Celebrating 175 Years of Mercy in the United States

*also in this issue:*

**Extractives:** Mercy’s Multidimensional Approach to Advocacy

**Welcoming Space:** Why We Need Mercy Retreat Centers Now and Into Our Future
On December 21, 1843, Mother Frances Xavier Warde and six other Sisters of Mercy from Carlow, Ireland, arrived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. How does the legacy of these pioneer sisters challenge and inspire us today? Photo credit: Mercy Heritage Center. Read more on page 4.

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Dear Sisters, Associates, and Companions in Mercy,

In 1879, Sister Frances Warde wrote to Sister M. Gonzaga O’Brien about the impact of Catherine McAuley’s friendship on Frances’ life:

“You never knew her, I knew her better than I have known anyone in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it meant to be a Sister of Mercy: To see the world and its peoples in terms of God’s love, To love everyone who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on – It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.”

Frances’ words tell us much about Catherine and equally as much about Frances herself. From Frances, we catch a glimpse of Catherine’s deep commitment to love and care for all those in need and Catherine’s whole-hearted relationship with her God—a relationship that imbued her with a vision that has stretched from Baggot Street to the four corners of our world today. Frances’ words also reveal Frances’ own embrace of this vision of compassionate and caring love for all in her enthusiastic claim: “It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.”

This issue of ¡Viva! Mercy provides insight into the continuity of the vision of Catherine and Frances in the life of our Institute. The second part of the series on our response to the issue of extractives speaks to how we continue to see “the world and all its peoples in terms of God’s love,” understanding that “justice is what love looks like in public” (Cornel West). The article on the ministry offered by our spirituality centers supports the integration of contemplation and action that grounded the lives of both Catherine and Frances. Finally, Frances herself merits special consideration as we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the beginning of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States. Frances’ pioneering spirit that brought her across the ocean to a new world continues to inspire all of us to embrace the future, wherever our Journey of Oneness takes us.

In June, the Institute Leadership Team invited sisters, associates, companions, staff and coworkers to engage in personalizing the 175th anniversary by joining with others in creative “175 responses.” We encourage you to check the Institute website for reports from these groups between Mercy Day and Foundation Day and be inspired by the variety of our commitments to the Mercy spirit!

As we join with our Mercy family across the world in our celebration of Mercy Day and as we remember in particular way our own beginnings in the United States, may we continue to say with wonder and gratitude: “It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy!”

In Mercy,
**SOUTH CENTRAL**

**SISTER MARIA TERESA MUHUHU**, who transferred from the Missionaries of Charity, took perpetual vows as a Sister of Mercy on June 16 in Kingston, Jamaica. Also, Sister Kelly Williams made her first profession of vows July 28 in D'Iberville, Mississippi.

Alyssa Dela Cruz, a student at the Academy of Our Lady of Guam, won first place in the 2018 #MakeMercyReal Video Contest. Her video examines the inequality and lack of opportunity faced by millions of women throughout the world. Second place went to students at Mercy Academy in Louisville, Kentucky; and third to students at St. Vincent's Academy in Savannah, Georgia. The contest began in 2017 to engage young people and to help them connect with the Critical Concerns. You can see the winning videos at sistersofmercy.org/contest.

**CARIBBEAN, CENTRAL AMERICA, SOUTH AMERICA**

**TEN SISTERS** from CCASA participated in the “Call to an Encounter,” a gathering for Sisters of Mercy under the age of 50, in St. Louis, Missouri, June 28 – July 1. The 10 sisters met prior to the gathering, joined by CCASA Sister Carolee Chanona, who has been living in St. Louis.

During the under-50s gathering, sisters reflected on their experiences living the Chapter 2017 Recommitment and our Journey to Oneness and shared hopes and dreams for the future of religious life and our Institute.

**MID-ATLANTIC**

**THE COMMUNITY’S CRITICAL CONCERNS** Committee gathered in contemplative prayer in July to reflect on authentic ways to move forward. During four hours of sharing, song, prayer and silence, committee members with the help of Mid-Atlantic member and facilitator Sister Patricia Griffith shared words, images and feelings; their motivation to continue to serve on this committee; and their vision for the future. This pause helped them to recognize common themes to explore at future meetings.

Throughout the past few months, Mid-Atlantic sisters met in small informal groups known as Conversation Circles to discuss, understand and reflect on end-of-life issues and surrogate decision-making. These conversations deepened community life through contemplative dialogue; surfaced questions and concerns around this vital topic; and supported sisters who serve in this role to accompany each other on life’s journey.

**NORTHEAST**

**A JOYFUL CEREMONY** marked the creation of Mercy Woods in Cumberland, Rhode Island, from the sale of 229 acres of land by the Northeast Community to the Town of Cumberland on June 25. In attendance were not only several dozen sisters and the Community Leadership Team, but also numerous officials, including Rhode Island’s governor, Gina Raimondo, and Cumberland’s mayor, William Murray.

