

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.



The 'Catherine Vow' as seen through the Lens of Women and Poverty

Sally Bradley RSM

Making the Links

Descriptions of Sisters of Mercy as the “walking nuns” and “damn it, do it Mercies” have always struck a chord in me. Catherine’s familiar words “The poor need help today, not next week” have always been one of my favourite sayings. All express the centrality of the fourth vow, that of apostolic service to our way of life as Sisters of Mercy. A service that is borne of a compassionate, contemplative heart and lived out in a practical response to real need in the world around us. When this vow was named as the “Catherine Vow” (at our Institute Justice Network Meeting in February 2010) I felt my heart stir and deep in my bones I responded with an energetic “Yes! That’s what I’m called to. That’s when I’m my best self.”

At the heart of Catherine’s ministry were the care, empowerment and education of women and girls. Her aim was always to lift them out of all kinds of poverty and the accompanying wounds of hopelessness and lack of self-worth. As Sisters of Mercy this is still Catherine’s legacy to us today in the twenty-first century. Our Fourth Vow of Apostolic Service gives flesh to our charism of mercy. We draw deeply from a contemplative wellspring to nourish our living out of this vow.

God’s mercy to us is the heart of our service to others. [Constitutions 4.01]

This “Catherine Vow” is intrinsically linked to our passion for justice and peace in our world. Justice is mercy in action.

The writings of Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners’ Community, are at the same time confronting *and* inspiring. Throughout his book, “*Seven Ways to Change the World – Reviving Faith and Politics*” he expresses the link in another way.

*Two of the great hungers in our world today are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice. The connection between the two is the one the world is waiting for, especially the new generation. And the first hunger will empower the second.*¹

As Sisters of Mercy, when we ‘live into’ this fourth vow, the ‘Catherine vow’, I believe we offer the world nourishment to meet both these ‘great hungers’ today.

Maria McGuinness RSM, in an article titled “*Challenges to Ministry*”, reminds us that there must be two contexts for our ministry, that is, the world around us and a perspective of disadvantage.²

The world around us – A Global Context

Jim Wallis also says,

*I don't believe the facts of global poverty will change us until they become personal for us.*³

This leads to two key questions: What are some of the facts about global poverty, especially in relation to women and girls? And how do they become personal for us?

So, firstly, what are some of the facts about global poverty?

Worldwide three billion people live on less than two dollars a day. And more than one billion live on less than one dollar a day. On the most basic level, about 70% of the world's poorest people (those living on less than a dollar a day) are women or girls. About two thirds of children who can't go to primary school are girls.⁴

Elizabeth Palmberg in *Sojourners* magazine⁵ describes the triple burden of poverty on women across the world:

1. Due to their physical vulnerability, women have less power and so are more likely to become targets of physical, sexual and emotional abuse.
2. Yet despite their less powerful position they bear the lion's share of the burden of keeping the family, village, neighbourhood and church together.
3. While being the most vulnerable, women are still in the most sustaining role. Yet they do not have the corresponding power and authority to change the facts that create the burdens in the first place. It is a known fact that women play a much more effective role in resolving conflict than men do, yet they are repeatedly passed over for such roles.

As Rita Sharman of the Women's Edge Coalition advocacy group said:

*Teach a man to fish, he eats. Teach a woman to fish everybody eats.*⁶

So, how do these facts become personal for us?

The Perspective of Disadvantage – the ability to imagine life differently!

The facts of global poverty will become personal for us when we engage with the poor of our times. All our attempts at social justice must come about through dialogue with the poor.

God's promise of mercy is to the poor of every age. [Constitutions 4.03]

When we speak from the perspective of disadvantage and our stance reflects this, our advocacy holds credibility and we can 'speak truth to power'.

Change begins with a new relationship to the poor. Lack of relationship leads to lack of understanding, empathy and urgency. It creates stereotypes, myths, excuses and passivity. Most biblical insights into poverty have to do with inclusion. In the scriptures poverty is resolved by bringing people into relationship and into community.⁷ While the female face of poverty in Australia has an economic dimension, the complex causes usually leave a woman spiraling into a vortex of powerlessness, isolation and little, if any, self-worth.

Mary Reynolds RSM⁸ reminds us that Catherine had the ability to imagine life differently!

She 'imagined' a society where the oppressed, marginalized and excluded would find a central role and sense of belonging. She could stand as a bridge between the rich and the poor, employing her own advantage and connection to advance the needs of the poor. She had a particular ability to address both the immediate need in a practical way and address

systemic issues that underpin those needs. Catherine was an instigator of professional services to empower those who were now powerless because of the oppressive structures imposed on them.

My present reality – A life-giving experience !

When I reflect on my own current ministry, living and working in the Exodus Community in West Heidelberg, over the past 13 years, so many faces and stories of people come to mind. We are a faith community in an urban area of disadvantage in Melbourne. While we are under the auspice of the local Catholic parish, we are here for everybody regardless of their background. So many women through this Community, in their courage and resilience, have enriched my own call to live the ‘Catherine vow’ with passion and love. From my lived experience I have gained many learnings - the worth-while struggle to live community *and* to be church; the creative use of power; building capacity and the relational ethic; economic poverty and its limiting of choices; and advocacy work, both individual and systemic.

