

NEW ERA FOR SISTERS OF MERCY



Sunday, December 18, 2012 was a historic day for about 1,500 Sisters of Mercy, their friends, families and ministry colleagues who gathered at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney for the foundation Eucharist of the newly established Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG). This historic occasion, also attended by members of other religious congregations and many bishops and priests from dioceses throughout Australia and PNG, heralded a new era for the Sisters of Mercy which began on December 12, the 180th anniversary of the founding of the Order of Mercy in Ireland by Venerable Catherine McAuley, when 14 of the 17 Australian Mercy congregations, along with their sisters from the Autonomous Region of PNG, came together as one new Institute for their first Chapter.



During this inaugural Chapter, held at Baulkham Hills in Sydney, 60 representatives of the 930-strong group of sisters elected a new leadership group, comprising (*L-R in photo*) Sisters Annette Schneider (Vicar), Theresia Tina (Councillor), Barbara Bolster (Councillor), Sally Bradley (Councillor) and Berneice Loch (Institute Leader).

Speaking to those gathered at St Mary's Cathedral, newly elected leader, Sister Berneice Loch said there was a "deep concern" among sisters gathered at the

Chapter about the "vast extent of displacement in our world: displacement within individuals who have suffered various forms of trauma; the far more obvious ways of displaced people – economic and political refugees among them; displacement experienced in environmental devastation and change. Making a response calls for local action and always will, but to make a difference we need also to work for change at national and international levels. Sisters of Mercy internationally have a presence in United Nations circles and we hope our renewed capacity will help us all to be a more effective part of those networks," she said.

In his words of welcome at the Eucharist, principal celebrant, Cardinal George Pell acknowledged the contribution of the Sisters of Mercy to many individuals and communities. "It's wonderful to see so many sisters and friends and I think the number of bishops is indicative of the debt – [for] some of us a lifelong debt – that we owe to the Sisters of Mercy," he said.

For many years, but particularly since 2005, the 17 Australian congregations and the Autonomous Region of PNG, who were federated in the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia in 1981, have been searching for the best way to nurture their unity and to strengthen their capacity for engaging in God's mission of mercy in this twenty-first century.



On July 20 this year, the Holy See approved the petition for the new Institute to take effect at the commencement of its first chapter on December 12. On that day, each of the 15 groups ceased to be a separate canonical and legal entity and its sisters became members of the new Institute. The 15 uniting groups, comprising some 930 sisters, are Adelaide, Ballarat East, Bathurst, Cairns, Goulburn, Grafton, Gunnedah, Melbourne, Papua New Guinea, Perth, Rockhampton, Singleton, Townsville, West Perth and Wilcannia-Forbes.

While three of the existing 17 congregations – Brisbane, North Sydney and Parramatta – will remain independent, they and the sisters in the Institute are anticipating ways of continuing to collaborate and share their common mercy heritage and their love of their founder Catherine McAuley.

There are many Sisters of Mercy in this Diocese - in Mildura, Merbein, Warrnambool, Terang, Mortlake, Timboon, Cobden, Colac, Ballarat, Ballarat North, Sebastopol, Beaufort, Gordon, Apollo Bay and St. Arnaud and recently, Sr. Veronica Lawson, former Congregational Leader of the previous Ballarat Congregation, was asked to speak of the changes to at Masses in St. Alipius' Parish last Sunday. Her words and Archbishop Wilson's Homily at the Foundation Mass follow:



Left: Bishop Connors (right) with other Bishops



L - R: Sisters Veronica Lawson, Rose Marie Glennen and Elizabeth Dowling



*Matthew Byrne,
Principal of
Damascus College
Ballarat reading the
Prayer of the Faithful*

*Papua New Guinea
Sisters bringing up
the Gifts*



Sisters gathered after the Mass

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE SISTERS OF MERCY?

Veronica Lawson RSM - February 5, 2012

I welcome this opportunity to speak at the Masses this weekend and to let you know what is happening to the Sisters of Mercy. This parish of St Alipius', Ballarat East is such an integral part of our lives, as is the Diocese of Ballarat. Ten days hence, on February 15, a Sister of Mercy from Northern NSW will take up her appointment as Community Leader for the 118 Mercy sisters in the western half of Victoria. Her name is Berenice Kerr and her photo is on the right. Berenice is first and foremost a Sister of Mercy. She is a scholar, an historian, and an educator with an expansive and engaging spirit. Her office will be at 151 Victoria Street. Although her appointment is from February 15, she will not actually be in Ballarat until March 8.



