Until all have ENOUGH

World and National Perspectives on Poverty and the Vow of Poverty  25 January 2011

I would like to thank each of you for the invitation to speak at this conference today. For those who do not know me, my name is Deirdre Mullan and I am the Mercy International representative at the United Nations in New York. I am a national of Ireland and come from a city with two names: Derry /Londonderry, in the North of Ireland. I am a teacher by profession, a Roman Catholic by tradition and a Sister of Mercy by life-choice.

The part of the world I come from is well known for all the wrong reasons. I grew up during what were known as the ‘Troubles’ in Ireland and I witnessed hatred and death far too often. As a teacher in one of the schools run by the Sisters of Mercy, I often saw firsthand what can happen to young minds and hearts when they are colonized by an ideology which demonizes the one who is different and “other”.

I am delighted to be with you today, to reflect with you on our topic: World and National Perspectives on Poverty and the Vow of Poverty.

My presentation to you will be in three parts, under the title – Until all have enough
1. World and National Perspectives on Poverty
2. The Vow of Poverty as a way toward sustainable living
3. Until all have enough – Re-thinking Poverty

Part 1: World and National Perspectives on Poverty

The philosopher John Hicks argues that “incarnation” should be understood as a metaphor for human life rather than the term applied uniquely to Jesus. “All human beings have the potential to “incarnate” or “live out” truths, values and love that reflect a divine reality at work within us. Jesus offers us extraordinary insights into the nature of God. He offers life-giving insights about the manner of our relationships with God, with all of creation and with each other. We who profess to be Christian would do well to listen to and promote Jesus’ message of salvation in ways that link it primarily with this world, not the world to come.”

In 1948, the UN General Assembly ratified the Declaration of Human Rights. The thirty Articles of the Declaration proper state that all people have a right to freedom and liberty; that no one shall be enslaved or held in servitude, or subjected to torture or cruel and degrading punishment.

By definition, human rights apply to everyone who belongs to our species, wherever they are found in our world. Concern for human rights, while not a recent phenomenon, has been grossly uneven throughout its history. Along with gross violations of human rights, there are also the endless indignities that billions of people endure.

What human beings all over the world want is universal: security, the ability to support their families, educational opportunities, affordable food, clean water, sanitation and access to health care.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the UN Member States agreed on eight goals – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – that call for national action and international cooperation to provide access to food, education, healthcare and economic opportunities for children, women and men everywhere. In the Millennium Declaration, world leaders resolved to halve, by 2015, the number of people living on less than $1 a day and also to set targets in the fight against poverty and disease. For many people the Millennium Development Goals represent a major landmark in public policy-making because these eight goals:
• Set international targets for reducing global poverty
• Set the target to lift 500 million people out of poverty by 2015
• Represent a synthesis of many of the most important commitments made separately at international conferences and summits during the 1990s.

However, the implementation of the MDGs is dependent on all of us who believe that another world is possible. Healing the wounds of the earth and its people does not require saintliness or a political party – only gumption and persistence. At a time when people feel powerless, an altruistic approach can be a balm because it reveals the power of helpful and humble acts. It is a reminder that constructive changes in human affairs arise from intention, not coercion.

Speaking at the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:
“…People of faith are on the front lines of efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest and bridge chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding. Religious groups can also be powerful advocates in mobilizing political leaders and the public at large… I look to religious leaders and scholars everywhere to work hand in hand with us in that mission.”

People of faith are key to achieving the MDGs. They know that malnutrition, ill health, lack of education and lack of economic power violate human dignity, and every day they turn conviction into action by caring for the neediest and most vulnerable. Religious communities have done more than any others to make us aware of the sheer scale of human suffering in our world, and of our duty to end it. People in the pews must help to create the political will needed to translate this rhetoric into reality.

As we grapple with the concept of poverty in this conference today, I bring to your attention part of a submission which we, Sisters of Mercy, have presented to the Forty Ninth Session of the Commission on Social Development to be held at United Nations Headquarters in New York from February 9-18, 2011. The priority theme of the session is the Eradication of Poverty.