This day was over 30 years in the making. During the 1980s, sisters in the Rhode Island community began discussions with the town to put into conservation most of the land under their control. But the town lacked funding to close the transaction. Negotiations started and stopped over the years, until the town and other sources came together to fund the sale and preserve the land in perpetuity.
NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, PACIFIC WEST

THE TRANSITIONAL COORDINATING TEAM announced a Community Gathering for sisters from June 28-30, 2019, at the Millennium Hotel in Buffalo, New York, with Sister Elizabeth Davis, RSM, Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, as presenter. Also, the Fall 2018 Community Meeting will be conducted via Lifesize on November 10.

Sister Rita Lewis was honored by the Greater Rochester Community of Churches on June 5 for her social justice work at the House of Mercy in Rochester, New York.

In Buffalo, sisters continued the yearlong celebration of their 160th anniversary with an outreach project at South Buffalo Community Table. Sisters in Erie, Pennsylvania, on April 29 and in Rochester on May 5 recognized benefactors with prayer and receptions.

PHILIPPINES

MERCY COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, INC. has come a long way in its 40 years of serving the community. Its vision to provide compassionate care and sustain affordable, quality health care in the community was once again realized with the inauguration and blessing of its Eye Center held on May 28. Fr. Alfre C. Liwagon, CSSP, led the blessing of the rooms and equipment within the facility. He also blessed the ophthalmologists present during the ceremony.

The Eye Center, located on the third floor of the Providence Building, is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and staffed by highly trained medical practitioners in the field of ophthalmology. It offers a wide range of eye care diagnostics, including biometry, corneal tomography and optical coherence tomography. Surgical laser procedures such as focal laser treatment, laser suture lysis, panretinal photocoagulation, peripheral iridoplasty, and other treatments are performed in the facility. The Eye Center also aims to extend its services to charity patients within Lanao del Norte and its neighboring provinces.

WEST MIDWEST

A CASUAL COMMENT two years ago turned into a special moment at the reception for Sister Marissa Butler in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on June 23. Marissa had mentioned to a friend how the music of popular Catholic musician John Agnotti had been so meaningful to her during her formation. Fortunately, this friend knows John and asked him if he would write a song for the occasion. The result was a song titled “Into Your Hands” based on a poem that Marissa had written. Sisters Shari Sutherland and Mary Jo Baldus played it at the reception.

There was a welcoming liturgy at Mercy Villa in Omaha, Nebraska, for the members of the newly elected West Midwest Community Leadership Team on July 8. Sisters from throughout the Community came to bless the team.
CELEBRATING

175 years of Mercy in the United States

By Sister Mary Katherine Doyle

The first Sisters of Mercy motherhouse in the United States was located at 800 Penn Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Credit: Mercy Heritage Center.
Our History Challenges Our Present and Future

Celebrating the past always carries with it opportunity and risk. Simply telling stories of the past can lead to resting in the nostalgia of past glory, but it also can provide strong paradigms for action and rich food for inspiration. The story of Frances Warde and her companions shapes our story.

Marking the 175th anniversary of Mercy’s arrival in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, comes at a time of world crisis. Waves of refugees are leaving their homelands, driven by hunger, desperation, war and terror. Earth is suffering from humankind’s wanton disregard for its sacredness. Poverty is still the haunt of persons who see plentitude before their eyes but cannot access safe shelter, sufficient food or adequate health care. These abiding needs were also present in the experience of our early Sisters of Mercy, and their response gives us both inspiration and direction in addressing the same issues in their contemporary forms.

Sister Helen Marie Burns notes in an article on the founding mothers: “As well as providing comfort and insight, though, history also provides challenge. History contains a disconcerting experience of timelessness” (“Founding Mothers: a Composite Portrait,” MAST 5:1, p. 1). Mercy pioneers faced many of Mercy’s vital concerns: exploitation of immigrants, discrimination and bigotry, ravishing of Earth, the violence of civil war and the plight of women and children. The way sisters have addressed each epoch’s needs and urgencies challenges us to follow in their footsteps. So, what is that story?

Mercy Arrives in the United States

Arriving in Pittsburgh after a long, dangerous journey, Frances Warde and the pioneer women of Mercy entered a context far different from their own. Pittsburgh was bursting with the energy of the Industrial Revolution. Abundant coal, easy river transportation and cheap labor caused rapid expansion. The human cost of this expansion was poverty, exploitation and disease. Immigrants flocked to the city in hope of work but also discovered a lack of housing, harsh work conditions and few social services.

The sisters arrived in Pittsburgh during a period of American history deeply biased against new immigrants and Catholics. Hostility was palpable. Bishop Michael O’Connor, Pittsburgh’s bishop who had recruited the sisters from Carlow, was conscious of the danger posed by nativists. He had the sisters wear secular dress while traveling from Ireland to their new home. Until the dangers of attacks or harassment due to bigotry were lessened, the sisters wore such dress on future travels.

