

EMBODYING GOD’S MERCY FOR THE WORLD
Re-imagining mission, identity and esprit de corp today
Inaugural Mercy Ministry Companions Conference October 27, 2022
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INTRODUCTION:

Thank you for the honour of sharing with you a reflection for this inaugural Mercy Ministry Companions Conference. The establishment of this new ecclesial entity has brought together the Institute’s incorporated ministries in the areas of health and aged care, community services and education. It will provide not only a best practice business model but even more importantly a fresh contemporary Gospel-inspired leadership, governance and mission for the staff and people who are entrusted to our care. I congratulate the Institute leaders and trustee directors who will play a vital role in governing Mercy Ministry Companions according to Catholic principles and inspiring their dynamic tradition of service begun by Catherine McAuley in the name of the God of mercy.

I do not believe that the transition to this new public juridic person and its civil entity is merely a response to the decline of the membership of the Institute. Rather, it was a result of a deep listening to the Spirit and a discernment process that took into account the signs of the times. It was the task of reimagining the future that the Mercy Sisters and religious generally are called to do at critical junctures.

The history of religious life is a journey into chaos, discovery and re-imagination writ-large. Consecrated men and women have known too well that there is never a time to settle into false securities. Discerning and living the creative power of the Spirit through the paschal rhythm of life and death have been their strength. Religious are the avant-garde who are entrusted with the prophetic task of pioneering and trailblazing. The Church and the world look to religious to lead them to new thresholds and crossroads where the God of the journey beckons.

Mercy Ministry Companions, therefore, is a new fresh way of embodying the Gospel of mercy. It is not a mere corporatization for the sake of business survival and sustainability. It is not a kind of institutional “foster care” in view of the imminent demise of the congregation. It is fundamentally a reimagination of the founding charism. It gives new expressions to the congregational tradition. It is ultimately a celebration of a future-oriented Church understood in the broad sense.

It is saying “our best days are not behind us but before us”. This new generation of Mercy leaders are not a “surrogate mother” for a dying congregation. You are Mercy infused companions, heirs to the heritage of the sisters and new bearers of McAuley’s vision.

WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS:

For centuries, religious were often seen as a cheap labour force for the Church. In fact, quite recently the Osservatore Romano unusually denounced widespread practice of nuns who cook, clean and wait on tables for cardinals, bishops, priests and even seminarians. Religious are neither a cheap labour force nor a kind of infantry troops for the institutional Church. Their reason d’etre is not keep afloat its infrastructure, that is, to staff hospitals, schools, orphanages and the like. Religious life primarily is the art of scanning the horizons above and exploring the terrain below for signs of a new life and a new future.

Religious are pathfinders who venture into the untrodden. We are not settlers but pilgrims; not guardians of status quo but explorers of what is possible. Religious are like the aboriginal pioneers who refused to sit on the edges of the shrinking billabong and yearn nostalgically for the good old times. It’s in our DNA to **go to where the river flows** in order to explore new frontiers of engagement and new possibilities of solidarity.

Religious are like the scouting party sent to reconnoitre the land. They were the avant-garde who went ahead of the people in order to map out the path ahead and ensure a safe passage for those who followed. They took enormous risks and led the People of God to a new future. It is an apt image for religious, I suggest. We are the avant-garde who are entrusted with the prophetic task of pioneering and trailblazing. The Church and the world depend on us to lead them to new thresholds and crossroads where the God of the journey beckons.

But instead of exploring new pathways to the future, we often spend our energy on maintaining the infrastructure of the past. We find it hard to uproot and replant. In Italy, some of my confreres wanted to keep custody of our shrines to the last man standing. Some of us would rather turn into pillars of salt, that is, to die heroically like Lot’s wife than to go into the unknown land. Some of us cannot even think and act outside the paradigm that has shaped us, let alone seeing with fresh insights

the lofty vision that requires inter-congregational, ecumenical, interfaith, ecological and indeed cosmological reimagination.

This new ecclesial entity of which you are the leaders, therefore, is an expression of the audacity that has characterized Catherine McAuley and her sisters. As keepers of the flame, you are to go where the river flows and enable others to find new life.

Where are the thresholds, peripheries and crossroads that we are called to venture into today? Where are the spaces where we can be the catalysts for the Kingdom and the yeast for the leavening of God's people?

Where are the needs that we as a Gospel-based entity, are vocationally called to be prophetic, that is, being alert to gaps between the Gospel and contextual realities?

Where are we in the intersection between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor? If there is an issue with absolute currency and urgency in the world today, it is the ecological crisis and the disproportionate impact on the poor. Who else but those who are supposed to be attuned to their cry?