“Poverty Eradication is an unparalleled challenge facing member states and the global community. As an international community of religious women working in 47 countries we see firsthand the consequences of poverty.

In 2001, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defined poverty as a “sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.” (E/C.12/2001/10)
Poverty is not simply the lack of money or resources. It cannot be measured by GDP alone. Poverty is a multi-dimensional violation of human rights. It is death dealing, physically and morally.”

According to the latest Human Development Report, 1.44 billion people around the world live in poverty and subsist on a daily income of $1.25 or less. Moreover, 1.75 billion people around the world experience the many dimensions of poverty – that is, they experience at least 30% of indicators reflecting acute deprivations in health, education, and standard of living.

Furthermore, the global community and member states together have a serious responsibility to address gender inequalities which underlie poverty, disproportionately affecting women and girls, and impoverishing the entire community.

The responsibility for addressing the root causes of chronic poverty lies at national level. Poverty eradication requires effective partnerships that challenge and transform economic, social, cultural and political structures that have given rise to and maintained the current inequalities.
While many situations remain dire and progress is slow, what I have seen and experienced personally as I do my work as the executive director of Mercy Global Concern at the United Nations, and experienced personally makes me believe that another world is possible. I am moved by the sentiments expressed by the poet Adrienne Rich, who wrote:

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

My challenge to you today as people who prepare young and newer members for religious life, is to seriously address this question?

• What is the connection between the United Nations analysis of Poverty and the Vow of Poverty?
• How can we help our members move beyond parochialism to global thinking and action in relation to both the Vow of Poverty and its relationship to Poverty as defined above?

In part answer to these questions, I turn to the second section of my presentation:

**Part 2: The Vow of Poverty as a way toward sustainable living:**

I believe that the vow of poverty is an attempt to try both to model an alternative way of living and to restructure our world – so that all may indeed have enough. To aspire to live in this way will obviously have implications for how we try to live our religious life. Traditionally, the vow of poverty – until the Renewal Years - was largely seen as personal and a matter of permissions.

With the Renewal Years, a marked evolution began to take place which brought to the fore a very strong – and even central – social dimension of poverty for vowed religious. The seminal ideas for this marked shift can be found in the early renewal documents and were clearly were influenced by the writings and thinking of Sister Marie Augusta Neal, and by such thinkers as Paulo Freire in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) as we began to understand the concept of conscientization – which is an in-depth understanding of the world and of social and political contradictions.

As Sr Marie Augusta Neal pointed out in her work, The Just Demands of the Poor: Essays in Socio-Theology when the church elaborated its theological position on human development and Church ministry, it shifted the primary focus on ministry - from alleviating the results of poverty, beyond the goal of human service – to eliminating its causes. And this shift recognizable in the Church’s post-Vatican II position, as for instance in Pope JohnXXIII’s statement’s in 1961 Mater et Magistra and 1963 Pacem in Terris; and by Pope Paul VI Populorum Progressio 1967 and Octogesima Adveniens, 1971.

The impact on this body of teaching of the Church on Women Religious in particular, was profound. Many Chapter Directives refocused on the founding call by responding to the pressing needs of the day, and by listening to the voices of poor and disempowered people. Recognizing the need to help build a world of redeemed humanity opposing all selfish individualism and nationalism, most congregations sought to find ways of recognizing their internationality; and they also reflected on how the vowed life was/is meant to be a life of liminal, prophetic calling.

Seen in this context, the vows are concerned with values and not with laws.
Modern and post-modern religious life is lived against a backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling extremes of wealth and poverty. The shift in focus and the need to live more simply so that other can simply live, away from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum in the past decade. The vow of poverty is meant to be a safeguard against the abuses related to wealth and property. But in many cases, as Diarmuid O’Murchu has argued, it is dogged by a double flaw:

“(a) the accompanying spirituality is not about responsible care of the goods of God’s Creation, but about stripping away all attachment to material things so that the soul is set free for eternal life or for nirvana; and (b) the onus is ultimately on each individual person; consequently, the collective wealth of the monastery was never subjected to the same intensity of evangelical scrutiny.”