Education: Then and Now

It quickly became apparent to the young Mercy community that they had come not only to a different culture but also one that was rapidly changing. By 1843, 2,500 houses had been built for new arrivals in Pittsburgh, but there still was not enough housing. Lack of education prevented many immigrants from bettering their circumstances. Believing with Catherine McAuley that learning...
was the doorway to dignity, the sisters turned to the task of education.

By 1846 the sisters ministered in two free schools, providing children locked in poverty a path to self-sufficiency. Mercy’s first private academy for girls in the United States, St. Mary’s Academy, opened in September 1844. Even though the facilities were inadequate, the educational program excelled in preparing the students for the future. Less than a year after opening St. Mary’s, Sister Josephine Cullen was missioned to open Mount St. Vincent Academy in Youngstown, Pennsylvania. St. Vincent’s would later move to new buildings and be renamed St. Xavier Academy.

The existence of such boarding schools made it possible for young women to access education that had been previously unreachable to them due to the hardships of travel. Sustaining the schools was made more difficult as a result of fires. Whenever fire hit, the sisters had to begin again, each time relying on support of benefactors and God’s providence.

The small seed of Mercy education planted in Pittsburgh has grown beyond the imagination of the early pioneers. Today the Mercy Education System of the Americas oversees the work of 56 educational ministries, while the Conference for Mercy Higher Education brings together 15 member colleges and universities and two associate members. The educational needs of new immigrants or persons lacking education haven’t been neglected. Ministries like ARISE in South Texas or Mercy Immigration Project in New Hampshire continue Frances Warde’s passion to provide adults with the education needed to reach their full potential.

Health Care: Then and Now

Education was not the only work undertaken by the early Mercy community. Immediately after their arrival, sisters began visiting the sick in their homes. Some cases needed help that only a hospital could provide, but the city lacked a hospital. The sisters came to Pittsburgh during what is sometimes called the “dark ages of nursing.” The critically sick feared hospitals as places of death.

The first hospital was opened in a space formerly part of the convent. Opposition to the hospital was strongly voiced by those who opposed the idea of a Catholic hospital. In spite of the difficulties, plans for the hospital went forward, with its doors opening in 1847.

In 1848 a typhus epidemic hit Pittsburgh, bringing in its wake terrible suffering and many deaths. The sisters readily took on the task of nursing victims, establishing a pattern of service that would be repeated over and over again from Pittsburgh to San Francisco, California. In less than a month, four sisters died of their labors: Sisters Ann Rigney, Catherine Lawler, Magdalen Reinbolt and Xavier Tiernan. (Read more about Sister Xavier Tiernan on page 16.) The service of the sisters to everyone regardless of their race, creed or economic status won the admiration of the public and softened the hearts of their detractors. It was a vibrant example of living evangelization.

The pattern of providing care for persons no matter what their religion, race or economic circumstances is one cherished and actualized in the seven healthcare systems including hospitals founded by the Sisters of Mercy. The values of excellence, respect, compassion, stewardship and justice that characterized the first Mercy hospital are lived out within each hospital, clinic and medical facility today.

Then and Now: Emergent Needs

Consistent with the Mercy commitment to “read the signs of the times,” early sisters responded to emergent needs.
Orphans and residents of the “poor house” claimed the sisters’ care. In spite of the expanded work load, urgent requests from other areas of the country were met with generosity and courage. Chicago, Illinois, was first. Other foundations in Providence, Rhode Island, and Baltimore, Maryland, among others, would follow. Nothing was spared in bringing the mercy of God to places of need.

The pioneer sisters did not shrink from unpopular stances when need was urgent. Sisters in both the North and South came to the aid of wounded and dying combatants during the Civil War. Although opposed to slavery and the abhorrent suffering it brought, sisters did not refrain from nursing Union and Confederate soldiers alike. Many Mercy sisters were experienced nurses. Seasoned by health crises and some by the Crimean battlefield, they were prepared and ready to serve. The Pittsburgh sisters took charge of Stanton Hospital as well as West Pennsylvania Hospital. More than 100 sisters came from Ohio, Maryland, New York, Georgia, Mississippi, Illinois, Arkansas, Missouri and Florida. They endured privation and hardship. Their universal mercy and adept nursing skills won them not only the hearts of the soldiers but also recognition from President Abraham Lincoln himself.

