



Opening Address by Sr Eveline Crotty RSM

I have based my reflection on the opening prayer and the old Gaelic expression TRASNA. As it was shared in the opening prayer the meaning of TRASNA expresses that it is not only an act of crossing but also a spiritual transition from an old way of being to a new. TRASNA does not call us to huddle around yesterday's fires, trying to enkindle the embers. It calls us to venture onto strange paths – risking all, knowing that God will provide light for our first steps.

As I pondered on this prayer over the past weeks Pope John XXIII came to mind. He prayed and reflected over many years before becoming Pope about the Church no longer huddling around yesterday's fires out of step with the political, social, economic, and cultural realities of the world around it.

Pope John XXIII believed that it was time for the Church to take a radical step to renew and respond to a world that was evolving from modernism to postmodernism. You will recall when he became Pope he took the bold step of calling a Vatican Council.

As you read the Vatican documents which, as you know came out of much struggle, prayer and discernment, all members of the Church, priests, religious, laity were being called to interact more fully with the modern world, to discern the change needed to be relevant to the modern world. If all members of the Church took up this challenge, Pope John XXIII knew there would be significant implications for the Church and the world around us.

I read in an article from the Tablet recently by Pedro Arrupe Gondra SJ that “ Roncalli, (Pope John XXIII), Pedro Arrupe Gondra, (who was the General of the Jesuits) and now Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) have all shared the same belief that the Church must engage with a volatile and complex world rather than retreat from it.”ⁱ He goes on to say “One of the essentials of authentic reform (as articulated by Yes Congar) is that, it must be change driven by pastoral concerns discerned on the edges, not ideological renewal imposed by the centre. But in a time of great change this pastoral openness is very unsettling for many.”

Coming closer to home this of course includes our religious Institute, and all of us, personally and collectively. Calling for change, transformation and a new way of governance of our incorporated ministries is unsettling for some. (The warm fires of the known are much more enticing.)

After the Vatican Council, religious institutes and congregations took the Vatican documents seriously, and with this came very many and varied consequences. We were called to reflect on ‘the signs of times’ and look not only on how to respond to the present but also look to the future. The ‘signs of the times’ were clear, if we wanted our ministries to continue to flourish beyond the lifespan of the then Mercy Congregations and now the Institute this would mean handing over positions of leadership to very competent and faith filled lay leaders.

I stand in your midst today excited for the future. Many of you are leaders who are talented, wise, innovative and faith filled and you hold significant leadership positions in ministries across the Institute.

I read recently the philosopher *Antoine de St Exupery* author of *The Little Prince* and he wrote : “If you want to build a ship, don’t first drum up people to collect wood, and don’t assign them tasks and duties; rather teach them to long for endless immensity of the sea.”

As leaders of Mercy Institute ministries, sisters and colleagues you have been given sound foundations and your lifelong learning of how to live Mercy continues day in and day out. Each of you is encouraged to reflect, now and then, on the theology that underpins your work as leaders. Each day your workplace gives you the opportunity to deepen your understanding and expression of what it means to be imbued with the charism of God’s Mercy, Compassion and Justice. You must rejoice when you see it being lived out in others. Actions speak louder than words as we all know. You know the saying “Preach the gospel wherever you are, and only if necessary use words.”

The changes that religious institutes have embraced over the past 50 years have been immense. Just as the changes in our world have in every level of life. The hierarchical Church has struggles with change. Religious Institutes, I don’t deny, have also struggled but they have also embraced it. Earlier expressions of ministry have slowly transformed. Some have become incorporated ministries now highly professional. The emphasis on being a faith filled expression of the works of Mercy has not changed.

Religious women have let go and encouraged dedicated men and women to take on their roles so that ministries could have a life and evolve into the future. Some smaller ministries have grown and flourished and others have come to completion when the need or its expression shifted elsewhere. Religious women are always looking for the ‘cracks in the concrete’ as we say, (we watch for the people who are neglected, rejected or turned away.) We keep asking the question, What can we do to change this? Even though many religious women have now retired they are still on mission doing ministry very quietly, no big fanfare but faithful to their calling.

The younger women are exploring ‘the edges’ with disadvantaged people and also moving more intently into the area of ecological conversion taking up the call of the 8th Work of Mercy, that is, care for our common home and now unpacking *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*, the encyclicals of Pope Frances. This is the current ‘signs of the times.’ The call is: How do we respond to the “Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor in 2020?” We are very good at responding to the Cry of the Poor but we are still unpacking how the Cry of the Earth underpins the Cry of the Poor. How conscious are we of the environmental impact across our ministries on our policies, investments, procurements etc and how these bring such poverty to our world? These are all questions that stretch our thinking and ways of being.

