



**Imagining our Future:
Growth or Maintenance?**
*Pikisarim behain bilong yumi -
groim o stretim*
Br Philip Pinto CFC

**Reflection
Seven**



INSTITUTE OF SISTERS OF MERCY OF AUSTRALIA AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Celebrating our Tenth Year

GRATITUDE SIMPLICITY INCLUSION

Imagining our Future: Growth or Maintenance?

Pikisarim behain bilong yumi - groim o stretim

Br Philip Pinto CFC

I feel so honoured to be asked to share some reflections with the Sisters of Mercy as they celebrate 10 years of the establishment of ISMAPNG. I believe it was a great act of faith and trust when you embarked on this journey, faith and trust not only in God, but particularly in one another. To use a cliché, there was a lot of 'letting go' and quite a bit of 'letting come'.

Cliché though it may be, what do the words 'letting go', 'letting come' awaken in you?

Any anniversary or Jubilee asks us to stop and reassess what has happened over the recent past. I think it is wonderful that you are choosing to do this collectively.

My task is to look at the question: ***At this time, and given our circumstances of age and diminishment, what awaits us? Is our future about growth or maintenance?***

As you take stock after a decade, you remind me of the pilgrims in Sr. Raphael Considine's poem, Trasna:

**The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones
In the mountain gap.**

**Behind them stretched the roadway they
had travelled.**

Ahead, the mist hid the track.

Unspoken the question hovered:

Why go on? Is life not short enough?

Why seek to pierce its mystery?

**Why venture further on strange paths,
risking all?**

Surely that is a gamble for fools ... or lovers.

Why not return quietly to the known road?

Why be a pilgrim still?¹

The temptation to stop and return to the comfortable and tested is always strong. We have worked hard for so long, surely no more can be reasonably expected of us! The verse quoted above puts this so well. It is the age-old yearning for how things were when we were young and energetic. Like the Israelites of old, we too long for the "fleshpots" of Egypt. But we are now in a different time and the world of our youth is gone.

*We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven.²*

But still, Some work of noble note, may yet be done.³



We find ourselves living in a papacy that offers so much vision and hope for the future. I would like us to take a cue from Pope Francis' desire for a Church that is a field hospital, that is one which is found in the midst of the messiness of our world, amid the pain and suffering of life. How strongly this resonates with the Mercy charism! Tomas Halik, in an article written last year teases out the metaphor for us.

"If the church is to be a hospital, it must, of course, offer the health, social and charitable care it has offered since the dawn of its history. But the church must also fulfil other tasks. It has a **diagnostic** role to play (identifying the "signs of the times"), a **preventive** role (creating an "immune system" in a society in which the malignant viruses of fear, hatred, populism and nationalism are rife) and a **convalescent** role (overcoming the traumas of the past through forgiveness."⁴ (Emphasis mine)

Such an approach forces us to stretch our charism to holistically meet the challenges of our time. It enables us to look at how our spiritual heritage can creatively interact with the needs of our world. I believe this is the call that lies ahead for you.

Look at that wonderful story in our Gospels, all four of them, which tells of a woman with an alabaster jar full of costly nard in her hands. In Mark's account we read: *"While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head."*⁵

She received praise that I don't believe we find anywhere else in the Gospels. "Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." I cannot but connect this with Jesus's own words in Luke's Gospel: "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."⁶ I believe both acts require immense courage and immense love. They are born of love. Both of them do what they do, knowing they will be misunderstood. Is there a lesson for us, as we stand in our Trasna crossing place?

Speaking about this Gospel incident, the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, in her very recent book, *The Church Cracked Open*, asks: *So much has cracked open. We have been cracked open. We*

*don't know how to embrace the disruption, make the sacrifice, stop worshiping the beauty of the jar, and instead break it open so the healing substance inside can work its way into a world that so desperately needs it. We're tempted to scramble around and gather the pieces and reassemble the jar and scoop up the lost oil. And we're really terrified we might be the jar, broken open by God, for love of the world. Maybe that's what God wants...*⁷

Could the jar be the Congregation? Do we risk cracking open the jar to let the life-giving ointment be poured out onto a needy world? Or do we try to glue together the broken pieces and preserve the jar and hoard for ourselves the precious liquid it holds? How have we expanded charism over the past ten years?

Rev Spellers continues as she imagines the woman speak and challenge us.

"You and your church [Congregation], you are holding a beautiful jar. You are used to grasping it with both hands, tilting and pouring the contents with moderation through the carefully crafted spout. Someday, you will have to break it open so the contents flow free, or God will do it for you.

*You and your church [Congregation], you think loving a thing means protecting and maintaining it exactly as it was handed to you. Someday, you will understand what it means to love something enough to let it crack apart and just sit with the pieces, notice what needs to be removed for good, and then faithfully piece together what matters most to make something more whole, something more like what God intended all along. Someday, you will lose your life and gain real life. Oh child, this could be one of those times."*⁸

Look over the past ten years and see how we (Mercy Sisters) have enabled our charism to expand. By this I am asking us to notice how we are moving beyond traditional expressions of our ministry.

My dear Sisters, because you have been faithful and courageous in the past this new future is given to you. I believe many religious congregations are today invited into the deeper call, the journey inwards. This is offered to those who remain faithful, and is part of the mystical journey as we know it.