Today sisters might not be found on battlefields, but they battle for justice and nonviolence through multiple advocacy initiatives at the United Nations and through Institute justice initiatives and grassroots demonstrations such as the vigil for immigrants organized by our sisters under 50 during their June gathering in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Mercy Made Visible in Action**

Today, 175 years later, we recall these early stories. We celebrate the courage, dedication, creativity and generosity of early Mercy women. It is fitting that the celebration begins by inviting everyone to engage in 175 acts of mercy that build relationships and foster nonviolence. Mercy is made visible in action. The seven pioneer women of Pittsburgh spoke Mercy loudly in their works and lives as well as in their prayer. Sister Patricia McCann, a church historian from Pittsburgh, puts it this way:

> “Thinking of the founding women whom we are celebrating … I am convinced that we come from strong stock—roots well grounded. These were mission-driven women. They met the challenges of their times head on, despite suffering from all of the same human limitations which afflict us. We immerse ourselves in their stories these days not to wallow in sentiment, but because they can give us courage. The same faith and outrageous hope which animated and impelled them have the potential to liberate us to do what we have to do” (“The Ecclesial Context: A Look in the Rearview Mirror,” MAST 5.1, p.6).

That is worthy of celebration!

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_Sister Katherine Doyle serves as the novitiate minister for the Institute’s U.S. Novitiate in St. Louis, Missouri. Among her past ministries have been community leadership, diocesan ministry, direction of Mercy Center Auburn and secondary administration. She is author of Like a Tree by Running Water, the Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California’s First Sister of Mercy. You can contact Katherine at mkdoyle@mercywmw.org._

_How Will You Share in the Legacy of Mercy?

The Institute Leadership Team invites all sisters, associates, companions, staff, volunteers and partners in ministry to complete 175 actions that grow our personal practice of nonviolence and strengthen our relationships.

Share your plans by Mercy Day, September 24, at www.sistersofmercy.org/175th_
PART 2

The Chapter 2017 Recommitment: Called to New Consciousness compels us to hear the “cry of our suffering world.” Urgently, “…The impoverishment of peoples, the devastation of Earth, and oppressive social norms and systems call us in this moment to act … to intensify efforts to align our investments with our values and, especially now, to pursue education and action against practices of extractive industries that are destroying people, communities and Earth.”

Standing with impacted peoples and Earth—a just response to this call requires the work and input of various groups and individuals, including sisters in countries most impacted by extractivism; the Institute Leadership Team and the Institute Leadership Conference; the Institute Justice Team and Extended Justice Team; Mercy Investment Services; and our members and partners in mission. Learn more about our work so far in our letter shared on June 28, 2018 (read it at bit.ly/ILT-letter-extractives).

While we continue our research and careful listening, we encourage you to read this article and its predecessor (available here – bit.ly/VivaJulyAugust2018) as a way to educate yourself about this complicated and multifaceted justice concern of our day. Talk it over with others in the Mercy community. What questions do you have? Are any ideas stirring? Please email us at ILT@sistersofmercy.org to share your thoughts, and please look for future communications from us on the progress of our response to our Chapter call.

—The Institute Leadership Team
The Mercy community addresses the multifaceted issues that extractivism poses with strategies for advocacy. Together with their partners in advocacy, Mercy organizations and groups use strategic platforms throughout the world to uplift the voices of impacted communities on the ground and to push for change. I had the opportunity to speak with some of the powerful Mercy advocates working in solidarity with impacted communities to mitigate the harms extractive industries cause today and unravel extractivism for a better tomorrow. While the visions, mandates, locations, strategies and expertise of their organizations differ, I heard cross-cutting themes like the connections between the destruction of Earth and exploitation of communities, the importance of *Laudato Si’*, and the necessity of consistent yet flexible advocacy across sectors.

These organizations are some of the key drivers of Mercy’s multidimensional approach to harms that extractive activity and the extractivist development model cause.

**Advocacy at the United Nations**

One Mercy strategy to challenge the extractive development model and hold extractive industries accountable for harms on the ground is advocacy at the international level through Mercy International Association: Mercy Global Action at the United Nations (MIA: MGA at the UN).

Colleen Cloonan, the Women’s Leadership, Development, and Advocacy associate at the MIA: MGA office explained the importance of extractivism work for their office’s portfolio. “Extractivism overlaps with many of our other concerns like human trafficking, gender violence, corporate power, inequality, profit over people and consumerism,” she said.

The MIA: MGA office serves as secretary of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Mining Working Group, a coalition of faith-based organizations that engages in UN processes to challenge member states to avoid the environmental and human rights abuses of the past in crafting new agreements. MIA: MGA also co-convenes the Transnational Corporations and Human Rights Working Group and the Human Right to Water and Sanitation Working Group for the coalition.

Individually and with the Mining Working Group and other partners, the MIA: MGA team draws on academic literature, expert analysis, knowledge from the Mercy community and, especially, information from grassroots partners to educate and advocate member states in forums like the...
Commission on the Status of Women, the Geneva-based negotiations around a legally-binding treaty on transnational corporations (TNCs), and human rights bodies.

Advocacy in the United States
The United States is one of the world’s biggest producers and consumers of extracted materials, and the country’s strong influence on global economic and political affairs make its approach to extractivism and extractive industries especially important to confront.