Where are we in the bigger picture of the Church embodying the vision of what I call the alternative relational paradigm? It is an alternative conscience and practice that is rooted in Jesus's downward mobility, solidarity and preferential option for the disadvantaged.

Where are we in respect of the enabling of women and lay people to reclaim their agency in the life of the Church given that the old wineskins of patriarchalism, triumphalism, power and privilege are bursting before our eyes?

We need to think and act for the reign of God even if it means joining forces with other congregations, other denominations, other faiths, other traditions. The survival of our institute is not paramount. It is the Gospel and the reign of God that we are utterly committed to. Ron Rolheiser says wisely we need to give up our death. He challenges us to live in such a way that our death is a blessing to others.

MYTH DRIFT OR MISSION FOCUSED:

One of the biggest challenges for a faith-based organization and specifically one with an economy of scale like this sizable and diverse business operation is the danger of losing or weakening its mission focus. The ever-increasing pressures to balance the budgets and to respond to corporate demands, coupled with secularism of the wider culture will inevitably impact on the mission.

When the business pole of the tension has the upper hand, the mission narrative ceases to be the senior partner. This phenomenon is known as a myth drift that is not uncommon in Catholic health, aged care and social services institutions. The litmus test for Mercy Ministry Companions is not to lose its founding story but to embody afresh the Gospel of mercy and witness to the values of its mission.

It is particularly essential that key leaders, e.g. trustees, CEOs, board directors, accept and interiorize the founding story. If not, their decision-making and operations will run counter to the founding story and its values, e.g., corporate values will dominate. Formation of key leaders in the founding story, therefore, is critically important for the survival and growth of the mission and its different ministries.

As key leaders, you stand on the shoulders of the pioneering sisters and continue their spirit of missionary and innovative leadership. You owe it to them not simply by repeating what they did for the people of their times but by reimagining and re-contextualizing the Christian story that drove them in the first place. You owe it to them to put flesh on the marrow of the Gospel for the people of our time.

One of the implications for those leading in the post-Christian culture is the fostering of our sense of identity. Clearly, we need to be at home with our minority status with all that entails. It means that our value system is often at odds with those of the dominant culture. It means that our engagement in the public sphere may be fraught when we advocate for matters that government and other civic powers oppose. Nurturing a post-Christian or a kind of “exilic” identity in a culture of rampant individualism, profit-driven and success-oriented is no easy task.

Another lesson to be learned from the biblical exile is the totalizing system that seeks explain everything in order to justify itself. The practice of empires is to

squash any dissent and any alternative vision that challenges the dominant narrative. It was critical that the exiles did not allow their spirit to be domesticated. They maintained intentional disciplines that distinguish the membership of the subversive community from those of the empire.

Similarly, Christians today need to keep imagination alive, to support our members in their ability to hold and practice faith in an environment that is antithetical to our Gospel-oriented vision and to keep our spirit from being subdued. We today need to maintain the disciplines of life that attune our minds and hearts to that vision, including prayer, reflection, critical thinking, consistent lifestyle etc.

We are called to be a blessing for the Church and the world by the measure of our authentic witness. This authenticity lies in our courage to be the voice of the minority and the conscience of the outsiders to the totalizing system. We are called to be like the prophets of old who have the burning passion, urgency, discomfort and the itch to speak God's alternate vision for humanity. Now we need to embody that vision in living as contrast communities, avoiding cultural accommodation and demonstrating a different way to be a society.

THE NEW RELATIONAL PARADIGM:

Not long ago, I happened to listen to a speech by Chief Executive Women's President Sam Mostyn during her National Press Club address, in which she outlined her vision for an inclusive post-pandemic economy and society. Drawing the lesson from the pandemic, she said that it is the human and social infrastructure of the care economy, that has been shown to falter.

The care economy is what sustains life. It involves childcare, elder care, education, healthcare. It can be personal, social and domestic services that are provided in both paid and unpaid forms, within formal and informal sectors. Mostyn argued that our care economy has faltered not just because we have not sufficiently invested in it but even more fundamentally because we see it as unimportant and secondary to other sectors. We value the breadwinner much more than the unpaid caregiver.

In addition to capitalizing on those lessons by putting care at the centre of the economy, Mostyn asked a question that every Catholic should reflect upon in terms of its relevance for the Church. “What would our country look like if we began reimagining a society that truly celebrates care and invests in its women; a country that ensures opportunities for women and men alike, and that treats women with the decency and respect that is our basic human right?”

To me, an analogous question that we can ask ourselves in the context of searching for a new way of being Church is “What does our Church look like if we began to reimagine a Church that celebrates and empowers women and men disciples to exercise their God-given gifts for the life of the world?” To put it differently, “What does our Church look like when its structures and relationships are configured in such a way that we can be a source of hope for people and the planet?”

