

REPONSE TO BISHOP VINCENT LONG – Eveline Crotty RSM

Thank you Bishop Vincent for your address this morning. My spirit gave a little leap for joy as so much of what you shared resonated with me, and I am sure with many of us.

To respond to your paper. You are right in saying that many of the decisions the Sisters of Mercy have made in the past few years have come, not from a negative response, noting the fact that religious vocations are in decline or that our particular way of living the charism of Mercy is in a deep process of transformation. What our response to the signs of the times has come out of is a long slow process of prayerful reflection, deep listening, as you say, always with ears and eyes open, good analysis of the situation and theological reflection as a way of pondering what 'pathways' still need to be opened to bring about the living out of the charism of Mercy in dynamic ways into the future. Since the days of Catherine, sisters have forged 'pathways,' been trailblazers, agitated for the most disadvantaged within the society and marginalised in the Church, sprung into action and often from a very small niggling thought, having a sense that from a small beginning, maybe this thought could come to reality and be transformative in the lives of people. I loved your sentence "Religious life primarily is the art of a new life and a new future."

A little example: I remember hearing the story years ago of the sisters pondering and concerned that so many of the girls from their school who completed their studies found themselves working in factories even though they were capable of so much more. One day one of the sisters found 2 old typewriters, so she polished them and got them working, taught the girls to type, learn shorthand and business skills - all she had to learn herself first. In time she heard that girls were now working in offices and some had moved on to higher education. From the confidence these young women gained they saw a future for themselves. From two typewriters and resourceful Sisters of Mercy the world opened for many women. You can imagine we have thousands of stories like this.

Vincent, you said to us that we all are 'keepers of the flame, we are to go where the river flows and enable others to find new life.'

I believe only recently we were at the 'fork in the river' but now Mercy Ministry Companions has taken one fork, the responsibility to take the established ministries into the future. As for the sisters, we are on the other. We are still trailblazing, agitating for the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor both in the Church and society. Sometimes we are in the background and most times at the coalface and at other times, no matter the age, holding the banners. We are not going away we want to continue to walk beside you all as colleagues, to

encourage you to keep going when you want to give up the struggle, and yearn for the sisters to come into your boat on your river.

As you said Vincent, In the bringing about the creation of Mercy Ministry Companions this is ‘fundamentally a reimagination of the founding charism.’ This reimagination is now in the hands of the Trustee/Directors, Boards, CEO’s and employees. All are companions as you say, with the challenge not to become settled, complacent or pleased with what you are presently achieving, but being brave to continue to stay in the chaos of life’s challenges and re-imagine and create the future. All of you here today as Vincent said are “Mercy infused companions, heirs to the heritage of the sisters, the charism of Mercy, and new bearers of Catherine’s vision.”

Vincent, you have challenged us to think deeply by asking these questions:

Where are the thresholds, peripheries and crossroads etc. in your Gospel-based entity? This is a constant disturbing question for us all.

‘Where are we in the bigger picture of the Church??’ You note that we are still in the “old wineskins of patriarchalism, triumphalism, power and privilege,” whereas Jesus way of being was on a ‘downward mobility, solidarity and preferential option for the disadvantaged.’

My experience over many years is that the wineskin of the systemic Church, and those who choose to dwell within this wineskin, still believe their wineskin with all of its patches, trying to hold it together, holds the best wine (wisdom in our terms). When I hear the ministry stories of sisters who frequently spend time with those on the periphery I hear about their encounters, stories of relationship, heartaches and joys. This is where the Spirit of God is alive and well. As you say Vincent, let’s live in hope and sit with your question “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?’ Hope does lie on the periphery, where newness is born out of pain and suffering. This is where we learn humility and hear the spirit of God being alive and expressed in ways we never thought of.

Another question you asked was: What lies at the heart of a “synodal” Church? You named it as participation, agency and discipleship, where women and men experience ‘equal dignity and equal right to participate in the mission of the Church by virtue of our baptism.’ This is the ideal. I believe synodality is harder to live than it sounds. We all must critique ourselves regularly ‘are we really living and working in this way?’ Clericalism is deeply embedded in Church structures and personnel – lay, religious and clerical, and shows itself in the living out in the use of power, treatment of women and those marginalised. Synodality

as a way of being and acting needs our continual critique almost at the end of every meeting.

A little example: I was recently on a committee where three members out of a committee of six lobbied their position and believed at the end of the meeting that we had all agreed with the outcome. They held the truth. For the other members the matter had not been negotiated, nor agreed upon. The three believed the matter was settled. Later, that evening I received an email from one of the 3 mentioned members 'thanking me for joining them on their synodal way.'

My learning from this? – we have a long way to go to really understand what 'synodality' means in reality if we are to live out Pope Francis' call which you described so well. I thank you for naming this in your sharing with us today.

To conclude: Vincent I thank you for your sharing today and finish with a quote from *Evangelii Gaudium* #114 which the Trustees/Directors have heard me quote before:

“The Church, (and we as the gathered people) must offer a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”

Your talk today has demonstrated all of this and challenged us to keep walking forward – thank you