Marianne Comfort of the Institute Justice Team works with the D.C.-based Inter-religious Working Group on Extractive Industries to use its strategic location in the nation’s capital to put pressure on government industries to grapple with the realities that U.S. extractivist policies cause domestically and throughout the world. Marianne explained that the Interfaith Working Group’s work falls into two different categories:
1. Legislative and executive branch advocacy; for example, calling for implementation of a section of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act on financial reform that requires oil, gas and mineral companies to report payments they make to countries for extraction of resources. This transparency is important in fighting corruption and strengthening impacted communities’ demands for services from their governments.
2. Accompaniment of impacted communities; for example, accompaniment of grassroots advocates from South America appearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to share their experiences of harms from extractive industries.

The Institute Justice Team coordinates Mercy participation in public witness, such as marches in Washington, D.C. against the Keystone XL pipeline and the Dakota Access Pipeline that pushed the Obama Administration to reject a permit for the former and slow down the process for the latter. The Trump Administration then reversed those decisions.

International Advocacy
The Mercy community’s strategies to address extractivism stretch beyond U.S. borders.

For example, Sister Ana Siufi’s personal advocacy work on extractivism focuses on combatting mega extraction, fracking and nuclear energy generation with local socio-environmental assemblies in the Patagonia region of Argentina. Ana is connected with Iglesias y Minería (Churches and Mining), a dynamic coalition of Latin American faith leaders from impacted communities working to address extractivism and the devastation it causes the region. Iglesias y Minería brings a systems-based analysis to this work, recognizing extractivism’s systemic marginalization of communities and unsustainable economic models that perpetuate it. Ana explained, “It is the ones who are the weakest—it’s always the rural, the indigenous, the poorest communities who are right next to the dump. The poorest people are the ones who receive the contamination of their water, the air, the land.” She added, “Extractivism is at the service of a totally irrational and totally destructive system of production and consumption. … It is an extremely violent system against Earth and against humanity.”

The coalition’s strategies to create systems-level alternatives include international dissemination of reports on harms caused by extractivism, advocacy letters from faith communities to government bodies across Latin America, solidarity meetings and information sharing between affected communities, and calls to action. For example, advocacy from the coalition helped lead to the publication of a pastoral letter authored by the Conference of Latin American Bishops that considers the call of Laudato Si’ to care for “our common home,” connecting this to protecting natural resources from the harms of extractivism.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the Sisters Association in Mindanao (SAMIN) works against harms caused by extractivism and extractive industries. Like in many extractivist countries throughout the world, in the Philippines, advocates face an added layer of issues stemming from corruption and government collusion with extractive industries. SAMIN member Sister Virgencita (JenJen) Alegado explained, “Many of those who have political power are also partners or owners of these industries, so they don’t support efforts to stop or modify extractivism.” To address these multilayered issues, SAMIN collaborates with affected communities, including indigenous peoples’ organizations. SAMIN’s advocates write letters to government officials, attend rallies and protests and make public statements opposing mining activities.

Advocacy with Corporations
Another Mercy strategy on extractivism is engagement of extractive industries through shareholder advocacy. Mercy Investment Services (MIS) leverages the access that the Sisters of Mercy have as corporate shareholders to bring concerns of affected communities to the table with corporate executives. Susan Makos, MIS vice president of social responsibility, explained, “It’s our role as an investor to bring those voices forward in a way that the company
normally does not hear. We’re calling them to accountability because we’re calling them to answer what’s happening on the ground.”

MIS’s work centers on the principle of dialogue. Pat Zerega, MIS senior director of shareholder advocacy, explained, “Companies may be doing things that we really don’t like, but it’s the people in companies that have gone to our schools, that are sitting in our pews every Sunday, that are trying to do this work. And sometimes it’s helping them to raise their voice in the company…. It’s supporting the voice that’s not always out there on the main line.”

MIS’s advocacy tools include letter writing, shareholder resolutions and face-to-face meetings with corporate executives. The office collaborates with other faith-based socially responsible investment groups and socially responsible investment firms.

Advocacy as Individual Changemakers and Consumers

The newly formed Mercy Justice Extractives Working Group—made up of sisters, associates and coworkers from throughout the Institute—is exploring engaging individuals through spiritual reflection, education and support for local advocacy.

One member of the group, Mercy Associate Virginia Fifield, explained that the most powerful advocacy comes from acknowledging the divine nature of defending communities and Earth. As a member of the Mohawk, Turtle Clan, she stressed the importance of understanding human connectedness and “the sacred duty of saving the Earth.”

Another strategy to encourage individuals to “opt-out” as much as possible from perpetuating extractivist violence. This work includes engaging in local advocacy initiatives.

Marianne Comfort explained, “We know that a lot of the decisions about mining, oil and gas operations, fracking and pipelines happen at the state and local level…. It’s really up to the sisters, lay associates, our students and our volunteers at the local level to press for local initiatives … to really pose the concrete laws that will move us away from the extractive development model and the extractive economy.”

