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Conference Report: Bridging the Gap

Where do I begin? The experience from October 13th to October 24th was an awesome one from the opening prayer service to the closing one. The presentations were challenging, informative and left no doubt in my mind that poverty needs to be eradicated. We all must act since we are an international group.

The opening talk by Sister Mary Waskowisk was enlightening. She spoke about being a servant to the vulnerable people on earth and that giving people the gift of Mercy is giving them the gift of no fear. We have a collective responsibility to reach out to the most vulnerable in our society and to bridge the gap even in a small way. She talked about the significance of Place – Mercy Global Concern at the UN and Catherine McAuley’s concern for the poor of her time. Catherine’s spirit has power to inspire us to action on behalf of the poor, to be advocates at the UN etc. and thus close the distance between rich and poor.

Adelle Howard R.S.M. and Anne Walshe impressed upon me the importance of using the media to make the struggles of the poor known to the larger world and to network with people who are committed to eradicating poverty. We have to move beyond territory and think globally. The challenge is to reclaim and articulate our Mercy values in a new way and look to our tradition as Mercy Sisters for inspiration. Vicki Swanes stressed that in order to eradicate poverty, we need to build communities. She said what is missing is “The Voice of the Poor to make policy changes.” The Voice of the Poor must be brought to CEO’s and policy makers in government etc. Throughout the two weeks I heard many times that poverty is an issue of human rights and everyone has a right not to be poor.

Sr. Carol Riltner’s presentation on violence against women and the presentations on Sister to Sister Project left me dumb founded. They described the disrespect for human life especially against women and children, also the devastation caused by genocide, HIV and Aids. Each of the speakers spoke their message with a passion. The impact of violence is fear, trauma, suspicion and denial. We were challenged to be bridges in a fractured world, also to be in solidarity with the poor and to set goals for prevention.

Visiting Mercy Centre in the Bronx and Mercy Haven in Queens was a marvelous opportunity to see “Bridging the Gap” in action. In visiting with staff, Mercy Associates and volunteers, I found them to be people having a passion for what they do and they do it with compassion. Mercy Spirit is evident at these centers. These two centers care for the most vulnerable in society – the mentally ill, the homeless, the uneducated and they serve people of all ages. Their work demonstrates that action and change brings opportunities when people pursue a shared vision and a common goal. We are called to be doers of the word and not just listeners. Throughout the conference I kept hearing the words “walk with the poor, empower them, give them a voice, give them dignity, and

partnership with them, connect and collaborate.” The poor have great wisdom and they can make policy change.

Sr. Nellie McLaughlin through input, slides and song demonstrated how we are depleting the earth and in doing so we are increasing the poverty of humans. The well being of each person is depended on the well being of the earth. I was challenged to look at how I treat the earth and to see it as sacred.

Being with twenty-six Mercy Sisters from ten different countries was enriching and a valuable experience. We shared stories about our ministries and it is evident that Mercy Spirit of Catherine McAuley is alive and well. Visiting the UN was an experience of awe and wonder for me. The Globe of the Broken World spoke volumes to me and is a real symbol of the brokenness of humanity. Attending International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, Human Rights and dignity of people living in poverty was an education. Listening to testimonies from persons who experienced extreme poverty in their lives and the lives of others was very profound. I saw it as a step forward in the process of giving the poor a voice in telling their story. The video on “Voices of Poverty” portrayed the helplessness of the poor and the unveiling of the six postage stamps done by children from different parts of the world spoke loudly that they can grasp the plight of the poor.

The two week experience took me out of my comfort zone and propels me to act. I can no longer be indifferent to world issues. I will be more conscientious about issues affecting the poor and doing something about the issues, whether it is signing a petition or writing a letter to state or local government or the UN. Since my return to Billings I have been sharing with faculty and students my experience at the conference on Bridging the Gap.

Thank you so much Sr. Deirdre for making it possible for me to attend the conference. You certainly left no stone unturned to make our experience one to be remembered. Your enthusiasm and energy for your job at the UN was very evident and inspiring.

God bless you,