg.ozstaging.com/merc/>