Mercy sisters, associates and coworkers have joined successful campaigns to ban fracking in New York State and Maryland, ban the transportation of fracked waste through some towns in Connecticut, and delay the approval of the Keystone XL route through Nebraska.

The Mercy community also makes change by reflecting upon and revolutionizing consumption practices such as choosing not to buy bottled water, delaying purchases of new electronic devices (which contain mined minerals) and reducing use of fossil fuels.

As Virginia Fifield shared, part of solidarity with communities affected by global demand for extracted materials comes from our daily choices. She said, “It’s not just recycling and preserving water—it’s more than that. It’s how we live our lives and how all of our individual actions add up.”

“Avery Kelly is a third-year student at Georgetown University Law Center, where she studies international human rights and environmental law. She is currently a legal intern with Corporate Accountability Lab. Before going to law school, Avery interned at the Mercy International Association: Mercy Global Action office in New York. You can contact her at ack97@georgetown.edu.

“*We know that a lot of the decisions about mining, oil and gas operations, fracking and pipelines happen at the state and local level. … It’s really up to the sisters, lay associates, our students and our volunteers at the local level to press for local initiatives.”* – Marianne Comfort

**MERCY ADVOCACY MAKES AN IMPACT**

Here’s a sampling of some advocacy success stories from our Mercy community:

- Integrally linked to issues of extractivism is the recognition of the human right to water and sanitation. Mercy International Association: Mercy Global Action at the United Nations played an instrumental role in the negotiations and naming of the human right to water and sanitation in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- Iglesias y Minería organized a delegation of victims of mining to testify about the grave effects of extractivism at the Vatican before Cardinal Turkson and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

- Mercy Investment Services’ engagements with two mining companies in Peru have resulted in human rights impact assessments in several locations. One of the companies has also conducted a community study on local impacts and a water assessment as well as increased transparency on their risks and community and environmental impacts.
Concerns about Extractives Expand Climate Change Advocacy

The stories of Mercy sisters and associates opposing fracking, oil and gas pipelines and other fossil fuel infrastructure from Argentina to northern Michigan are both unsettling and inspiring.

The examples shared by members of the new Mercy Justice Extractives Working Group make me wonder whether we’re missing the full picture in the way we usually talk about climate change.

Advocates typically name the burning of fossil fuels as the main culprit in climate change that is impacting Earth and vulnerable communities. We express concern for the slow disappearance of low-lying island nations, the bleaching of sea coral, the increase in devastating storms, the greater prevalence of insect-borne illnesses and rising deaths in extreme heat. The obvious conclusion is that we need to keep fossil fuels in the ground and slow global warming.

What’s missing in that advocacy thread, though, is acknowledging the damages done by fossil fuel extraction itself, beyond the climate change threats.

If you had listened in on the first conversation of the Mercy Justice Extractives Working Group, you would have heard New Mexico named as a “sacrifice zone” with communities impacted by crude oil production and a giant methane plume from natural gas flaring (along with uranium mining and nuclear facilities). You would have heard concerns about fracking in a fertile fruit-growing region of Argentina; threats of leaks in an oil and gas pipeline that runs between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron; and the violence that has sprung up in oil-producing regions of Nigeria.

Also missing in typical climate change discussions is the need to avoid the same human rights and environmental abuses of the fossil fuel industry in the growing renewables sector. Large-scale hydroelectric dams, for instance, are a “clean” alternative to carbon-emitting energy sources, but when poorly sited they are destroying native lands and cultural heritage. One can easily imagine giant solar and wind farms causing similar harms if local communities aren’t driving the decision-making and receiving the benefits.

Pope Francis is clear about these broader concerns and more inclusive solutions when he talks about the plundering of the global South for the enrichment of the North, and then notes that “the local population should have a special place at the table” (Laudato Si’, #183).

We as Mercy can follow the pope’s lead and expand climate change conversations in our circles to include the impacts of extractivism itself and to give attention to the “how” of shifting to a renewable energy future.

For more information on the Mercy justice extractives group, contact Marianne Comfort at mcomfort@sistersofmercy.org

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“Paz, Standing Rock,” art by Mary Button (marybutton.com).
WELCOMING SPACE
Why We Need Mercy Retreat Centers Now and Into Our Future
By Dawn Stringfield
Now more than ever, there is a need for ministries like Mercy Conference and Retreat Center (St. Louis, Missouri) and the other retreat centers of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

We live in a world that is divided: I am Republican or Democrat; Christian or Muslim; citizen, immigrant or refugee. We need places where one can say, “I am a part of the human family, a child of the Divine.”

We live in a world that is constantly inundating us from all sides with information (fake and real), often in the form of tweets and sound bites. We need places where one can stop, listen deeply and reflect clearly on what matters, with opportunities for silence and for sharing in more than hashtags and 140 characters.