O’Murchu argues that the Vow of Poverty as traditionally understood, emphasizes the betrayal of creation and the abandonment of basic human responsibility for the goods of creation entrusted to human care. True to the hierarchical norms and traditions, the care of goods was entrusted to a bursar figure who distributed from a collective pot while adult religious (men and women) behaved in a submissive way by asking permissions for the use of the most basic of goods. This in turn led to widespread abuse and a great deal of irresponsible evasiveness.

With the growing awareness of the finite resources we share as earthlings and our call to live in an inter-dependent way conscious of all living systems, the Vow of Poverty takes on a whole new meaning.

Of course, trying to live in a conscious way has consequences because how I as an individual live my life has far reaching implications for other people and for the planet alike. The consequent attitudes and actions regarding how we use and regard property and resources are informed by awareness. To live in a sustainable way needs to be realized and informed; and ethical behavior is informed by education.

This enlightened wisdom is elucidated vividly by Joan Chittister:

“To say that we can possibly minister to the poor and never read a single article on the national debt; to think that we can be moral parts of the global community and never study a thing about debt; to imagine that we can save the planet and never learn a thing about ecology; to infer that we work to promote women’s issues but never go to a women’s conference, read a feminist theologian or spend a minute tracing the history the ideas about women; to say that we care about the homeless and never say a word about the evil of homelessness or the lack of medical care for the indigent, smacks of pallid conviction at best. Simply to do things is not enough anymore. Professional education that fits us for particular skills but neglects to prepare a person for dealing with the moral questions of our time is not enough anymore. The world needs thinkers who take thinking as a spiritual discipline. Anything else is denial practiced in the name of religion.”

The shift in thinking alluded to here, demands that we think in terms of horizons rather than boundaries. To try to live in this way is to recognize that religious life is not about religion! It is a value witness at the service of humanity. By restricting it to a religious context, we violate our calling to be liminal witnesses to cutting edge issues. Our task is therefore to “re-member” our founding call to be liminal witnesses at the service of vulnerable humanity, living in a vulnerable planet.

The vow of Poverty or the Vow for Sustainability is about fostering the reign of God upon our Earth. Such awareness knows that, under God, things should be different from the way they are now. Too often, this awareness is defined as justice doing. It is more than the narrow confines of justice making; it is about a quality of engagement that confronts the oppressive suffering of our time. Most religious are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic nature of poverty. Most of our work on poverty eradication is mere tokenism. We give generously to poor people and in so doing we exonerate governments from having to
address what is primarily a political problem. The justice that arises from the liminal space requires a set of skills and wisdom that traditional formation programs for religious never address. It requires a resilience and wisdom that understands how the world operates and requires the backing of groups of supportive networks. It works in creative networks such as the religious at the United Nations (RUN) who work in a consistent and collaborative way with a quality of engagement and monitoring which puts many governments to shame!

If we really believed in the Vow for Sustainable Living and were focused on the horizon when all have enough, more of our memberships would be engaged in political analysis such as that undertaken at the United Nations and, our Non-Governmental-Organizations and UN offices would be staffed adequately by individuals who are both profoundly spiritual yet imbued with the wisdom to understand how the world works!

For this to happen, we need leadership people who understand that having effective agents of gospel justice, requires vision-makers who are not constrained and who will fearlessly speak truth to power. Sadly, decisions about personnel and where they should be located are based more on the bottom black line than on liminal witnessing!

How do we move forward to the place of liminal witnessing and a world where all have enough?

The starting point for such a shift in consciousness is right here where we are today.

