

MERCY'S WAY FORWARD: ONE STEP AT A TIME



Pope Francis last month welcoming 12 Muslim asylum seekers who flew with him to Rome from the Greek island of Lesbos. Mercy leads us “to open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society,” writes the pope in his latest book. (PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES)

The latest and largest document to come from Pope Francis is his book, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), which is his considered response to two gatherings of the World Synod of Catholic bishops, held in 2014 and 2015 and devoted to family life and love. Observers speculated in advance about whether the pope would change the rules, especially those excluding the divorced and remarried from receiving Communion.

Cardinal Kasper, long an advocate for a more merciful approach by the church to human failure, sums up the pope’s book by saying that it changes nothing “but everything has changed.” The church’s doctrines remain the same, says Kasper, but its pastoral approach to the messiness of human life and the complexity of human choices has to be different from here on.

Of special interest for any who are involved in Mercy’s ministries is a section in Chapter Eight of the pope’s book, where he talks about how pastors are to accompany and care for people whose lives are compromised in their efforts to love. It’s a section called “The logic of pastoral mercy”, and as the title suggests, Francis writes to strike a balance between maintaining the highest ideals without dimming the light and truth of the Gospel and, at the same time, supporting and encouraging those who reach beyond failure and breakdown towards a wholeness that is sometimes hard to achieve.

Francis longs for a church that can see the goodness sown by the Holy Spirit in the midst of human weakness. It’s a church that while continuing to express its objective teaching, is like a mother “who always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the streets.”

Here’s an image which would have struck a chord with Catherine McAuley and her first companions, the walking sisters in their homemade boots, finding their way through Dublin’s streets to hospitals, homes and hovels in slum alleys, through snow and mud, to any place where people were suffering or in need.

The Gospel itself tells us not to judge or condemn, says Pope Francis. He warns that Jesus expects us to stop looking for the niches “which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune,” and instead to enter into the reality of people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. “Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated.” (par 308)

Pope Francis reminds us that his reflections are being offered in a Holy Year devoted to mercy, when the church is more aware than ever that Jesus himself “is shepherd of the hundred, not just of the ninety-nine.” Mercy is the hall-mark not only of God, but of all who are God’s children, the pope insists. “In a word, we are called to show mercy because mercy was first shown to us.” The church, says Francis, is “not a toll-house; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.”

The mind-set the pope recommends to those involved in any kind of pastoral care is one that leads us “to open our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society.” Such people may not always find us endorsing their own ideas or desires, “but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth.”

A key to this passage is found earlier in the chapter, where Pope Francis speaks of “gradualness in pastoral care”, an expression used by Pope John Paul II to describe the journey taken by those seeking the right path, advancing with God’s help along a way that leads to growth in goodness and freedom. One is reminded here of Catherine’s “simplest and most practical lesson” of resolving to be good today, but better tomorrow. “Thus may we hope to get on, taking short careful steps, not great strides.” Mercy’s path demands not perfection, but a resolve to take one step at a time.

Taihoa, spare a moment.....

You’re invited to conclude this reflection by sharing the following questions when you next meet with your colleagues at the Mercy board or ministry in which you serve.

- *Who are the people ‘living on the outermost fringes of society’ to whom your involvement in Mercy brings you close? What is it they most require from you? How might you offer more of this?*
- *Pope Francis says that when we move from the shelter of our lives into ‘the maelstrom of human misfortune’ our lives “become wonderfully complicated.” Talk for a moment about what this means for your involvement with Mercy. How do you manage this ‘wonderful complication’?*

- **Dennis Horton**

He Inoi: Prayer

Welcome to Mātāriki

Our prayer this month centres on Mātāriki, the Māori New Year, which begins this year on June 6, with the appearance of the Pleiades in the pre-dawn sky. For Māori, the four-week season is traditionally a time to remember those who have passed on, and to celebrate the fruitfulness of land and sea, with Earth’s abundance of crops and fish.

*HAERE mai, te tau hou e Mātāriki,
welcome to this new season of light,
brightening the sky over our wintry land,
promising a spring of fresh growth
and the fruitfulness of another summer.*

*In this Year of Mercy,
may we heed Pope Francis in his latest
letter,
inviting us to open our hearts,
in the steps of the Good Shepherd,
to those living on the outermost fringes
of society.*

*Tiaho mai ra,
shine brightly on us,
with stars from our past.
Let the witness of Catherine McAuley
and of our Mercy founders
inspire us to be stars in our turn,
that others may enjoy to share
what we have received,
in mercy’s name.*

Amen.

Produced for He Waka Tiaki mission team.

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