We live in a world that focuses on accomplishment and requires constant human “doing” to achieve what, for some, are only the minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter. We need places where one can simply be a human “being” and where opportunities are not unavailable or limited simply because of one’s ability to afford them.

We live in a world where people who serve are constantly giving of themselves and never finding space for self-care; space to attend to peripheral or direct post-traumatic stress disorder; space to create any type of emotional or spiritual reserves or resilience. We need places where one can unplug, recharge and renew and then return to the world replenished for the work ahead.

I believe this state of the world in which we live impels us—as the Gospel and the example of Catherine McAuley impel us—to create a welcoming space. It must be a space that is sacred, healing and transformative and in an environment that is filled with beauty and connection to Earth, where all obstacles that would prevent a person from being able to just be are removed. It would be a space where people experience hospitality and care: to sleep, if that is what is needed; to think and reflect on what is deeply meaningful, alone or with a trained staff member; to walk or pray, write or create—whatever is needed for that person.

In making that space available to an individual or a group, we are part of bringing about the healing of our world. We are a part of creating the change we want to see.

QUALITIES OF A MERCY RETREAT CENTER

What differentiates a Mercy retreat center is a commitment to excellence and attention to the whole person as a part of the whole of creation. In each encounter, we seek to be collaborative and empowering; we accept people where they are and offer the welcome and hospitality that Catherine would have offered. In our buildings and grounds as well, we create sacred space to hold the spirit and prayers of each one who comes through our doors.

What is essential:

- Welcoming each individual as he or she is, not as we might want him or her to be. It is being present, listening to and focusing on the whole person and how we can be most supportive. It is being thoughtful and creative in our response.
- It is creating a space for transformation where people can grow into their full potential as human beings cherished by God and recognizing that it is for God and them to discern what that is.
- We create the space; God does the transformation. For me, that means it is sometimes the smile, the kind word, the comfortable mattress or the right temperature.
in the meeting room as much as any input or presentation we may offer that opens a way for the Spirit to be at work in a person’s life. We can’t control the outcome. What we can do is be Mercy in the moment and in collaboration with the Spirit.

And all of these characteristics apply to each and every Mercy ministry in the ways we are in relationship with and in service to humanity.

SUSTAINING OUR WELCOMING SPACES

In order to sustain the ministry of our spiritual retreat centers, we need to be relevant, agile and adept at responding to the needs of people at this time. Structures can sometimes be helpful or hinder us in this regard. Histories as well can sometimes hold us back from what is possible. Language and how we describe who we are or what we do can sometimes invite and at other times exclude. Part of our role is to celebrate our heritage and not get stuck in it so that we can be present to what is now before us.

In order to be relevant in a rapidly changing world, we must no longer come from the place of “build it and they will come” or depend exclusively on the ways in which people have found us in the past. We may need to look at language like a space for respite, a place to unplug and recharge, instead of exclusively naming something a “retreat” or “day of reflection.”

We may need to be open to taking our retreats to guests who can no longer come to us because they are in nursing homes. We may need to repurpose talks to make them available through some form of podcast for people who may be working full-time or caring for children or aging parents and who don’t have the time to come to us.

We want to be open to conversations with other nonprofit organizations and groups to not only learn what the needs for respite and renewal are but also to have a way to reach out to and connect with their clients, staff and boards. In strategic collaboration we grow in what we offer and whom we serve. We also create a possibility for financial support for programs that might not otherwise have been available.

And what about those millennials who don’t consider themselves religious or even spiritual and yet have a passion for peace, nonviolence, social justice, care for Earth and making a difference in the world—all those things that we associate with Mercy? How can we reach them and listen to their needs and create a space for them as they seek to do good in the world? I don’t know about you, but I haven’t been a 20-something for a very long time and may not know what would be the place of connection for them. It means not making assumptions, but instead educating ourselves, reaching out or inviting people in and asking, “What would be meaningful for you?”

MERCY HOSPITALITY AND SPIRITUALITY INTO THE FUTURE

Even though we are in a very different world than when our ministries of spiritual retreat centers began, we are still living out of our roots in Mercy: offering hospitality in the spirit of Catherine McAuley so that anyone who comes through our doors knows that he or she is welcome, invited into our sacred space and grounds, held in prayer and tended to with care for whatever their purpose. And whether that space and grounds are physical, whether it is on a Mercy retreat campus or out in the world, the spirit of Mercy remains.

I feel humbled to be called and totally committed to lead a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy and continue this legacy. I love this prayer from the Mercy Spirituality booklet published in 2011: “God of Mercy, we pray for courage to see the needs of the world in which we live; for prudence to know those needs which we can address and for wisdom to respond in ways that address the needs and maintain the dignity of all.” And I believe that the God of Mercy is responding: “These ministries are mine … here … now … trust in me, and I will show you the way that I need you to be Mercy now and in the future.”

