

December 12, 2021



My dearest Sisters

As you prepare for the Tenth Anniversary of your Institute
I write to you, each one,
in the name of
*God, source of life and goodness
Jesus, ever the principal path of God's mercy,
the Spirit of Wisdom who animates and guides
all you do.*

Ten years! Blessings on all they represent for you: light and dark days; hopes fulfilled and hopes unrealized; brave actions in the name of God's mercy and opportunities missed; experiences of best-self and experiences of needing your better angels; times to forgive and times to ask forgiveness; joys and sorrows mingled.

Ten years! I know well from my own experience how critical the first ten years can be. It is the time when founding fervour matures into tested and tried commitment and high ideals become grounded in hard-won wisdom.

In this letter I am inviting you to reflect with me about a few realities of these ten years which I see are influencing the identity you are creating for yourselves as the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. And as you reflect, I ask you to keep in mind a simple question. It is a familiar one. You will recall that it was the overarching question which guided your consultative work in preparation for the Second Institute Chapter (2017). It is also the title of the first Institute Leadership's report to the chapter which, in its comprehensive way, reminds you all that the Institute is essentially evolving; that like every Institute member regardless of her age or stage in life, it is ever be-coming, ever a 'work in progress'. God's work, of course.

***The question, always relevant, always timely,
always inviting honest response is
'Who are we becoming by the grace of God?'***



In the Beginning

Having been with you in spirit from the outset (and be assured, for all the years before), I begin with two memories of the Mass which inaugurated the Institute. Maybe those of you who participated in this moving event at Saint Mary's Cathedral in Sydney will share them.

One memory is of the spontaneous, prolonged applause which erupted from the congregation - sisters, ministry colleagues, family and friends - when Nerida Tinkler began her Welcome Address:

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this historic occasion, as together, we celebrate the new Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea which was established just six days ago on December 12 - the 180th anniversary of the founding of the Order of Mercy in Dublin by Venerable Catherine McAuley.

My other memory is of the sisters from Papua New Guinea in their vibrant traditional dress, dancing and singing the length of the cathedral as they presented the gifts for the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

These memories are instructive. The first, because it expresses the faith and hope at the heart of your Institute with its potential for a new unity of Mercy sisterhood and new strength for mission. The second, because in its delightful Melanesian way, it brought infectious joy to that sacred occasion while confidently witnessing to the integral place of Papua New Guinea in the Institute's life and mission.





REALITY: Creating the Institute through a Network of Communities

Australia is a vast country – about ninety times bigger than Ireland. I see that now but I could never have imagined it in my time. Nor could I have envisioned Papua New Guinea – only seven times larger than Ireland - but nothing would have prepared me for this ‘land of the unexpected’ with its rugged topography, stunning vistas, hundreds of local languages and diversity of cultures.

How could you, 930 sisters at the time, give life and purpose to your Institute in such challenging lands? How could you create a living experience of ‘one’ out of fifteen formerly autonomous groups, each with its own culture? What would be needed for communion of life and mission to thrive? After all, it was for the sake of these two mutually dependent elements at the very heart of Mercy religious life that you chose to become one congregation.

Community is the primary place where each of you lives and ministers. It is where you make your home in the Institute.

You created a network of communities, at first six, now eight; sisters with authority delegated from your elected leadership were appointed to lead them. This ‘infrastructure’ is intended to be flexible so that it can adapt according to new insights into how Institute life can be nourished. I expect that such adaptation will happen in the near future. But regardless of its shape and size and whatever the form of its leadership, community is the primary place where each of you lives and ministers. It is where you make your home in the Institute. And as your Constitutions so compellingly remind you, communities are more than functional structures.

They are essentially groupings of your sisters among whom you ‘try to live in the friendship of Christ’s disciples’. They are characterised by true equality in your relationships, acceptance of each other, and ‘a forgetfulness of anything which does not make love its message’. [Constitutions 5.08]

As I see it, your whole-hearted efforts for unity within each community and the mutuality among all communities, determine the quality of the Institute’s strength of purpose. And, in that regard I want to say that in a world fractured by oppressive use of power, inequality of access to basic resources, ideologies which demean the sacredness of all life, and other such death-dealing forces, your integrity of life offers an eloquent symbol of right relations. This is so, not only for Australia and Papua New Guinea, but for the whole human family, at least for those who have eyes to see and hearts to understand.



REALITY: Some Pain and a Little Disaffection

Of course, it has not been easy for everyone to settle into her community. There has been a sense of loss, occasionally deeply felt, of the former congregations with their reassuring familiarity. Sometimes, in lamenting the passing of a congregation's characteristic ways such as celebrating, ritualising, story-telling, decision making, and so on, a small number of sisters have resisted the new. Their disaffection can be 'catching' and sometimes it troubles others.

