

In Company with Catherine

The Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea was established on December 12, 2011 but its story begins in Ireland 180 years earlier to the day, when Catherine McAuley, along with two companions, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley, professed their vows and became the first Sisters of Mercy.

Much is written about why in 1831 Catherine, at the age of 53, founded a religious order. Here it is enough to say that, while religious life was not her first preference, she recognised it as God's way of enabling her and the several women who had joined her, to continue their work, radical for its time, among the most destitute people of Dublin.

That work began systematically in 1827 with the opening of the House of Mercy which Catherine had built with her inheritance from William Callaghan. With his wife, also named Catherine, William had invited Catherine in 1809 to live with them in their home in Coolock, a small village about five miles north of Dublin city. The Callaghans loved Catherine and cherished her companionship. They also understood her desire to help people who suffered severe and unremitting disadvantage in ways that could foster their chances for self-determination. They had no doubt that if they left her their considerable wealth, it would be fruitfully used. So when William died in 1822, three years after his wife, Catherine became a very rich heiress. And hardly was the matter of receiving the inheritance settled when she embarked on her bold project of 'investing' it in those held bound by poverty and ignorance.

“

Dedicated to Mary the Mother of Mercy and given over to works of mercy, the first House of Mercy, established on Dublin's fashionable Baggot Street, was quickly enlivened as a centre to which people came day and night for refuge and from which Catherine and her friends went regularly into the streets and hovels ministering among the dispossessed of the city.

”

In a real way, the House of Mercy witnessed to Catherine's life-time concerns. Influenced by her father, James, a man of faith and refined social conscience, from early childhood she had demonstrated deep sensitivity to people shamed by grinding deprivation. As an adult her heart was with those she knew who were denied the security of home, daily food, basic education, the self respect of decent employment, or any real opportunity to realise a fair quality of life.

There is a sense in which Catherine and the women she inspired to join her could be regarded as social reformers. In a society marred by socio-political forces that protected the privileged and oppressed the poor, they spent themselves and their resources trying to confront the causes of chronic poverty and to alleviate its demeaning effects of ignorance, ill health and homelessness. And while their outreach was to all, they had a special care for young women and girls vulnerable to exploitation.

However, before they were social reformers, these Sisters of Mercy were women of Christian faith. They believed that God, in whose image every person is created, is the source of human dignity; that God, self-revealing in Jesus, is full of compassion; that no-one is unworthy of God's love. They were convinced that when leaders in society were guided by God's wisdom and justice, no person need be excluded from life-giving opportunities.

Catherine exemplified such faith. It animated all the ways in which she carried out 'the corporal and spiritual works of mercy'. And it was her enthusiastic commitment to serving those who longed for God's mercy that encouraged other women to share in her life's work.

Catherine died in 1841. By then she had made ten autonomous foundations of Sisters of Mercy throughout Ireland and two in England. Wherever they were, the sisters tried to respond to human needs too long neglected. They established schools and clinics, ministered to the sick and dying in their homes, consoled the bereaved, provided refuge for homeless people, and befriended prisoners and their families.



To Australia

In 1846, just five years after Catherine's death, Sisters of Mercy made a foundation in Perth, Western Australia. The leader of this first Mercy community in Australia was Ursula Frayne who had known Catherine well and, in fact, was with her when she died.

Over the next few decades other foundations were made in Australia. All of these had been invited by bishops striving to nurture the Church in this vast land where British colonization began in 1788, when Catherine was about ten years old. The foundations came from different places in Ireland, two came from England and one from Argentina. Every one of them traced its origin to Catherine's first foundation in Dublin. In time, some of the Australian groups made their own foundations throughout the country so that by the early years of the twentieth century there were 53 autonomous Mercy congregations in Australia.

Although they were independent of each other, all the Australian congregations were united by the original Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy. Most of this had been written by Catherine herself and was confirmed by Pope Gregory XVI on June 6, 1841. The sisters in Australia were also of one mind and heart in their commitment to the tradition of ministerial religious life which Catherine had begun. This meant that wherever they found themselves, in growing

cities or towns or remote 'outback' places, they tried to respond to desperate needs for evangelisation, education, health care, and a myriad of welfare and pastoral services.

The legacy of these faithful women who literally 'left all' and crossed the seas to begin life anew for the sake of the Gospel in a strange land, is immeasurable.

