

# Mercy Life Gathering in Panama

January 13–16, 2025

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## Introduction

Looking back on my Panama experience, here are some of the blessings, surprises, lessons, and insights that I wish to share in our ongoing call toward reimagining and renewal of Mercy into the future.

## Arrival

My journey from Nigeria took over four days. I found myself stranded in the middle of the night on arrival. The mercy of God came to my rescue in the person of a Black woman taxi driver. As the airport emptied out, she asked me for the tenth time if I needed a taxi, and I continued to assure her that I didn't need a taxi. I was being extra cautious about taking a taxi, given the information sent out to alert us to opportunistic crimes targeting unsuspecting tourists. The exchanges continued with her few words of English and my even fewer words of Spanish. She assured me that she could get me to my destination if I had the address. It was over two hours of waiting by this time. The lady came over again. After saying an inward prayer of trust to the universe and my ancestors, I showed the address to her reluctantly. First, she drove me to terminal 1 to find out if any of the last arrivals in our group might still be there. But terminal 1 had already emptied out and closed; it was after 10 p.m. She typed the address into Google Maps, and we made our way in silence through dark streets. "Lord Jesus, son of the living God, have mercy on me."

People familiar with unreliable systems can understand and appreciate the important role of prayer and trust in the universe. Where appealing to political systems for recourse often fails to provide protection and redress, unseen forces are the last hope of those without power.

When we arrived at Mira Flores retreat center, the first person I saw through the window was Sr. Deborah Watson! I breathed a sigh of relief. A man approached the taxi and asked: "Sr. Mary?" All was well!

## Visits to Ministries

The next morning, I was surprised by a feeling of unexplainable energy despite the expectation of tiredness from the journey.

Sisters from the States visited two ministry sites in Colon. The first ministry was located in the heart of one of the poorest neighborhoods, in the oldest parts of the city, while the other ministry was in a lower-middle-class area.

We were serenaded with music and cultural dances performed by some of the children and a past student of the center. Two sisters and a lady who is a beneficiary of the center shared about their work among Indigenous women, while another lady and her daughter and granddaughter shared about the financial benefits to all three generations of skills learned at the center. Sharing the experience of our visit the next

day, we described our Panamanian sisters as: “makers of joy”, “defenders of joy”, “guardians of joy”, “bearers of joy”, etc. The sisters and the people they serve gave concrete expression to the joy that we experienced.

### Opening Ritual: We are one: Membership and Care

Sisters processed in with the four elements – earth (sand), fire (lighted candle), water (the free-flowing water calls us to inhabit nonviolence), and wind (a dancer waving a piece of cloth) – and banners depicting our Critical Concerns.

A letter from Catherine was read to the gathering. The phrase that stayed with me from the letter was: “...entrust Mercy to you with hope...”

In her introduction to the work of the gathering, the animator engaged us in some activities that were meant to facilitate the shift that is required for us to embody an identity of belonging and care.

There’s a need both to learn and to unlearn. For example, integrating Western rational intelligence with the body intelligence that characterizes most of Indigenous knowing. A process of unlearning requires a conscious shift. A reference was made to Pope Francis’s analogy about how to harmonize the three languages of head, heart, and hands.

The group was engaged in a whistling exercise to show that harmony and integration are required to achieve a common “language”, to become one with the group. Reading from right to left and reading with head turned sideways... this can change meaning, one’s outlook, and even how one responds.

The third exercise involved two sisters sharing an embrace. To embrace the other requires firmness, flexibility, and openness all at once. An embrace can turn violent if we deny the other the opportunity to inhabit their space.

For me, the theme of belonging and care was made concrete in remembering myself being stranded on arrival. First, I called my SLM. Then, I called the IM in my area. I also sent messages to other sisters who could help contact some of our Panamanian sisters. The sisters I contacted demonstrated their care and concern by contacting other sisters who could assist me in the moment.

To demonstrate the mutuality required for individual sisters to have a sense of belonging, a picture was shown depicting how tree roots are intertwined below the ground. It illustrated a relationship of mutual care among species of different trees in the ecosystem. It is as though the roots of the trees are “holding hands”.