Such reactions are understandable and, as you know, common enough when a beloved organisation is replaced by another, no matter how worthy its purpose. Relinquishing a congregation in which one had invested a lifetime, whose unique culture one had both formed and been formed by, is especially poignant.

With the wisdom of hindsight, during the reconfiguring years, when practical preparations began towards the new institute it might have been helpful for all concerned to anticipate something of the pain or dislocation related to closure of congregations. This need not have negated the grace of change inviting all to create a new deed for the sake of Mercy life and mission, but it could have validated aggrieved feelings and assisted their healing. Maybe too, owning the natural need to lament the passing of congregations could have freed individuals to set aside their ambivalence about the new Institute and to approach its future confidently, patiently and with openness to change and difference.

Maybe too, owning the natural need to lament the passing of congregations could have freed individuals to set aside their ambivalence about the new Institute

Another expression of disaffection here and there, but certainly not everywhere, is captured by the word 'corporate'. Sometimes, sisters use it as complaint, 'the Institute is becoming corporate' they say. Have you heard statements like that? I think 'corporate' is not meant as a judgement on how you are living your communion of life or engaging in mission, but I suspect it conveys unease about the administrative side of the Institute. That is to say, it seems jarring for some that the Institute requires many employees, operational systems and policies and procedures to work effectively as a large, public organisation across two countries. For the most part, this is different from the homely ways former congregations, small and locally based, managed their affairs. Some sisters are concerned that the principle of subsidiarity is compromised. Occasionally the old tensions between 'local' and 'central' emerge, although they may be more conceptual than real. However, I think you would generally agree that, while not integral to your living of religious life, good administration can effectively facilitate it. Perhaps there are services which could be done without or done differently at this time. What do you think?




REALITY: A Bounty of Gifts Differing

Sisters, notwithstanding a few patches of despondency in the Institute, I must tell you that from my perspective it is Spirit-filled light and energy which prevails.

I cherish your collective gifts of soul and intellect: your faith and fidelity, your courage, patience and abundant generosity, your hospitality towards those whose difference confronts you, your forgiveness of the ones who offend you, your humility when you see your own failings (note to all: be ever alert), your cheerfulness and your sense of fun.

Especially dear to me, sisters, is your loving care for each other and your dedication to those you serve. Yes, your numbers are diminishing and, for the majority, your personal capacities are lessening, but your heart for ministry is as true and strong as ever. The bounty of 'gifts differing' among you and the conscientious way you use them for the sake of others, delights me. I am also stirred by your 'day-in-day-out' prayer for the people and places on earth longing for God's mercy. With your conviction that God's mercy is *our liberation and our happiness*, as Pope Francis reminds you, that prayer is a powerful ministry.

I want to thank you too, for the gracious way you honour your sisters when they die. Over the ten years you have commended 280 sisters to God. In doing so you have reverently celebrated the uniqueness of each one and her contribution to your communion of life and mission. At your funerals there is typically a lovely human blending of faith, sadness, gratitude, benign truth-telling and gentle humour. It may seem a paradox but these occasions, along with the monthly gatherings on 'zoom' when together you remember the most recently deceased sisters, animate your Institute and enliven your sense of belonging.



*Especially dear
to me, sisters, is
your loving care
for each other
and your
dedication to
those you serve.*

REALITY: Home Away from Home for a Global Sisterhood

No doubt you would expect me to be greatly pleased that you engage earnestly in the works of Mercy International Association. I think, for example, of Mercy International Centre in Dublin where a large number of you have contributed a rich mix of gifts in areas such as hospitality, home-making, sacred heritage, faith formation and spirituality, communication, administration and leadership. And I am glad and grateful that, along with your sisters and associates world-wide, you have enabled the house that was my home to become the universal home of Mercy.



I think too of your participation in programmes of Mercy Global Action through which you heighten your understanding of best ways to advocate and act for justice in the name of God's mercy. And I love the occasions when, thanks to clever technology, you can be part of a global Mercy community gathered to discuss unifying matters and to celebrate the sisterhood you share across many lands.

Dear Sisters in Australia and Papua New Guinea, it seems to me that as MIA and its various works continue to converge with concerns of the world, it could lead to a future for the dynamic tradition of Mercy life which I entrusted to you. With God's grace, each one of you has matured that tradition in the way of religious life. But perhaps young people will find a way different from yours. With God's grace it will be no less ardent or fruitful.

But perhaps young people will find a way different from yours. With God's grace it will be no less ardent or fruitful.



REALITY: Pope Francis - Principal Teacher of God's Mercy

Now, I want to refer to Pope Francis because it seems to me that his ministry has been a great blessing for you. As I see it, Francis epitomizes servant leadership in the way of Jesus; he warmly welcomes and includes all people, yet has a preferential care for the ones who are desperate for healing, burdened by shame, bereft of hope. Like Jesus, he carries authority lightly and his commitment to truth and truth-telling uplifts those with ears to hear.