1. The worth-while struggle to live community and to be church

Our tradition leads us to identify with and be a prophetic witness in the local church.
[Constitutions 4.04]

When these inspirational words of our Constitutions were written in the late 1980’s the context for living them out was probably less fraught with the current pain and sense of dislocation. Today many of us as Sisters of Mercy struggle to find a eucharistic community where we can belong, be nourished and contribute our gifts. Aging, tired clergy, and conservative formation of the few younger men entering the Seminary, leaves many local parishes bereft of any spiritual and prophetic leadership. Our Exodus Community model has provided me, as a woman, with a way to be a leader of a eucharistic community in a non-clerical, non- hierarchical way. In 1998 I joined in establishing this Community with women and men, religious and lay of all ages. I believe we offer a credible model of church, where the poor are central to our mission. My own identity as a Sister of Mercy has been sharpened as I belong to concentric circles of community – family, Mercies, Exodus, parish and local neighbourhood.

2. Creative use of power

The use of power and authority is a central issue for the hierarchical church today, which raises further issues of credibility. I believe as women religious we are called more than ever to live out an alternative model where power is used creatively. At a recent public lecture on “Ministerial Religious Life – Prophetic Obedience” Sandra Schneiders IHM differentiated between three forms of power. At the first level is “coercive power” or power over. If we have to use this form of power then authority has failed. At the second level is “empowerment” or “power for” which is the kind we most use in collaborative ministry. The third level of “persuasion”, which is real authority, carries more weight. This is the exercise of the right to be heard and heeded. In my work at present I have the privilege of exercising this kind of power whenever I advocate for a person experiencing injustice or lack of human rights. Such times may be in a Court of law, dealing with a government agency such as Office of Public Housing or Centrelink, or other professional services. My support and credibility has helped others to find their voice and speak with confidence. In our Community working with disadvantaged people I have found that overall women are more ready, willing and capable of exercising responsibilities as community leaders in a relational way.

3. Building capacity – the relational ethic

Mercy is all about building relationships of respect and trust. From my experience, when women who have felt isolated, lonely and powerless connect with each other and form friendships personal capacity and growth develops. I am always conscious of keeping in mind Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. We build on these basic needs (pictured as a pyramid) when building capacity. We start with physiological needs, to the need for safety, to the need for love and belonging (friendship), to the need for self-esteem and finally to a level of self-actualisation. I was once supporting a single mother who found herself homeless due to the chronic shortage of public housing. When I advocated for her the agency worker said they could offer her counselling but no house! When a person is homeless they return to basic human needs at the beginning of Maslow's pyramid.

4. Economic poverty and its limiting of choices

Living among and working with women who experience urban poverty has shown me the complexities of people's lives and the social dynamics which reinforce and entrench disadvantage. Such complexities may include – addictions, mental illness, intellectual disability and a background of serious and damaging abuse. Homelessness in Australia is a complex problem, but if there is a common factor in the stories we hear it is that of isolation and loneliness. Like all issues of poverty, homelessness brings with it a myriad of limited and debilitating choices. People end up homeless when their support networks fail them, or were not there in the beginning. Strength to tackle these issues is built when people have the friendship and active support of other people. Building relationships is therefore a stronger strategy than merely giving money. However, in all human beings is the tendency for addictions of all kinds. Many of us (myself included) are 'addicted' to shopping for bargains. I am always amused when some of the women in our Community buy bags of clothes at the 'Op Shop', only to discard many of them later.

5. Advocacy – individual and systemic

I believe all advocacy work begins at the personal level and for many years I worked at this personal level. I felt overwhelmed when confronted by systemic abuse. In some ways I am comforted by these words,

If we are to sow the seeds of real hope in our world, I think Catherine McAuley would say: This is the way we must do it – one person at a time: one answering of the figurative doorbell, one opening of the figurative door, one embrace of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk, one person at a time.⁹

However, over time I have learnt to tackle the much larger issue of systemic abuse. I have been particularly involved in this in relation to the shortage of public housing.¹⁰ Forming a Resident's Group two years ago has given us a strong collective voice on issues such as public housing. Inviting both the Housing Minister and the Shadow Housing Minister to public meetings to tell their powerful stories in an atmosphere of respect, has greatly highlighted this issue of systemic abuse. Residents reported feeling empowered, in solidarity with each other and not so alone. The Resident's Group submitted a Report to the "Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria." We were then invited to present this to a Parliamentary committee.

Conclusion

I conclude this reflection on “The ‘Catherine Vow’ as seen through the Lens of Women and Poverty” with words from our Constitutions and with the stirring words of Ghandi.

We must join in the search for justice and love wherever we are.

[Constitutions 4.06]

You must be the change you want to see in the world.

¹ Jim Wallis “Seven Ways to Change the World – Reviving Faith and Politics”, Harper Collins Publishing, New York, 2008, p. 9

² Maria McGuinness RSM “Challenges to Ministry” in *LISTEN – Journal of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia* 2004

³ Wallis, p.38

⁴ Wallis, p.90

⁵ Wallis, p. 142

⁶ Wallis, p. 143

⁷ Wallis, pp. 86-87

⁸ Mary Reynolds RSM “*The Business of Our Lives*” (Paper 4 of 6), p. 22 in *LISTEN – Journal of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia* Vol. 27 No. 2, 2009

⁹ Mary Sullivan RSM, “*Welcoming the stranger: The Kenosis of Catherine McAuley*” in *Morning and Evening of the Sisters of Mercy*, p. 931

¹⁰ Waiting lists for Public Housing in Victoria are 2-15 years. There are 76,000 units of Public Housing across Victoria and 40,000 people on waiting lists. Australia’s most vulnerable people, including many single mothers and frail elderly rely on public housing.

Institute Justice Network

Chapter Stimulus Material No 3 written by **Sally Bradley RSM**

Image by Mary White RSM

Contact: Carmel Heagerty RSM, Institute Justice Co-ordinator

Email: Institute.Justice@mercy.org.au