The imagery of trees belonging to and caring for each other in their different areas of need and stages of development is the ecological relationship which we are called to embody, while moving away from systems that emphasize the ego. The ecological system is cyclical, communal, and characterized by mutuality and transparency. The ego-system is top down and focuses on self, with one or a few having all the authority, power, and information.

We went into groups to reflect on the question: How do we keep our relationship more ecological than ego-logical from a care perspective?

A panel was asked to reflect on signs that generate life and provide clues for other possible systems. A second panel was asked to reflect on their experience of migration, while a third panel was asked to reflect on health and care. Following reflections by the panelists, we returned to our groups to reflect on the questions:

- What does justice mean to me?
- What do we need so that our works of mercy can continue to be a contribution to the work of justice this time in history?
- What practical actions can we engage in as Sisters of Mercy?

For me, there are many analogies in this experience that lend themselves to our desire for solutions to mounting challenges confronting us as the Mercy community and as citizens of our countries and the world.

I first encountered the story about the Panama Canal in one of the stories in my English language textbook under reading and comprehension exercises. Not too long ago, I saw a PBS documentary about the life of President Theodore Roosevelt and his involvement in building the Panama Canal. The mental picture that I had reading the story as a child growing up in Nigeria was awe-inspiring, and seeing historical footage of the making of the Panama Canal left me even more spellbound. Before our arrival in Panama, we were asked to indicate one site out of the three tourist attractions that we wished to visit. I had no conflict. The Panama Canal was it, and I was not disappointed. The Canal was closed for operations on the day of our visit. Instead, we viewed a historical documentary movie. The 3D glasses made the viewing experience so real and up close, it felt as though I was a part of the happenings.

### What Practical Actions can we engage in as Sisters of Mercy?

The incidence of the first bomb blast in 2011 in Nigeria set me on a journey of conscious embrace of nonviolence and commitment to teaching its basic principles to the next generation (children and young religious women). Ministering in Nigeria has tested the limit of my commitment to nonviolence almost daily. My experience has served to strengthen my commitment and belief in nonviolent activism as an effective tool in quiet revolution. I'm especially committed to the revolution of awakening of the consciousness of a person committed to wrongdoings, whose values of common decency and respect for the dignity of the other are skewed so much that sometimes I am tempted to respond in kind.

The call to move from *ego* to *eco* is a call to return to simplicity and a return to the basics. Science and technology have promised to make life easier, and they have in many ways. But complications and irreversible damage to humans and nature have also resulted. The promises of science and technological development have not brought blessings and gains to the majority of the world. Those whose lands and labors enrich other lands and peoples live in abject poverty, driven from their land, becoming unwanted and hunted refugees, robbed of their rights to dream and hope.

### What Does Justice Mean to me?

As I work on this reflection, the breaking news about fresh attacks on the people of Congo aired. Around the same time, Palestinian refugees were making their way back

to Gaza. Most of the Western world has grown used to seeing masses of Black and brown bodies fleeing their homelands. Black and brown bodies have continued to be collateral damage in the West's insatiable appetite for precious metals, minerals, arable land, waterfronts, and ocean-view real estate, and especially by the belief that one race or class of people has a divine right to profit at the expense of Indigenous populations, whatever it takes (slavery, genocide, the use of religions to keep people pliable for subjugation and grand scale dispossession of their birthrights, and uneven economic playing field). We are complicit. The Church has done a lot of good in the areas of education, poverty alleviation, and health care. Even these good deeds have left generational trauma in people. The Church has learned little lessons from past mistakes borne of ignorance and the erroneous belief in racial superiority, as well as a corresponding belief in the superiority of Western systems (education, politics, commerce, religion, medicine, etc.).