With his profound understanding of God's mercy, indeed God's transforming mercy has been the theme of his universal leadership, it seems that Francis offers you new insights to refine your own spirituality and to sharpen its focus on the needs of the world. Because you are women who have made your vows to the 'God of all Mercy'.

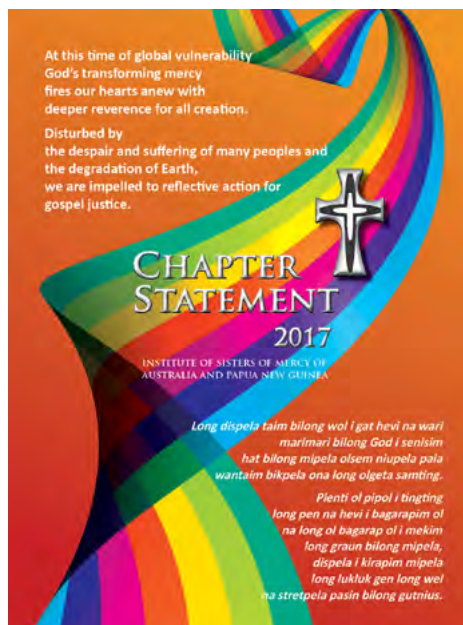
I expect Francis' words have special resonance for you:

Let us be renewed by God's mercy ... and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice.



REALITY: Laudato Si and Call to Ecological Conversion.

Among Francis' best and bravest gifts to date is his Encyclical 'Laudato Si' which he wrote in 2015. The following year, along with your Mercy sisters and colleagues world-wide, most of you participated in the Mercy International Reflection Process (MIRP). This was yet another a graced initiative of MIA. As a communal process, it strengthened your own mutuality and deepened appreciation of your global sisterhood. In particular, MIRP drew you to contemplate the rich theology of 'Laudato Si' with its two truths critical for your faith and mission. One truth, grand and beautiful, is the dynamic interrelationship of all creation which shows forth the image of God. The other truth, sad and salutary, is the accelerating vulnerability of Earth, creation's common home, because of self-serving, destructive human action.



Undoubtedly the teaching of 'Laudato Si', along with issues which emerged for your urgent attention through MIRP, influenced the mind of your Institute's chapter in 2017. This is most clearly seen in the Chapter Statement which identifies perilous areas of 'global vulnerability', impelling you 'to reflective action for gospel justice', in name of 'God's transforming mercy'. Its call to you is constant.

I am consoled that in the spirit of 'ecological conversion' which Francis urges in 'Laudato Si', so many of you have full-heartedly embraced the new eighth work of mercy which he declared not long before your chapter. Why would you not embrace it? 'To care for our common home' is a natural complement to the traditional corporal and spiritual works of mercy which motivate your lives of apostolic

service. And it is good to see that you are developing personal habits of life which demonstrate your commitment to protect and nurture Earth. At the same time, the Institute as a whole has obliged itself to create a culture of 'integral ecology'. This will be achieved when all Institute policies and practices are consistently in harmony with the principles of 'Laudato Si' and other teachings which promote and protect the inherent dignity of all creation.

To care for our common home' is a natural complement to the traditional corporal and

8. *spiritual works of mercy which motivate your lives....*



REALITY: Disgrace

I know that one of the most challenging realities for the Institute over most of your ten years has been the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse. The Commission exposed a grave wound in the Church – widespread, festering over decades, hidden from the curative light of truth. This is the disgrace that hundreds of children and vulnerable adults were violated by individuals entrusted to minister to them in Jesus' name. That the suffering of these little ones broken by abuse is beyond healing, breaks God's merciful heart.

I understand that the Commission's revelations, and other sources of disclosure over past years, continue to cause deep sorrow to God's people, including yourselves. As ecclesial women you feel the collective shame of the Church and I know you share the disillusionment of so many close to you - your families, friends and those among whom you minister.

*Shame is false
unless it produces new
integrity - the true
fruit of humility and
truth*

But shame is false unless it produces new integrity - the true fruit of humility and truth - which permeates the entire Church and all its works. In the meantime, dear sisters, remember that your faith is not in the Church, wonderfully sacramental as it can be, but in God's very self whose redemptive love excludes no-one and whose mercies are new every morning. (ref Lamentations 3:22-23)



REALITY: Hard Truths

Your Institute frequently receives claims against it from women and men who, as children, were in care of the former congregations. Mostly these historic claims concern sexual abuse by predatory individuals – pastors, workers, holiday hosts - associated with the orphanages or schools. While sisters themselves were not abusive in that way, they are regarded as having failed in 'duty of care' – not being vigilant, not believing boys and girls who complained of offences. It is this failure in the past to safeguard children, to respect their dignity and uphold their rights which justifies the present legitimate claims.