Abraham, our father in the faith, experienced it. Twice he is told to "go out". The Hebrew words,

"lekh lekha" are used on two occasions in the biblical narrative. The first at the beginning of his journey: "Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I shall show you."⁹ The second when he is told to go to Moriah: Take your son, your only son, your beloved Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.¹⁰

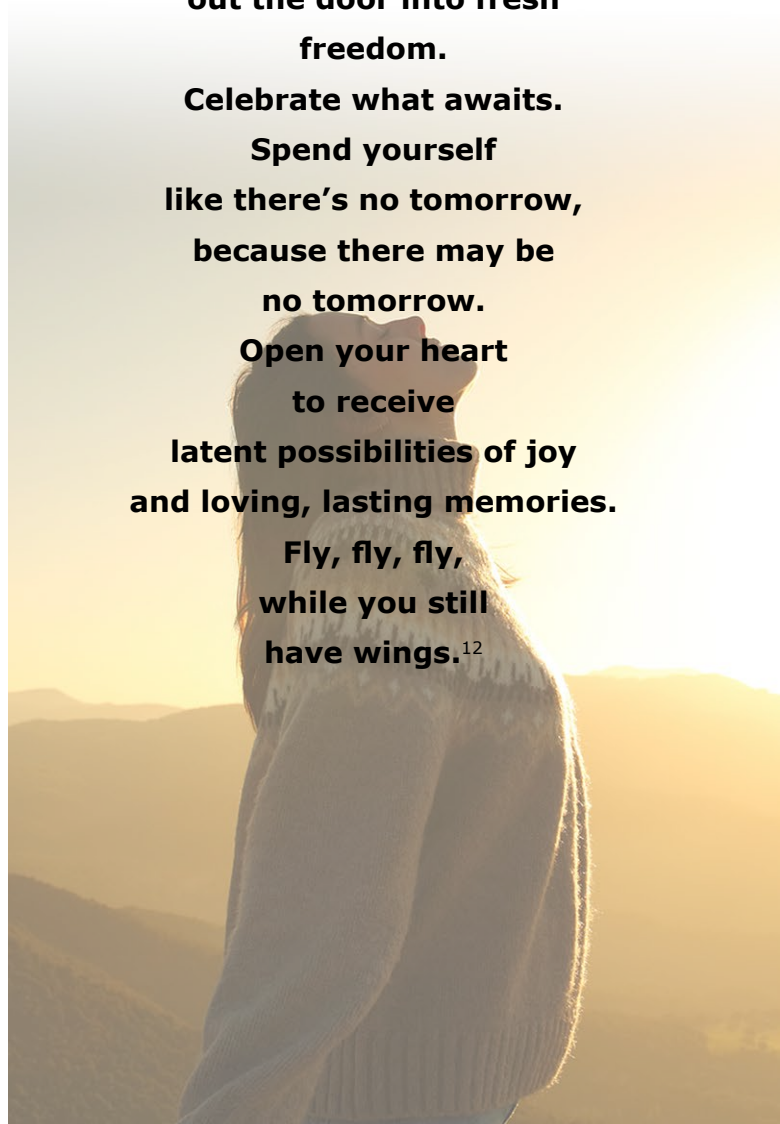
This second command to "go" is a far harder journey, and calls for a much greater surrender to the unknown. Are we ready for it? Can we say yes again? It is like the journey to Jerusalem outlined in Mark's gospel. How powerfully that journey is described in terms of seeing, seeing only partially, and not seeing. Space does not allow me to go into detail here. All I want to say is that the discipleship journey invites us to face death, look death in the eyes, and choose our course of action.

*"Death is not the enemy. Age is not the enemy. These things are inevitable. They happen to everybody. But what we ought to fear is the kind of death that happens in life. It can happen at any time you're going along, and then, at some point, you congeal. You know, like jelly. You're not fluid any more. You solidify at a certain point and from then on, your life is doomed to be a repetition of what you have done before. That's the enemy. There are two kinds of people walking around on this earth. One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congeal into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas, the other kind keep moving, changing. With these people you can never say X stops here, or now I know all there is to know about Y."*¹¹

My dear Sisters, we are continually being invited by the Mystery we call God into the deeper journey of surrender. Surrender of ourselves and of our most loved desires. This is the task of our second journey. This is where we find ourselves at this point on the road. What you began so boldly ten years ago is now pointing you further down the road of trust and love. This is the path of growth, a path well beyond maintenance and settling down.

I leave you with a verse from Joyce Rupp

**Fly
Fly, fly
while you still
have wings.
Fly with buoyancy.
Do not falter in fervour
or waver in eagerness.
Lift off with a zestful spirit.
Enter fully what remains
of the fleeting,
diminishing years of life.
Do not wait
to follow what the heart
truly desires.
Fly now.
Take yourself
out the door into fresh
freedom.
Celebrate what awaits.
Spend yourself
like there's no tomorrow,
because there may be
no tomorrow.
Open your heart
to receive
latent possibilities of joy
and loving, lasting memories.
Fly, fly, fly,
while you still
have wings.¹²**



Quiet Reflection

- As you read through the reflection, what words or phrases attract you?
- Where do you feel the need to spend some moments of quiet?
- Look at your own journey. How has your understanding of the Mystery we call God expanded? What has that invited you to do? Where do you feel called now?
- Cliché though it may be, what do the words 'letting go', 'letting come' awaken in you?
- Where are the growth points in the Institute?
- Share some of what is moving inside you with another Sister, or with your community.



Endnotes

- 1 Raphael Considine PBVM, Trasná. It might be a good idea to spend some time reading and reflecting on the Poem attached to this article.
- 2 Alfred Lord Tennyson, Ulysses
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Tomas Halik, Christianity in a Time of sickness, April 3 2020
- 5 (Mark 14:3).
- 6 Luke 19:19
- 7 Stephanie Spellers, The Church Cracked Open 2021
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Gen. 12:1
- 10 Gen. 22:2
- 11 Gail Godwin, The Finishing School 1984
- 12 Joyce Rupp. Fly While You Still Have Wings: And Other Lessons My Resilient Mother Taught Me.