My people have a saying: "Oyinbo to se pensu naa lo se iresa." Simply put, "The West is the antidote to its poison". While Christianity has done a great many good works in Africa, the impact of wrongdoings has lasted generations. The contact of the West with Indigenous peoples resulted in the destruction of values and the destruction of far more sophisticated systems of government, political systems, commerce, and social cohesion. The belief in the sacredness of all things because the Sacred Spirit inhabits all things is not a belief that has not been particularly emphasized in Christianity until very recently. Even though Vatican II expressed the recognition that missionaries did not bring God to the Indigenous peoples, but that God was already present, known, and worshipped, the attitude of adherents of the three Abrahamic religions says differently. The Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria are said to be the most tolerant of other beliefs and welcoming toward other ethnicities. Because of their value of hospitality, Christianity and Islam thrive in the region. Yet fundamental Islam and Christianity have continued to attack and call for total annihilation of Indigenous beliefs and systems of worship.

The imposition of foreign systems has continued in shifting guises to this day. When I say that there's a need to return to the basics, democracy is a good example. Democracy has not succeeded in most parts of the world, most especially in Africa, because built into the system of democracy are mechanisms that make it susceptible to failure. Democracy, as a system of government, was conceived in Greece for people of European descent. Not every nation must practice democracy to ensure fairness, the rule of law, and assurance that all citizens are equal partakers of the commonwealth. When villages and communities were responsible for the welfare of their people, everyone had access to what they needed to live in dignity and security on their own land. The world has become a global village where only the wealthy class and people with sophisticated weapons have unlimited access to the goods of the world. The West insistence on making the governments of the world look and operate the same is simply for the gain and benefit of the West and their domestic collaborators. Developing nations are vilified for corrupt practices and corruption in government, whereas, the same system assures continued dominance of the West and unchecked access to Africa's minerals and raw materials. It is said that Congo is capable of growing enough food to feed two billion people and possesses fifty percent

of the world's mineral deposits. In other words, Congo is to the world in terms of solid minerals and waterways what the Amazon rainforest is in terms of its ecosystem. To ensure its dominance, the West continues to employ politics of divide and rule, playing one African nation against another (Rwanda and Congo), playing one tribe against another (Tutsi and Hutu).

Another example of western imposition is found in healthcare and pharmaceuticals. Again, Indigenous peoples had their systems of using natural herbs and roots in ways that were respectful and sustainable to treat ailments. The sense of sacredness that inhabits the bodies of water, mountains and hills, leaves and trees – this was demonized at the coming of Western invaders. Today, forests are being destroyed. Hills and mountains are leveled for “development”. Waterways are polluted to access fossil fuels. When people are made sick as a result, they have no access to the lands that once healed them. Instead, they are made to turn to pharmaceutical drugs that are often out of reach. I learned recently from a Yoruba herbalist and shaman that the Yoruba people were already practicing inoculation, while Europe was still engaged in bloodletting as popular method of treating various ailments.

### Challenges Calling for Our Merciful Response

As Sisters of Mercy, our commitment in this age will need to include support, encouragement, and advocacy for people to return to systems that had worked for their ancestors while advocating and working for a world where all people can exercise control over their destiny and determine the extent and degree of interaction with the rest of the world.

### Intercultural and Global Reality and its Implication for Mercy Witness

Recently, I called the attention of our Justice Team to the news about the former U.S. Secretary of State ordering the shutting down of online news outlets operated by young Africans (during the General Assembly of the UN), under the pretext of sponsorship by Russia. We found out from the operators of the news outlets affected that the real reason behind the shutdown was that young generations of Africans are asking uncomfortable questions about Western involvement and continued economic and political disparity perpetrated by the West, and they are showing proof that is difficult to dismiss or deny.

How can we claim to live up to our intercultural and international reality if we concern ourselves narrowly to the U.S. (including its territories) and countries within our Institute because other countries are “outside our jurisdiction”? What then is the implication of our international and Catholic identity?

Those of us whose lands were colonized spiritually, culturally, and politically open ourselves whole-heartedly to what we were taught: that we are one, that we are more alike than we are different, that globalization is for the benefit of everyone, yet the reality says differently.

