

ASSOCIATE GATHERING NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE



On Saturday May 13th Associates from Alnwick, North Shields, Newcastle and six members of the National Commission gathered at St Cuthbert's North Shields for the Third Mercy Associate Regional Gathering of 2017.

At 10.30am Associates processed to the chapel, some carrying Mercy symbols which provided the focus for Morning Prayer.

The theme for the day was, The 8th Work of Mercy: Caring for the Earth; the 'new' Work of Mercy which Pope Francis expands on in his Encyclical 'Laudato Si' (2016). "As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a grateful contemplation of God's worldas a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness and makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world" (Laudato Si)

In addressing the theme our speaker, Sister Kathleen Gooch, asked:

- How are we caring for the Earth & do we need to do more?
- How did Catherine McAuley respond to this 'new' work of mercy way back in 19th Century Dublin?
- How does Pope Francis' Encyclical, Laudato Si, speak to us and challenge us?



After this introduction we expected to hear how we must get busy, be more active, more involved in caring for God's Creation and His Creatures, in particular the poor & disadvantaged but, to our surprise, Sr. Kathleen started with Our Shoes!! "Why did you decide to wear those shoes today; are they comfortable, see if you can walk in your neighbour's shoes; do you like to 'kick' off your shoes sometime and how does that feel?" After this simple exercise of talking about shoes we all agreed that, although there are times when we need to be in 'active' mode, 'Shoes On' time, we also need 'Shoes Off' time, when we can 'kick' off our shoes to relax, rest and refresh ourselves, physically and spiritually. It is often in our 'Shoes Off' time that God speaks to us; refreshing and energising us for our 'Shoes On' time when we are actively involved in our daily tasks.

Sr. Kathleen emphasised the importance of this with a passage from Exodus 3:v1-6 (the Burning Bush). "Moses was in active mode or 'shoes on' time, minding his sheep. He was drawn away from his activity; he was caught up with 'shoes off' experience and called to encounter God. In the ordinary of the burning bush, dwells the divine. In our busy lives this story can teach us so much about God in everything, every place, every person, in the unexpected. All we have to do is open ourselves to the experience. Then, like Moses we will be with our God, as a friend with whom we can be at ease and find coping mechanisms which we never thought we had".

'Blessed be the pressure places of our lives that entice us into time apart. Blessed be the path of true discernment that rises up when we are still. Blessed be all of life that discloses a world charged with the grandeur of God. Blessed be God'.

As Sisters and Associates of Mercy we could not find a better example of a 'Shoes on'/'Shoes off' woman than Catherine Mc Auley. Catherine was living and practising the 8th Work of Mercy way back in 19th Century Dublin. Catherine coped with so many environmental issues that are still with us today in many parts of our Earth: poverty, pollution, lack of clean water, hunger, sickness and disease. With the limited resources and personnel available to her she did her best to improve things but her main concern was for the creatures of God's Creation. With her mercy 'boots on' Catherine worked tirelessly for the poor in Dublin. In 'boots off' time she relaxed with her Sisters fully aware that work and prayer are interdependent. The time she spent in prayer, deepening her relationship with her God of Mercy, gave her the strength and coping mechanisms to care for the poor, sick and dying for whom she became the personification of God's Mercy, Love and Tenderness.

Just as Catherine read the Signs of the Time in 19th Century Dublin and attempted to do what she could to make a difference, so too Pope Francis read the Signs of the Times today. One area of concern for Pope Francis is the Care of the Planet and its People, which he addresses in his Encyclical, Laudato Si. He urges us to make radical changes in life styles; take more care of our Earth and its creatures, especially the poor. Like Catherine Pope Francis is a 'Shoes On' 'Shoes Off' person, showing great concern for people especially the poor and disadvantaged. Like Catherine his God is a God of Mercy, Love and Tenderness and, like Catherine, he too knows that in order to pursue his hectic schedule of travel, audiences, meetings etc. he needs to spend time apart with God.

We then spent time reflecting on some quotes from 'Laudato Si'. After sharing our reactions to and preferences for the quotes we agreed that the one which resonated with the majority was this one:

'We receive this world as an inheritance from past generations, but also as a loan for the future generations, to whom we will have to return it'.

We then discussed ways in which we, as individuals, might;

- become more conscious of our actions that are harming the Planet
- make one change in my lifestyle to help save Planet Earth.

Our theme song/hymn for the day reminded us that in all our Mercy Journeying, whether with 'shoes on' or 'shoes off', we are never alone, God is always walking beside us, living His life through us:

***'Let me walk with you on the journey, open your heart to me,
Share with me your story and you will come to see
That I am always beside you, walking the way with you.
I am always beside you, living my life through you'***

Our day of reflection ended with the Earth Rosary, led by Sr. Bridie Stephens but the socialising went on for some time. While we enjoyed a good cup of tea and tucked into a

feast of scones and cakes we sang along to songs from the 40's and 50's; Scotland and Ireland (courtesy of Sr Kathleen). We sang 'Auld Lang Syne' and said our goodbyes. We had all enjoyed a wonderful 'Shoes Off' day.



Eileen Malone

Associate