- How do we deal with the hoarding of goods which takes place in convents and monasteries across the globe?
- How do we educate membership to vote? Do we vote with a nationalist mindset or in a way which respects the needs of all of humanity?
- How do we educate membership in the area of Earth systems and the interconnectedness of all of life?
- How do we deal with an ecclesiastical status which imposes upon us a respectability status which in turns limits our liminal availability?
- Have we ever given serious thought as to why “preferential option for the poor” was such a stumbling block for religious men and women?

When we look to the life and witness of Jesus we realize that he never talked about poverty but about poor people. He never recommended poverty as something to be embraced either spiritually or materially. From a Gospel perspective, the call and challenge as I see it, is to work toward a new world order or until all have enough …and this brings me to my third and final part of my presentation...

**Part 3: Until all have enough: Rethinking Poverty.**

“The vowed life is often been portrayed as a life of frugality and destitution. Frugal it may have been but never destitute! In many cases it was, and continues to be, a life well protected from the insecurities that the bulk of humanity endure.”

Rethinking poverty has an important place in any discourse about living in a sustainable way until all have enough. It prompts us to re-examine, at the deepest levels, who we are and what our purpose is in life. The human experience is essentially spiritual in nature and is rooted in the inner reality – or what we call the soul. The culture of consumerism in which we live out our lives has tended to reduce human beings to competitive, insatiable consumers of goods and to objects of manipulation by the market.

The articulation of a vision for sustainability until all have enough, must emerge from the discourse on the vowed life, especially in relation to the Vow of Poverty. It is not enough to conceive of sustainable consumption in terms of creating better conditions for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs. A
sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization. A relevant analogy is the human body: here, millions of cells collaborate to make human life possible. “The astounding diversity of form and function connect them in a lifelong process of giving and receiving. It represents the highest expression of unity in diversity. Within such an order, the concept of justice is embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and the wider community are inextricably linked.”

Such a transformation will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect the fully the interdependence of the entire social body – as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it. Among these changes, many of which are already the focus of considerable public discourse, are:

1. The Call to Global Citizenship;
2. The call to Ecological Justice.
3. The eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with a capacity for global decision-making;
4. The establishment of structures which recognizes the interconnectedness of all of life and humanity’s common stewardship of the earth’s resources;
5. The redirection of massive military spending toward constructive social ends.

“The current model for progress which is based on the economic system depends on a society of vigorous consumers of material goods.” In such a model, endlessly rising levels of consumption are cast as indicators of progress and prosperity. This preoccupation with the production and accumulation of material objects and comforts (as sources of meaning, happiness and social acceptance) has permeated every level of our society and has consolidated itself in the structures of power and information to the exclusion of competing voices and paradigms. The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for the privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty and inequality, for the majority. Each successive global crisis – be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, financial collapse – has revealed new dimensions of the exploitation and oppression inherent in the current patterns of consumption and production. There are stark contrasts between the consumption of luxuries and the cost of provision of basic needs: for example, basic education for all of the world’s poorest boys and girls would cost $10 billion; yet $82 billion is spent annually on cigarettes in the United States alone. The eradication of world hunger would cost $30 billion; water and sanitation would cost $10 billion.

By comparison the world’s military budget rose to $1.55 trillion in 2008.

The narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of our modern economic thinking has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the disruption of families and communities, the corruption of public institutions and the exploitation and marginalization of large sectors of the population – women and girls in particular.