How is it, you may ask, that a sister from afar has been asked to assume such responsibility in this part of the country? The answer takes us back almost eight years to an insight of some of the Mercy leaders of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia (ISMA). We established ISMA in 1981. At that time, we remained autonomous congregations with Leaders and Councils. In that structure, there were more than eighty sisters in designated congregational leadership roles, as well as an elected Institute Leadership Team of three sisters. The Congregation Leaders formed, with the Institute Leadership Team, a Plenary Council that met at least twice a year and attended to matters of mutual concern. We established Mercy Works, had a common website, and co-operated on common projects.

ISMA served us well. In 2004, however, we decided it was time to reconfigure, to have fewer sisters in the internal ministry of leadership, and to pool our personnel and material resources for the sake of our Mercy mission. We engaged in processes that involved every sister, processes that called us to a renewal of Mercy Religious Life. By early 2011, fourteen of the congregations and the autonomous region of PNG had formally determined to create, with the approval of the Holy See, the new **Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea** (ISMAPNG). We held a National Chapter in Sydney in December and ISMAPNG came into being on December 12.

Prior to the establishment of ISMAPNG, each of the participating groups held celebrations to mark the transition into the new. On November 6 last year, the Ballarat East sisters had held a very moving public celebration of our 130 years. Many of you know that because you were there. The Melbourne Sisters of Mercy with their families and friends filled St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne on December 4 to celebrate and give thanks for their Congregational journey.

On December 3, the Ballarat sisters again gathered to give thanks for the gift of each other and for what we might bring individually and collectively to the new Institute. We celebrated our Mercy story: the founding of the Institute of Mercy 180 years ago in Dublin; Catherine McAuley's death ten years later; the arrival in Ballarat of the first Sisters, Agnes Graham and her companions, who came from Warrnambool in 1881; their immediate involvement Ballarat East - in St. Alipius' Primary School and the establishment of Sacred Heart College; the early growth of the congregation and the founding of the Colac community in 1887; the opening of St Arnaud in 1901; our short time in Redan; the establishment of Aquin Training College which grew into the Aquinas campus of Australian Catholic University; the beginnings at Ballarat North in 1911; the opening of St Francis Xavier Primary School in 1914, and everything that was to follow in so many parts of Victoria and beyond, in Chile, PNG, Timor Leste, the NT, and outback NSW. In short, we celebrated all the joys and the heartache of thirteen decades. We recommitted ourselves to Mercy religious

life and to ever expanding Mercy connections. For some of the Sisters, the process has been painful. For all, it has been a time of grace.

We now find ourselves with 930 sisters in the new Institute, a third of whom live in Victoria. We in this western part of Victoria now belong to a community of approximately 150 Sisters known presently as Southern Community B. The Institute has eleven designated leaders. At the Chapter, we elected an Institute Leader, Sr Berneice Loch, and four councillors. One of the councillors is Sr Annette Schneider whom some of you may know from her time at ACU in Ballarat as well as her work with school staffs.

We articulated a direction for the new Institute that focuses on the displaced of our world. We put it this way: 'Mercy impels us to extravagant hospitality, compassion, and justice in an Earth community being shattered by displacement.' This focus is in continuity with the gospel we have heard today and with the founding vision of Venerable Catherine McAuley who established the Institute of Mercy for young women at risk.

Catherine's charism is shared by our Mercy Associates and our partners in ministry. We are proud to claim some 55 Associates in this community and a countless circle of friends in this parish where the Sisters of Mercy have truly been at home for some 131 years.

To return to the question: 'How is it that a sister from afar has been asked to be our Leader?' One of the first tasks of the new Institute leaders was to choose, from a list of nominees, a Community Leader for each of the six Communities in the Institute, one in the North (encompassing Queensland, Northern Territory, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste), two in NSW, two in Victoria, and one for SA & WA. In an act of faith and trust, most of us expressed a wish to have a leader for this community who might come with new eyes and draw us beyond our present dreams. So it is that we, Sisters of Mercy in this little neck of the woods, count ourselves blessed that Berenice has accepted the invitation to be our leader.

I conclude with the words of Mary Wickham rsm, a Mercy poet who is part of this community: '*May God heal where healing's needed, Bless what waits for blessing's touch.*' We thank you, the people of the Ballarat Diocese, for your enduring friendship and support as we move with hope-filled hearts to embrace whatever the future holds.