“

How many women, men and children did they help to find faith in the God of Mercy? How many realised their gifts for learning or found hope and healing through the sisters' ministries? ”

How many were able to contribute to the growth of the Australian Church and to the rise of a compassionate, fair society through sharing with their families, social networks and workplaces the gifts of God's mercy - justice, compassion, peace, forgiveness - which the sisters had helped to awaken in them?

For the Sake of God's Mission

Early Amalgamations

In 1905, prompted by the expanding needs of new dioceses, the Third Australian Plenary Council of Bishops addressed the challenge of consolidating the preparation of teachers for Catholic schools. At this time, teacher training was mostly conducted in novitiates or colleges of the congregations.

The bishops recognised that although such arrangements were effective enough, they were too disparate and did not have a viable future. Consequently they urged congregations of common origin to unite so that their capacity for the vital work of Catholic education, as well for as other ministries, would be strengthened. Also they saw the desirability of very small congregations merging in the interest of good formation and healthier communion of life among the sisters. Thus, within the next ten years or so a large number of the 53 Mercy congregations amalgamated.

It is noteworthy that these amalgamations were to be the first of several developments among the Australian Mercy congregations in their movement towards full unity. In fact, a substantial framework for understanding the history of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) is the major changes in structure and governance which took place in Australia and Papua New Guinea, particularly from the 1950s until 2011 when ISMAPNG was formed.

“

And significantly, the primary motivation for each of those changes was ‘for the sake of the mission.’ ”

”

To Papua New Guinea

In 1955 the Apostolic Delegate to Australia and Oceania, Archbishop Romolo Carboni, requested the Sisters of Mercy to establish a mission in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The response was quick and generous: four sisters went to Goroka in the Eastern Highlands in 1956; seven went to Kunjingini in the Diocese of Wewak in 1957; and five went to Torembe in 1958.

These pioneer sisters in PNG established a tradition of works of mercy through catechetics, primary, secondary and tertiary education, health care and a range of pastoral services. Since the 1950s their work has been continued and expanded by other sisters from Australia, approximately 200 by 2014, who have served in various ministries throughout the country.

Growth of Community in Papua New Guinea

By the late 1970s young PNG women were expressing interest in joining the Sisters of Mercy. While canonical matters to do with membership were addressed in Australia, thankfully the leaders at the time believed that candidates for religious life in PNG should be formed in their own Melanesian culture.

Thus, the formation programme was established initially in Wewak and subsequently in Goroka. The first PNG sisters were professed in 1983 and there has been a steady growth in membership since

then. Educated in health care, teaching, community development and pastoral practice the sisters are well placed to minister God's mercy among the local people most of whom, even today, suffer compounded injustices related to severe poverty and social unrest.

Towards Deeper Unity

Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia

As mentioned above, there has been a movement towards full unity since early in the twentieth century. And like most movements involving potentially radical changes, it has had periods of inertia and periods of vigour.

One of the most important initiatives from the vigorous years was the creation of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia (ISMA - not to be confused with ISMAPNG) in 1981. This was a federation of the seventeen Australian congregations in which each one retained its own autonomy. PNG joined ISMA as its eighteenth member when the Holy See gave it status as an autonomous region in 2006.

For thirty years ISMA engaged fruitfully in God's mission, particularly through the sisters of its member congregations who ministered in 'cutting edge' situations among Australia's Indigenous people, in Papua New Guinea, in refugee camps of South East Asia, in Pakistan and East Timor, and in Australian detention centres for asylum seekers. ISMA also fostered a vibrant spirit of sisterhood, encouraged professional collegiality among women and men who worked for mercy institutions, and took Australia and PNG into 'global mercy' through its integral involvement with the Mercy International Association.

Yet notwithstanding its rich contribution to mercy life and mission, the governance structure of ISMA could not generate the mature union for which sisters throughout Australia and PNG had hoped in 1981. That is to say, the inherent tension between the worthy ideals of acting as one institute, and the autonomy of each of its members, often hampered the most effective exercise of authority and limited ISMA's potential for Gospel witness.

“

By the time of ISMA's fifth chapter (2004) the Sisters of Mercy were ready to engage again with the provocative question of unity.