This question lies at the heart of what we call a “synodal” Church. Synodality is about participation, agency and discipleship. Synodality is premised on this core notion that we have equal dignity and equal right to participate in the mission of the Church by virtue of our baptism. Vatican II affirmed that the Church is fundamentally the Church of the baptised not of the ordained.

For a long time, the culture of clerical dominance had been solidly entrenched in the Catholic Church ever since it took centre stage in the Roman Empire. It is a by-product of the model of church, which sees itself as self-sufficient, superior to and separate from the outside world. The Church as understood and articulated by the Second Vatican Council sees itself as a pilgrim People of God, incarnate in the world. It is a new paradigm - one that is based on mutuality not exclusion, love not fear, “smell of the sheep” not elitism, engagement with the world not flight from or hostility against it, incarnate grace not dualism. It is the Church going out of itself as opposed to closing in on itself.

The time has come for us to embrace and implement unambiguously and decisively the vision of the pilgrim church, that the Second Vatican Council entrusted to us. The time has come for the Church to embrace a new paradigm based on a discipleship of equals, so that all the People of God can create a new culture of humility, accountability and service.

The time has come to apply the trinitarian theological framework as a basis for restructuring the Church as a circular, symbiotic and co-operative relational paradigm rather than a linear pyramidal power structure. Trinitarian theology today stresses love, equality and distinction as key in our attempt to grasp the meaning of a relational God, linking our faith with action for the environment, and Trinity is the template for restructuring a church, so that the equality of the baptized is actually lived, rather than pyramidal power. Only in such a church will everyday Catholics come to recognize that their lives offer countless opportunities for ministry.

Pope Francis affirms that ‘this path of synodality’ is precisely what “God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” He gave new impetus to the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, stating that the path of synodality represents an indispensable prerequisite for infusing the Church with a renewed missionary impulse: all the members of the Church are called to be active subjects of evangelisation and “missionary disciples”.

Pope Francis has applied a critical lens through which the Church is renewed for the sake of its mission for the poor. The Church is helped to decentralise and impelled towards the peripheries. The Church, the People of God, should walk together, sharing the burdens of humanity, listening to the cry of the poor, reforming itself and its own action, first by listening to the voice of the humble, the oppressed, the marginalized or the *anawim* of the biblical tradition, who were at the heart of Jesus’s public ministry.

I think we can ask the same question of this body. “What does this ecclesial body look like when its structures and relationships are configured in such a way that we can be a source of hope for people and the planet?”

For me, this question is not just about efficiency of our financial operations or even the bottom line thereof. I believe that our primary objective is embodying the life-giving, circular, symbiotic and co-operative relational God in our structures and relationships, internally and externally. It is never about short-term profit and the bottom line.

When we embody the God that we believe in, we learn to consider a complex and nuanced bottom line. We know there is another line beneath the bottom line, what we might call the space where God signs off on what we have done. That is to say, we are not simply satisfied when we are in the black; we are only satisfied when our work reflects the values we espouse, the mission we profess and the governance that frames our decision-making processes.

We can draw inspiration from the biblical narrative that confronts and subverts the imperial narrative of domination and control. It refuses to accept the status quo and imagines a new social reality outside the scope of what the imperial systems can offer.

We can draw inspiration from our forebears like Catherine McAuley and countless other men and women of courage and generosity who modelled another way of living and relating. In the world where the rules were made by the strong and the structures of power favoured the privileged, they embodied the boundary breaking spirit of Jesus. They mirrored God's kingdom where those socially marginalised were brought to the table and in turn contributed to a more inclusive caring society that is Australia today. The Kingdom vision of Jesus guides us as we endeavour to be a community that serves as an antidote to the politics of fear, self-interest and the economy of exclusion in our society. We are privileged to be partners with God's plan for a shared destiny of hope, communion and life for all.

Questions for further reflection:

1. It's in our DNA as catalysts of God's new order to go to where the river flows in order to explore new frontiers of engagement and new possibilities of solidarity. Where and how do you think you could find and witness to the God of life and love today?
2. The living out of the mission and founding values at all levels of the organizational culture is vital to Mercy Ministry Companions. What educational, formative and developmental processes do you think are needed to ensure its effectiveness? How do we invest in such a way that mission is actually driving the business in decision-making and values-based outcomes?

3. Refounding is critical to the identity, mission and esprit de corp of the movement. How do we as guardians and stewards of the founding charism not only prevent the myth drift but also give new expressions to it?

4. How can we ensure that the structures and relationships within MMC model the lifegiving, circular, symbiotic and co-operative relational God?