View a list of Mercy retreat and spirituality centers online at www.sistersofmercy.org/spirituality/retreat-centers/

Dawn Stringfield has served as the executive director of Mercy Conference and Retreat Center in St. Louis, Missouri, since 2011. Prior to her ministry at Mercy, her nonprofit career included being president and CEO of Coro Leadership Center – St. Louis, a leadership training and development nonprofit, and executive director of Lydia’s House, a program that provided housing and critical support services to abused women and their children. She can be reached at dstringfield@mercycenterstl.org.
“At Once the Sisters Began”

Whenever I have the opportunity to visit the historical marker that was installed 25 years ago when the Pittsburgh Community marked its 150th anniversary, I am so taken by the words “at once.”

The sisters came at the winter solstice, a dark and cold time in the northern hemisphere. They sailed across the ocean and bumped across mountains on train and stagecoach. When they finally landed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, they had every right to take a few days off, to rest and get settled and to look around them. But the annals say they wasted no time. They began “at once” to do what they had come to do.

That energy must have impressed a young Eliza Jane Tiernan, who supplied flowers for the chapel for the sisters’ first Christmas in the United States just days after their arrival. She witnessed the sisters renewing their vows on New Year’s Day and soon after became the first postulant, then later received the religious name Xavier. The following year, Eliza traveled to Ireland with Mother Frances Warde and stayed several months, returning with new recruits, including a novice.

In 1848 Pittsburgh suffered an epidemic, and the sisters began accepting typhus patients at the new Mercy Hospital. Because of their tireless service, many sisters, including Sister Xavier Tiernan, died of typhus themselves. Xavier’s short religious life was rich in Mercy and her obituary in the March 11, 1848, edition of The Pittsburgh Catholic reveals her own impulse to be of service: “We cannot exaggerate her loss, not merely to the religious community which she edified so much, but to all who came within the wide sphere of her usefulness.”

Like Eliza Tiernan, many young people today are looking for ways to join with others to make a difference in the world. Our own new members have a good portion of the spirit of Frances Warde and her companions as they eagerly engage in the works of Mercy in the places where they find themselves. They are called to do this in Mercy, because Mercy has a reputation for responding “at once,” whether that’s to the U.S.-Mexico border, to Haiti or to a neighbor down the block who finds herself in need. Mercy doesn’t wait to see if someone else will go first, but steps out and takes the lead, then looks around to see who else might be ready to help. Like Catherine, we know that those who are poor need help today, not next week. When people in need look around, they see that the door of Mercy stands ajar, ready to welcome them “at once.”

—Sister Cynthia Serjak

Long Strands of Red Hair

My friend Roberta told me that when she was a child, she and her family lived on a farm in central Indiana near a woods and creek. She said that in the spring, her mother would ask Roberta and her two sisters to go out into the yard to brush and comb their long red hair. When summer ended, and the occasional empty bird nests fell from the trees, they would find woven into the nests strands of red hair holding the twigs and leaves and bits of nothing all together.

I wonder how many of us have been long red strands of hair that have held together another’s soul. I know that in my soul-nest there are many strands of hair holding everything together. Woven within the daily routine of sound and noise, busyness and rest, are the words and kindnesses of others holding me tightly. My neighbor’s friendly greeting this morning, the last book I read, a call from my cousin who just wanted to say hello, all these are red strands of hair woven tightly around the twigs and leaves of my daily life.

I know that after hearing Roberta’s story, I will never look at a bird’s nest the same way again. It will always remind me of the many little things that hold us together.

—Cynthia Sartor, Companion in Mercy

Art by Sister Genemarie Beegan
Calendar

“Fall Fantasy,” watercolor by Sister Angela Follin

OCTOBER 5-7
Mercy 12-Step Weekend
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Contact: Sister Rita Valade
rvaladersm@gmail.com

OCTOBER 5-7
Mercy Volunteer Corps
Alumni Retreat
Sea Isle City, New Jersey
Contact: Elizabeth MacNeal
elizabethmacneal@mercyvolunteers.org

OCTOBER 12-14
Mercy Education System of the Americas Annual Conference
King of Prussia, Pennsylvania
Contact: Sister Lisa Griffith
lgriffith@sistersofmercy.org

OCTOBER 12-14
New Members Weekend
St. Louis, Missouri
Contact: Sister Cynthia Serjak
cserjak@sistersofmercy.org

OCTOBER 15-17
Mercy Mission Officers Meeting
Albany, New York
Contact: Sister Victoria Battell
vbattell@mariacollege.edu

OCTOBER 22-27
Institute Leadership Conference
Madison, Connecticut
Contact: Melanie Miller
mmiller@sistersofmercy.org

NOVEMBER 1-5
National Religious Vocation Conference
Buffalo, New York
Contact: Sister Cynthia Serjak
cserjak@sistersofmercy.org

NOVEMBER 4-10
National Vocation Awareness Week

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