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP PHILIP WILSON

(President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference)

Foundation Eucharist of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea
St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney

December 18, 2011



It is of great interest to me in reading about the history of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy to discover that it was never the intention of Venerable Catherine McAuley to become a sister. She didn't want to be a religious. But luckily she met a nice bishop who helped her and this is a good turn of events I can tell you. Given the history that I belong to it's really something. But Dr. Murray was of great help to her because he understood exactly what she wanted to do and he knew why she had the opinion that she had and he helped her to create a new way of being religious, so that the Sisters of Mercy, known as the walking sisters, were able to do their work about bringing the mercy of God to the people of Ireland and very quickly then to England and to the rest of the world.

It's very appropriate that we celebrate this Foundation Eucharist today as the new Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea is being founded by its members. The Gospel of today reminds us that we live in a Church that began at a moment when Mary, a woman, was able to be open to God and provided a space for Jesus to take flesh within her womb and for the work of God's redemption and re-creation then was able to take place. This moment when Mary, the Holy Spirit and Jesus were together, was a moment of rebirth, of re-creation, a moment as we say in the liturgy of the foundation of the life of the Church, an ecclesial moment.

But what we endeavour to do in our discipleship is to re-live those moments or to re-live that moment in the moments that we live in our lives to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to take place in our lives; to give us the opportunity to bring new birth into the life of the Church. And today we commemorate one of those moments where a group of women re-dedicate themselves to the life of the Church and the Gospel of the Lord within the specific charism that was established by Catherine McAuley. And this is a moment of regeneration, of re-birth and opportunity, a moment for new and wonderful things to happen. Not without its challenges and I'm sure not without its difficulties. But we have to understand the nature of this moment and how we can depend upon the power of God that comes to us in our lives to help us to do the things we need to do to give glory to God's name.

So this moment of foundation as we celebrate the Eucharist is an ecclesial moment where we are joined together around Jesus, in union with Mary, empowered by the Holy Spirit and I'm sure accompanied by the presence of Venerable Catherine McAuley today. There are two points about her life and the experiences that she had and her manifestation of faith that I'd like to share with you today as we set the scene for this Eucharistic celebration.

There are two indications through Catherine's life about the nature of the charism of mercy that she wanted to have brought into life in a new way in the life of this Institute. The first is that when she was a little girl that she participated in a devotion that was current at the time called *"The Psalter of Jesus"*. And in fact, as a little girl, she actually copied *"The Psalter of Jesus"* in her own hand. The pattern of this prayer was that after each part of the prayer you would call upon the name of Jesus imploring him to come and to fulfil the request that you make in the prayer. Some years ago when Sister Mary Carmel Bourke RSM wrote a life of Catherine McAuley she said these words:

"In the psalter of the name of Jesus, a refrain is formed at the end of each section of the prayer by calling upon the name of Jesus. And Catherine McAuley found comfort in the saying of his holy name and Jesus would have filled her heart with his presence and love. Already the Lord was calling her and this was her way of saying 'here I am Lord'. This awareness of the presence of Jesus and union with him in going about his work and doing his work in the world and trying to personify his mercy in the life of the Institute in the way in which the sisters lived out their lives and did their work".

The second moment that I think is very important in our reflections about Catherine McAuley and the legacy that she left to the Church came with the moment of her death when she said this to the sisters:

"My legacy to the Institute is charity. If you preserve the peace and union which has never been violated among us you will feel even in this world a happiness that will surprise you the foretaste of heaven." Her legacy of charity of course is at the very centre of all of the aims and endeavours that the Sisters of Mercy make in the world and the work of this foundation

today is part of the way of making that reality more concrete in the life of the Church in Australia and Papua New Guinea for which we should be most grateful.

So we've read in the readings today and we now go on to make our response in the Eucharist to what the Lord has said to us. And I think that today we can take on something of the prayer that was so important to Catherine when she was a young girl - this Jesus psalter.

We ask Jesus to be with us in our lives and our endeavours. We ask Jesus to be present to us in our celebration of the Eucharist today in a special way, because as we bring our gifts of bread and wine to the altar, we understand that we place our lives on the altar as well. And we ask that our lives and our endeavours will be taken into the centre of the mystery of our Lord's suffering, death and resurrection that enables us today to live in the power of the Holy Spirit and to be his people as we live in the world; to be his Church; to live out the reality of the Church in the specific and particular ways in which the Lord has called us to be his disciples in the world today. So I pray:

Jesus, be present at our foundation and beginning;

Jesus, sustain our daily efforts;

Jesus, heal our limitations;

Jesus, bring everything to fulfilment in the glory of the Trinity.

For more information about the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea visit <http://institute.mercy.org.au>