

Mercy Begins with ME

Keynote Address: Young Mercy Leaders

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Introduction

Today I have structured my presentation into six parts. As the Mercy Global Action Coordinator at the United Nations, I want to talk about Advocacy for Justice and its relationship to leadership and Mercy. So I will begin by sharing a little about current experiences of injustice in our world, these include experiences for both people and earth. Then I will move on to the issue of self-reflection, taking time to see how you situate yourself in this ever changing world of ours. I will then share with you some of the tools that we use for advocating and how critical it is to advocate *with* those oppressed rather than *for* those oppressed. I will then move to sharing with you the importance of building up relationships with justice people and the significance of being part of global justice coalitions. Finally, I would like to share with you some of the Mercy Global actions that we take in seeking to bring about global justice.

What is important to remember is that these actions are deeply grounded in the experience of our brothers and sisters around the world who are often rendered poor and powerless. At the same time, our advocacy also encapsulates earth. Earth justice is a relatively new concept, but it concerns the degradation of our earth and recognition of our responsibility to learn to live sustainably, requiring from us a stance of deep humility and gratitude for all non-human life.

Given the relatively short time frame we have together, it is my hope that some of what I share this morning will resonate with you and that you will feel encouraged to keep on pursuing issues of justice that you feel passionate about. That of course is the call of Mercy. Last year, I gave an address to the young Mercy Leaders conference and I stressed three points. I would like to emphasise those points again. First, as Mercy leaders we need to develop and maintain a great sense of hope about the future and our world. Second, we are called to be critical thinkers, always being prepared to challenge our own bias

and presuppositions, to ask the big questions, to interrogate our own motivations and to seek new knowledge. Third, a life of Mercy leadership involves developing and yearning for a merciful heart in which justice reigns.

1. What is the Experience for Earth /People

So to begin with, let's look at some of the situations and circumstances in which people and the earth are calling for a justice response. The issue of water has been on the Mercy Justice agenda for a long time now. Just one week ago, a Sister of Mercy from Detroit participated on a panel at the UN in which she highlighted the human right to water and sanitation. I'd like to share with you now a small movie trailer of the documentary 'Flow'. It will give you some insight into the issue of water and highlight just how sacred water is.

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1149583/videoplayer/vi197329177> Flow Theatrical Trailer

I invite you to take out your journals and just write down one or two things that you just heard about the issue of water.

The second short video, I want to share with you is the trailer of a documentary movie called 'Human Flow'. Some of you may have already seen it. You may be aware of the documentary maker; renowned artist and public advocate Ai Wei Wei. In this documentary Ai Wei Wei seeks to highlight the plight of the world refugee crisis. Once again I invite you to listen and note down what you find significant.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVZGyTdk_BY Human Flow Trailer

One of the most powerful statements I heard in that small trailer was this;

'The more immune you are to people's suffering...that's very very dangerous for humanity.' These words speak powerfully to me about the need for Self Reflection. Which brings me to my second point.

2. Self Reflection – Who am I? Where do I stand? What is my position?

I wonder if you can recall a time when you had the experience whereby you were challenged to look at something from a new perspective. How open were you to this experience? Did it open new doors for you? Before I began my research project in the Philippines in 2011, I was really challenged to; first, tackle the question of who I was, where I stood and from what vantage point I viewed the world. This meant that I had to acknowledge my own position of privilege and in some instances power. This relates to the colour of my skin, my nationality, my financial security, my educational background to name a few.

In a recent article by Mary Cunningham entitled ‘ Striving for Holiness in Our Advocacy ’,¹ the reader is challenged to be ‘willing to enter into moments of discomfort and leave our own privilege’. Without addressing our own privilege we can be totally blind to another’s marginalisation and often discrimination.

I believe that the whole issue of self-knowledge and self-reflection is critical to any justice response. Too often in our world today, we find politicians, media personnel and other public figures making what is often termed ‘off the cuff’ comments. These are remarks that are made with very little reflection or analysis. They appear to lack any self reflection.

To be authentic in justice work, we must be prepared to be reflective , to challenge our own assumptions and biases and be open to see things in a new way.

I would like to share with you now this short video clip in which we encounter a moment where perception changes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyLLbhXuI4k> The movie Joy and Heron = 3 min film –

¹ Striving for Holiness in Our Advocacy” Cunningham, Mary 2018 . Accessed

I invite you to turn to the person next to you and share your thoughts on that little video clip. **Did anything surprise you? Delight you, confuse you?**

Let's take a moment to revisit our Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach.

Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach Diagram

In this model you can see that the base is about being in touch with the experience of Earth and its People. The next step is to identify my own self in this world and where I stand.

The next section highlights Tools for Advocacy.

3. Tools for Advocacy

When talking about tools for advocacy we have a number of useful models in which we can work to recognise the root cause or underlying issues. Colleen mentioned yesterday that Catherine McAuley did not view poverty as a fate, but rather, a condition brought about by oppressive and unjust social, political and economic systems. To do justice work means you have to do the hard work; you have to dig deep and understand oppressive systems.

One system of analysis is called problematisation. This is a theory developed by Australian academic and political analyst, Carol Bacchi. She refers to a WTP approach.

In her book Bacchi, Carol (2009) *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?*

She asks us to think about how we frame particular social problems? She asks, 'What is the problem represented to be? In adopting this approach Bacchi asked the following questions.