”

In a world that seemed to be longing for God's mercy with ever increasing urgency, how might the members of ISMA, with their considerable institutional ministries, reconfigure themselves 'for the sake of the mission'?

Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea

The chapter's question, in various forms and contexts, was the subject of wide-ranging exploration for six years.

Eventually, in light of tested outcomes from several probing consultations and the results of due canonical processes, fifteen members of ISMA, namely the Congregations of Adelaide, Ballarat East, Bathurst, Cairns, Goulburn, Grafton, Gunnedah, Melbourne, Perth, Rockhampton, Singleton, Townsville, West Perth and Wilcannia-Forbes and the Autonomous Region of Papua New Guinea chose to form a single canonical entity. This meant that each one, as well as ISMA itself, was dissolved. In their place one new congregation was created by decree of the Holy See on December 12, 2011. Significantly this was the 180th anniversary of the founding of the Order of Mercy by Venerable Catherine McAuley in Dublin.

The new congregation is known as Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG).

The other three members of ISMA, the Congregations of Brisbane, North Sydney and Parramatta, remain independent of ISMAPNG and each other. However, close bonds of sisterhood remain among the four congregations. Also they continue to share in a number of important initiatives, including the critical ministry of Mercy Works Ltd, which enables community development projects in Australia, PNG and beyond.

Through Institutional Ministries

As noted, from the beginning of their time in Australia, and then in PNG, Sisters of Mercy have served God's mission through diverse ministries. In order to flourish and expand and to comply with requirements of church and state, some of these ministries needed the stability of an institutional structure. Consequently, over the years Sisters of Mercy established many institutions - schools, hospitals, facilities for the frail aged, 'at risk'

women and children, community outreach, and so on. The fact that ISMAPNG inherited a relatively large number of institutional works from the former congregations meant that it was in a strong position for continuing the tradition of Mercy service begun by Catherine and her first companions.

Shared Responsibility

A significant character of the institutions is their appeal to people from the wider church and society who wish to participate in them.

Whether motivated by religious conviction, humanitarian ideals, preference for engagement in a not-for-profit organisation, or a simple desire for meaningful work, these women and men, with their dedication and professional talent, are pivotal to a culture of authentic Mercy service.

This was not a new development. It was another rich gift to ISMAPNG from the former congregations whose institutions had been increasingly directed and staffed by lay people, at least since the 1980s.

Here it must be stated that ISMAPNG is glad and grateful to acknowledge, as the Second Vatican Council clearly affirmed, that service of 'the faithful', with their baptismal graces and their own vocational commitment, is essential for the promotion of God's mission. Within the Catholic tradition of faith, this is a fundamental belief.

In practical terms, that belief has compelled lay people and the sisters collectively to share the responsibilities of gospel stewardship for ISMAPNG's institutional ministries in a spirit of interdependence.

Through the Ministry of Stewardship

Stewardship, of course, is more than astute economic management of each work, necessary as that is. Indeed the Scriptures teach that stewardship itself is a ministry crucial for the service of God's mission in any given time or place on the earth. In a biblical sense, it can be regarded as the work of co-creation with God.

For ISMAPNG, the competence of the ministry of stewardship depends on a robust mix of 'gifts differing' to honour civil and ecclesial obligations, to lead each

work according to the deep values of its purpose, and to animate every aspect of the works with qualities which are at the heart of God's mercy. These qualities include reverence for all creation, justice, hospitality, compassion, wisdom and forgiveness.

The Trust of Governance

Those who are invited to the ministry of stewardship for ISMAPNG, religious and laity alike, are entrusted with governance of the institutions. In effect this governance, which can thrive only on the mutuality of trust and respect, is the chief means by which the ministry of stewardship is exercised. That is to say, governance is the authorising power which, according to defined areas of responsibility and accountability, must ensure that the institutional ministries exist and operate according to all legitimate requirements, that they are true agents of God's mission, and that, in their endeavours to be always relevant and viable, they are faithful to the founding inspiration of Catherine McAuley.

“

God's mercy to us is the heart of our service to others. Manifesting the great mercy of God, Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and freedom to those who are oppressed. When we discover what it means to belong to God's people, and to receive through them God's love, then may we reach out to the women and men in our day, as mercifully as Catherine McAuley did in hers.

-ISMAPNG Constitution 4.01

”