In 2011, 14 Mercy Congregations and one Autonomous Region, over 900 Mercy women, took an enormous risk to step out of their known ways of being governed and share their local identity, cultures and ministries across Australia and Papua New Guinea. In the years leading up to this the ‘signs of the times’ were indicating that it was time to consider the individual Congregations joining together under one governance structure for the sake of the future. For some sisters this was painful having to move away from that ‘warm fireside’ of the known but

deep down they knew it was time to venture onto 'an unknown path' knowing that God would provide light for those first steps of becoming an Institute named ISMAPNG.

Over these 9 years there have been many adjustments both personally and collectively for us to live into becoming an Institute. Some changes have not been easy, but the relationships and appreciation of one another and our various ministries across the Institute has slowly grown and even more so recently during this pandemic time.

I believe we, the Sisters and our Incorporated Ministries, are now at another 'moment.' This is the second phase of our reconfiguring.' At our Chapter in 2017 on behalf of the sisters of the Institute we made the decision to risk again, let go of the reins, and entrust the incorporated ministries to faith filled women and men who would become the Trustees of a newly formed pontifical ministerial public juridic person so that the ministries would 'flourish into the future.'

Earlier this year there was another a sacred moment when the recommendations of the Future Working Party were accepted by the leadership team on behalf of the Institute. We were very aware that we have been entrusted by the sisters of the Institute to make this decision. We are now working towards this coming to fruition. Our hope is that the Ministerial PJP will be in place by 2022.

This is more than just a 'moment.' I believe this is a 'threshold moment' I read recently

"Thresholds are sacred for two reasons.

They are about identity;being and becoming"

Our incorporated ministries each have a strong identity NOW but that identity must evolve. Each ministry must continue to read 'the signs of the times' if it is to stay relevant. I ask the question: In 20 years' time will the identity of the ministries be Catholic, within the Mercy tradition or will they have evolved into unidentifiable NGO's? I am expressing our Hope and our Trust but also being realistic about a fear. The Trustees of the PJP and everyone in leadership positions must ensure that these incorporated ministries will always have a Catholic and hopefully a Mercy identity.

One of the essential keys to ensure their 'faith filled' identity is ongoing formation at all levels of the ministry. This involves not just the upskilling of professional skills for leaders and workers but the deeper valuing of our Catholic, gospel identity in its true sense. It must involve as an imperative, constant reflection, critique, theological input and challenge. An example of this is how will the Pope's latest encyclical challenge your way of looking and delivering your ministry?

During this pandemic I have heard of the innovation so many of you have embraced to make sure your clients have continued to get the very best of care, learning and skills. So many of you have also embraced the question: "What is the deeper meaning in this pandemic, personally in my own life, in my family and workplace? What are we being called to as a society, as a world? This pandemic is a very real 'sign of the time.' No-one has been exempt from its challenge. The 8th work of Mercy takes on not just a surface meaning but the pandemic has made us take it seriously. It has called each of us to be innovative, learn new skills, and treasure a world we are destroying. But will this new awareness continue? What

other changes are we and our colleagues being called to in our ministries, communities and workplaces?

I believe it is time to be courageous, step out of known ways of understanding and treating our world, critique how we care for people who are unwell, elderly, displaced, physically, intellectually or mentally challenged, violated, and offer our students transformative learning so that our young people can learn to think, feel, critique and act. These are all challenges. It is not the time to sit around “yesterday’s fires” of even 2019, but the time is now to take up the challenge, as I know you all are doing, and continue to bring the charism of Mercy alive in its deepest sense, so that our world and its inhabitants can come to the ‘fullness of life.’

I believe our Mercy Ministries have a wonderful future within the new PJP because I know each and every one of them is led by faith filled leaders who want the very best for the people they serve so that God’s promise of a ‘life lived to the full’ is made possible.

I thank you sincerely

Questions for break-out groups

1. What are ‘the signs of the time’ that you have responded to in your workplace of community over the past year that brought about positive change?
2. How are you ensuring your ministry continues to operate from ‘a faith and gospel’ basis well in to the future?

ⁱ Pedro Arrupe Gondra SJ [A transparent soul lit by palpable holiness. The Tablet Feb 8 2020](#)