What are the taken for granted givens? The purpose of this question is to highlight the conditions that allow a particular problem representation to take shape and to assume dominance.

This includes the dominant discourse and cultural factors. Usually if we look carefully, we can trace the history of how the problem first became identified and how the discussion around the problem has been developed.

Bacchi seeks to shift the problem from problem solving to problem questioning..

What fails to be problematised? Who fails to be heard?

Does the way that the problem is presented seek to benefit or harm some members of the community?

If some options for social interventions this can have devastating effects for certain people.

Often different groups can be set up as in opposition to each other.

Can lead to the objectification of people as problems

It effects access to resources

What is likely to change with the representation of the problem?

What is likely to stay the same?

Who is likely to benefit from the representation of the problem?

Who is likely to be harmed by the representation of the problem?

Who is considered to be blamed for the problem?

What is the means through which the problem representation becomes dominant?

Maybe Media, politicians, social settings, churches.

How do problem representations achieve legitimacy?

As advocates and leaders of social justice we must ensure that we do not simply buy into certain problem representations without reflecting on their origins, purposes and effects.

Bacci suggests we need to interrogate our own assumptions. Here we must ask ourselves what is assumed? What is taken for granted? What is not questioned?

In doing this we uncover the (assumed) thought that lies behind specific problem representations and are thereby in a position to challenge them.

This takes me to a very simple document produced by the International Federation of Libraries. How to Spot FaKe News.

http://www.prattlibrary.org/uploadedFiles/www/locations/central/information_services/how-to_guides/How-to-Spot-Fake-News.pdf

There are other models that we can draw upon as advocacy tools these include the 5 why's, systems analysis and social analysis to name a few. Significantly for faith based justice groups we also have our spirituality to draw upon. For the Sisters of Mercy and associates, Mercy spirituality and Gospel Justice are key to addressing situations of injustice. And of course prayer is core to our justice work. In a recent article by NETWORK, a Catholic justice group the author states

“Only in talking to God can we ensure that we are doing all we can to live out God’s Mission.. we must occasionally set aside doing and focus on openness: Letting Gods will enter our hearts and minds...We have to remind ourselves of why we are doing this work. Only then can we ensure we are truly living out God’s Call for us.” (NETWORK)

Take a moment to reflect as we engage prayerfully with this short video prepared by Mercy Sister, Anna Siufi of Argentina.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeTS5cxwL2w&feature=youtu.be>

Take a moment to write down one feeling you had just now?

4. Advocacy for Whom?

So who is advocacy for? Working for advocacy can sometimes seem like an endless task with no obvious outcomes from our work. We wonder who is listening, who cares, why we bother but the call is to remain faithful to those experiencing pain, suffering, marginalisation and injustice. In a recent apostolic exhortation from Pope Francis, Rejoice and Be Glad, It states..

“They do not desert others in bad times; they accompany them in their anxiety and distress, even though doing so may not bring immediate satisfaction” (#112 Rejoice and Be Glad)

Very often we don't see immediate results from our advocacy work, but key to this is to remain hopeful, to believe that our work with those who seek to have a voice will lead to a future of hope and better outcomes for those in our world who are rendered poor. Despite what sometimes appears to be all grim we need to cultivate a sense of inner joy and positivity in moving forward. That sense of hope that I mentioned earlier.

5. Who is with Us?

We have a tendency to work in silos, to think that we can do things on our own. There are times when it feels harder to work with others (‘too many cooks spoil the broth’) however, to truly work for justice we need to constantly be in dialogue with others. We need to be aware of all those around us who want to make a difference, people and groups at the local, regional and global level. Relationship building is essential. There is great joy in finding time to engage with one another in meaningful ways, promoting the common good and dismantling oppressive systems. “Without the great work of our partner organizations, the uphill battle towards economic and social justice

would be a lot more challenging. When we recognise the value of community, we are all able to combine our unique strengths to work toward a common goal' (NETWORK)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg60sr38oic> Autumn Peltier, a 13 year old water advocate

6. Advocacy Leading to Action

So what are some of the actions that Mercy Justice Advocacy involves? As I have stressed throughout this presentation, our justice actions in the Mercy World are always informed by the experiences of the people and the earth. This means that our actions range in different ways according to the circumstances. It may involve signing on to petitions, preparing advocacy materials and papers, public talks, written interventions, oral interventions, attending rallies, public protests, praying publically peacefully. All of these actions are dependent on the work that happens beforehand. Often we see only the action at the top of the pyramid, but to be truly effective advocates we have to do all the ground work first.

Conclusion

To sum up, Justice and Advocacy go hand in hand with Mercy. To live a life of Mercy is to live a life of justice and compassion always striving to be as authentic as we can be.

As I shared at the outset, I hope that some of what I shared resonates with you and that you feel encouraged to keep on pursuing issues of justice that you feel passionate about. That of course is the call of Mercy. I want to conclude with those three points I emphasised earlier. First, as Mercy leaders we need to develop and maintain a great sense of hope about the future and our world. Second, we are called to be critical thinkers, always being prepared to challenge our own bias and presuppositions, to ask the big questions, to interrogate our own motivations and to seek new knowledge so that we can use our gifts to challenge oppressive systems that marginalise and discriminate

against people and our earth. Third, a life of Mercy leadership involves developing and yearning for a merciful heart in which justice reigns. I hope for each one of you that you will find your call in life and in responding to that call you will be your very best selves.

Thank you