While sisters were not sexually abusive, a few were severely punitive, causing physical and emotional damage. Yes, there were contributing circumstances. These sisters may have been ill prepared for their work and had little choice in their appointment to it. They may have lacked personal formation and the support of wise leadership. Their working conditions were harsh. The needs of some children were complex and their behaviour provocative. In that light it could be said that they themselves were victims of systemic failure and ignorance. Indeed, to be

fair to their memory, I think another justice is needed. Nonetheless, to a small child, their cruelty was inexcusable and ungodly. This is a hard truth for you to own.

I am aware of the large drain on your resources related to payment of claims. As together you are responsible for careful stewardship of the Institute's 'common purse', so together you carry the burden of redress. This costly demand is often disturbing for you and your response to it is sometimes anxious. But keep in mind that Providence is constant and generous, as I so often experienced myself.



REALITY: New Ministry

Sisters, ironically the work of redress arising from past failures in ministry is a ministry in itself. This seems clear to me in your Institute's efforts to respond with Gospel justice to those who have claims against it. Such justice is not merely payment of money. But with real desire to assist claimants' healing of mind and heart, you are ready to meet them, to hear their stories of pain and betrayal, to receive their anger, to express sorrow for suffering caused. This is the ministry of redress. May it be transformative.



REALITY: For our Ministries to Flourish

The Institute's decision to pass its responsibility for most of the incorporated ministries to a Public Juridic Person is another key development in recent years. In fact, the newly formed PJP, named Mercy Ministry Companions [MMC] will begin its work of governance just one week before you celebrate your Tenth Anniversary.

Sisters, I know that formation of MMC accords with the mind of your chapter in 2017 that decision and action should be taken for governance of the ministries – community services, education, health and aged care – 'so they can flourish into the future'. However, there are two qualities of MMC I want to note with you. Both are reasons for gratitude.



Mercy Ministry Companions Trustee Directors.

Back Row - Des Powell, Tony Goad, Rowena McNally, Gabrielle McMullen.

Front Row - Carmel Ross, Margaret Bounader and Margery Jackman

One quality is that all the ministries passing to MMC are robust agents of God's mercy. As works of the Church they offer professional service of the highest standards and enjoy reputations of excellence. Notwithstanding that they have been administered and staffed largely by lay women and men for many years, they are sure testimony to your sisters who began them and served in them for many decades. It is simply true that the ministries could not thrive as they do today without the foundational and enduring influence of these women - their vision, dedication, acumen, personal frugality and sheer hard work. MMC will always reverence this inheritance.

The other quality is that all the newly appointed Trustee Directors of MMC are lay people. This is intentional on the part of your Leadership and demonstrates the Institute's obedience to the signs of the times by affirming the rights and responsibilities of lay people to share in leadership of the Church's mission. You would appreciate that the baptismal vocation of the laity is clearly attested in documents of the Second Vatican Council and various papal statements of the past century. Like several of his predecessors, Pope Francis himself is very keen for lay leadership and often encourages women and men to step forward for appropriate roles. 'It's time' he says. And I agree.

REALITY: Institute Communication

Finally, I want to commend your considerable efforts and investment in the area of communication. This is one of your most valuable and valued resources. Not only do your systems ensure that important information is effectively shared, they also enable bonds of sisterhood and ease of participation in the life of the Institute through prayer, formative programmes, celebrations and special events.

Considering your reliance on communication, I am aware that those of you in Papua New Guinea are often hampered because of the country's difficulties with providing reliable electronic services. I hope you can continue to find ways of keeping communication between Australia and PNG alive and effective. For me, as you know,

regular communication was pivotal to nurturing relationships, conducting the business of our lives and creating the character of our Order in its first ten years, especially once the foundations began. But then we were limited to the unsophisticated means of pen and paper and Irish post. Imagine if we had what you have today?



I will close by returning to the question which has accompanied your reflection. In light of the realities I have mentioned, and your responses to them, how do you answer:

‘Who are you becoming by the grace of God?’

Sisters this is a long letter. Thank you for persevering with it. Enjoy your celebrations of the Institute’s Tenth Anniversary on December 12, which of course is also the 190th anniversary of our whole Order.

And now I pray for you, each one by name:

May the Spirit of God continue to find a home in you.

May the Spirit of God continue to animate you.

May the Spirit of God continue to renew your heart and mind.

I am your ever grateful and affectionate

Catherine



Questions for Reflection

1. Several realities are mentioned as influencing or shaping the Institute's identity. What are your own insights and feelings about those realities?
2. Of course, there are other realities which are forming the identity or character of the Institute; maybe they are influencing you personally in some way. Can you name two or three of them and say why you find them significant?