



OPENING ADDRESS
CHAPTER 2017 -
BERNEICE LOCH RSM,
INSTITUTE LEADER



ISMAPNG
CHAPTER 2017

*Through the tender
mercy of our God...*

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Bidjigal clan of the Darug people.

Members of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, those who are watching or who will watch from home or other centres, Delegates to the 2017 Chapter of the Institute and other friends able to be with us here at Baulkham Hills.

Six years ago I was one of the leaders who came to the front of this Chapel to sign out of existence the Congregation or Group we then led. Some others of those leaders are here again today. It was a solemn moment I will never forget and as we signed those groups out of existence, we welcomed into existence the Institute in which we now live our Mercy calling. And today we gather to commence the 2017 Chapter. I acknowledge the efforts of the many Sisters and staff who have worked hard to prepare for this event. We are grateful to you and there will be a time for formal thanks before we finish our days together.

As I said before, in many respects this Chapter is a first for our Institute. We are the first group to come to a Chapter of the Institute with the lived experience of being a Member. It is a privilege to be here, but also a serious responsibility, as we hold in our hands the power to determine the direction for the next stage of our Institute's life of service and commitment. Those who elected us have given us this right and responsibility and we hold it in great trust.

The past six years has been a shared journey and each of us has her own insights regarding what that journey has been. Today I will speak from just a few of my insights from the perspective of being in leadership, raising points that I consider very important as we approach this Chapter.

First I want to speak of our approach to the Chapter itself. So often when faced with a serious responsibility our response is to roll up our sleeves, take a deep breath and wade on in there. That is not the approach we are being invited to take at this Chapter. Instead we are asking ourselves and each other to take a listening approach, to direct a great deal of our time and energy to listening to God in prayer and God speaking in the words of each other. We have a vow of obedience, a vow to hear rightly, and this coming fortnight will tax the commitment of every one of us to listening, listening to the voice of God in ourselves, in this community coming together as a Chapter, and in the

many wisdom voices that will come into our lives including the voice of nature in this beautiful place.

Not all of us know each other very well, but one thing we do know about each other is that we are committed people who want to be faithful to the call we have experienced. We can know and trust that in each other, even in the other with whom I have perhaps exchanged only a few words. For a moment let us just think about the women here and commit to trusting that each will be a woman of integrity to the very best of her ability. (PAUSE)

Convinced of the sincerity of each other we can listen and speak with kindness and openness, ready to receive what the other has to offer. We read in Ephesians 4:29, *Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you.* (Ephesians 4:29) The process we envisage for this Chapter could have been formed around that particular quote from scripture. It does not suggest that we will agree with each other all the time or even often, but that we will find ways to engage in the dialogue with respect, so that our responses will urge the other to continue to be in the conversation even when we are expressing quite different views.

I want to say something of the current reality in which we find ourselves as women religious in Australia and Papua New Guinea. We are publicly committed women within a Church which has a serious credibility problem. There is no point in pretending this will go away. It won't. We must continue the struggle to make a deeply Christian response to those who suffered under our care or that of other Church personnel. We know for a certainty that the same difficulties will be aired and have to be faced in Papua New Guinea as are now being faced here in Australia. We, the Sisters of the Institute can be part of the problem or part of the solution, as we are already experiencing. If we are to be a credible witness of the message of Christ's love, we need to be fully present in this difficult space and shoulder our responsibility.

I will allude to a third area of attention for this Chapter, and that is the future of Religious Life itself. Many of us, probably all Sisters in this room and those watching, have been part of taking Religious Life out of the largely medieval context in which it was prior to Vatican II. Inspiration for doing so was found in the attitudes and words of Catherine herself. We have begun the changing which will make Religious Life relevant for our times, but the end is not yet.

Like many of you, I have read around this topic, most recently in my case, Diamuid O'Murchu's *Religious Life in the 21st Century* in which he looks for the emergence of a new form of religious life in the second half of this century – say in thirty years time. I am hoping it will come earlier than he anticipates or else that in the afterlife we will know what is going on here!

Will the Institute be one of those that will be called and will answer the call to go into the future? The answer is caught up in the question we ask ourselves at this Chapter, *“Who are we becoming by the Grace of God: Yumi Kamap Wanem Kain lain long grasia bilong God?”* The future is not something that has to concern us deeply. What matters is that we make the contribution we are called to make by listening again to the voice of the Spirit and doing the bit to which we are called in being all that we are meant to be.

Sometimes I find myself passing the burden of discerning the way forward to the younger members of the Institute, and if you look around you will find (a) that we don't have a big number of young members in the Institute but we do have some very fine women in this category however defined, and (b) not a great many of those young members are here in the Chapter room. However, I am also aware that the young members we have can feel particularly burdened when we say to them in effect – you go off over there and find the way into the future. Yes they have a significant part to play, but so do the rest of us. We must be with them on the journey every step of the way. I am an older member now. That does not excuse me in any sense, it just makes me aware of what part I might have to play. I think we should not forget that Catherine aged in her 50s was leading women mainly in their 20s and she did it well. What is more she could be led by them – “she treated the youngest as if they were capitulars” – old language, but an eternally young and vibrant insight. Can this Chapter give our younger women an assurance that all of us will be with them on *their* journey, *our* journey? I hope so.

As our Constitutions remind us, a Chapter is an ecclesial event, a moment in the life of the wider Church. We all bemoan the lack of voice for women in the Catholic Church and that can lead us to overlook the ways in which we can use events such as a Chapter to take up the responsibility we have to contribute to the evolution of a future Church in which the People of God will all have a voice. Religious Life is and will remain a significant element of Church even at a time when, quite properly, we are seeing many more lay people stepping up to take responsibility and being allowed and welcomed to do so. We have a role to play in both shaping Religious Life into the future and shaping the

Church itself through our own treasuring of the lay vocation alongside our own and through our reimagining of how leadership and ministry can function. There is a price to pay since there is no way we can expect to move into the future without subjecting ourselves to further change. Six years ago we faced change with courage to become the Institute and we will need to continue to have courage as we face letting go of even more of what we had come to treasure as the source of our identity and security.

Those of us gathered here are gratefully aware of the many others who are joining us through the wonders of modern technology. We ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the ritual we are beginning as we move forward in faith and trust. *Mipela i askim wok bilong holi spirit long stap wantain mipela long ol prea mipela mekim wantaim bilip na trus. Mi tokaut nau dispela chapter bilong mipela i op.* I declare this Chapter open.

Berneice Loch RSM,
13 August 2017