I learned during our visit that Panama has adopted the U.S. dollar for the most part, yet a liter of gas costs \$8 in Panama, while it is about \$4 in the U.S.



Fr. Bryan Massingale called religious women at the LCWR conference in 2024 to model needed lamentation so we can live up to our prophetic identity. Lament must also move us to courageous reimagining. United States women religious responded to the call of Vatican II. Why was it “easier” then than the kind of reimagining and re-visioning that is required of us at this time? Why do many of our sisters impacted by racial hegemony continue to feel that implementation of our call to be more embracing of interculturality and internationality is still so tentative? Why do our processes continue to marginalize minority voices and worldviews and experiences? Why is the next generation of Mercy not the dominant voice in our succession plan? What does mentorship look like in the Mercy tradition? How is the next generation being mentored, prepared, and given freedom to shape the future of Mercy? Who are those being mentored currently? Why are we not open to experiences that stretch us and challenge us to move beyond our comfort zone? These are some of the questions that my Panama experience and leadership discernment process have brought up for me.

The analogy of the Panama Canal: the human ingenuity that conceived and brought about a technological wonder that is of benefit to the world is also capable of ending wars, hunger, genocides, and profits at the expense of the poor. Unfortunately, history has demonstrated that the West will be interested in righting wrongs only if there's something to gain. COVID-19 exposed the hypocrisy of the West. The moment it was clear that most deaths were being recorded in the northern hemisphere than in the global south, a vaccine suddenly appeared. Even then, it was not made available to Africa at the same time. There were reports of expired vaccines being sent to some countries.

In this time and age, living up to our prophetic calling as Sisters of Mercy would require that we admit our complacency, admit that we have benefitted from the systems that oppress others around the world, learn to lament, model lamentation for our society to follow, and take concrete steps within our own community to make our words match our deeds. As Yoruba people say, “Eni ti yio da aso ro ni, ti orun e ni a koko wo” (“If someone offers to buy you a garment, you must first look at what she has on”). Put differently, you cannot give what you don't have.

## Challenges calling for our Merciful response

### **Sisters call for an interrogation of some of our current practices...**

- The Eucharist/reposition of the real presence of Christ (bread), church buildings as holy places to the exclusion of all creation, separation of Christ and the Creator from creation perpetuates continued disregard of the sacredness of nature and treatment of the human person as disposable.
- Rising mass migration of peoples: a call to imagine a new system that benefits all.
- Embodying and mentoring active hope: to be built every day, to challenge the attitude of waiting for “manna from heaven”.
- Be in the forefront of the formation of a critical mass of humanity that will assert the belief in the value of human life and the cosmos above money and profit.

- Support groups and organizations who are upholding hope, e.g., assertion of the Supreme Court of Panama that development and protection of the environment are both integral to achievement of fulfilled human life
- Attitude and policies in Church and society that continue to uphold Euro-centric, colonial and imperial legacies of the status of women as second-class citizens (European, colonial, and imperial legacies, as distinct from some Indigenous cultural practices where women were citizens and had equal rights). A call during our last General Chapter to incorporate more words upholding “women” in our documents.
- Genderless language: most Indigenous African languages are genderless. God has no gender either. The Yoruba system promotes an egalitarian society where everybody’s wellbeing is seen as necessary to the communal wellbeing.
- Works of Mercy are works of justice: Mercy needs to go beyond actions of kindness.

In closing, I am grateful for the opportunity because the experience reawakened some latent skills. I didn’t realize that I knew many Spanish words. I found myself able to catch and make meaning during the processes. In addition, my knowledge of French also helped. I recommend opportunities that challenge us to grow and walk in the shoes of another, so that we grow in respect and understand at a deeper level what others who do not speak our language have to go through for integration and acceptance. I was grateful that the English speakers were the ones who had to make extra effort to understand the processes.

For further reflection and wisdom inherent in the Indigenous systems, which can help us respond to the invitation of great reimagining, see Victoria Looz and Valerie Luna’s contribution in [The Earth Story published by Center for Action and Contemplation](#) (Thursday, February 20, 2025).