Economic activity and the strengthening of the economy have a role to play in the prosperity of a region and its people. Yet, the shift towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable society, will require attention to a harmonious dynamic between the material, and moral dimensions of consumption and production. The latter in particular will be responsible for laying the foundation for just and meaningful human relations; these include the cultivation of trust, the eradication of poverty, promotion of art, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The present system of profit at all costs has, too often, been accompanied by delocalization or the transition to automation thus raising unemployment and underemployment worldwide. Those living in poverty have no voice in such a system. Movement towards a greener economy alone is not enough and must involve systems that enable all human beings to contribute to the productive process.
The shift toward the Vision of Sustainability: until all have enough will involve vow education, based on a clear vision of the kind of society that we wish to live in; and the kind of individuals who will bring this about. Advocates for such a system need to be able to reflect deeply on learned behaviors and to adjust accordingly incorporating the inextricable link between earth poverty and human poverty. Education must be transformed from simply imparting knowledge to developing the vast potential inherent in human beings. The vow of poverty as many of us understood it in the past, took detachment as the primary virtue. The vow for mutual sustainability cherishes the sacredness in the most simple of things. Let me share with you ……:

I once experienced this in a profound way. On a visit to a rural region in Cambodia where I had helped to build a small school, I was asked to go to the home of the village elder to receive a thankyou gift. My western mind was wondering what this might be! The elder, bestowed on me a Buddhist blessing as I entered her humble dwelling. Then she brought me to a small square opening at the back of her one-roomed thatched home and pointed to the VIEW OF THE MOUNTAIN - My gift to cherish and remember. This poor Cambodian woman epitomized for me the “poor in spirit” – those who are open to the generous abundance of God, who recognize that God is very near in the ordinariness of daily living and encounter.

The Vow for Sustainable Living: until all have enough is an invitation to connect with the sacredness within and without all living systems. The Vow for Sustainable living is more about being rich in soul than poor in spirit. “The language we now employ must liberate us from the oppression of the past in order to engage with the liminal task of demolishing competitive consumerism and replacing it with care and compassion. Under God, the whole earth is ours and yet nothing is ours. All is entrusted to our care, to develop and re-create.”

This idea is beautifully crafted in the words of Irish Poet John O Donohue –

In the world of creative work, where your gift is engaged, there is no competition…… In the world of soul, the more you have, the more everyone has. The rhythm of soul is the surprise of endless enrichment.

I believe that as humanly-divine creatures that we have within us the resources to break the vicious, violent cycle and reclaim our true humanity. The challenge is: Who will risk the doing of this? As catalysts for a different quality of reality we cannot continue to allow our liminal witnessing to be subverted. In short, the liminal vision is a call to transform behaviors and attitudes which cause us to collude with violence. The scholar Walter Bruggermann provides a useful synthesis for this challenge. He names amnesia, greed, and despair as our inherited sins:

In our world of fragmented disconnectedness we encounter:

• Memory as a covenant that aggressively forgets,
• Covenant in a community enmeshed in commodity,
• And hope in a community that believes very little is possible.

The counter witness to which we are called is:

• Remember a rich past
• A relational presence in the face of commoditization
• And Hope for a marvelous future in the face of resigned despair.

Finally, in Called to Global Solidarity, 1997, the US Catholic Conference said:
“Cain’s question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ has global implications and is a special challenge for our time, touching not one brother but all sisters and brothers. Are we responsible for the fate of the world’s poor? Do we have duties to suffering people in far-off places? Must we respond to the needs of suffering refugees in distant nations? Are we keepers of the creation for future generations?

For the followers of Jesus, the answer is an unequivocal YES.”

“It has already been pointed out,” wrote the theologian Karl Rahner, “that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or s/he will not exist at all.” Rahner’s prediction is proving prophetic. We who belong to religious communities know that the current crisis makes all the more urgent the need to be still, to quiet our souls, to wait prayerfully – for a certain contemplative quiet is necessary for the voice of the Spirit to be heard. Living contemplatively may well save our sanity in a spirit-crushing, fast paced society in which we live. Such mindfulness has the power to melt our fear so that we can act and be faithful to our prophetic calling, to preach and teach the gospel. The living Christ continues to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. The voice of the church, wounds and scandalizes when it does not “speak the truth in love.” It fails its mission when it denies the reality of issues that affect the lives of its members.

I would like to share with you a story told by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, the great moral voice of our time.

“One of the Just Men of Sodom determined to save its inhabitants from sin and punishment. Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching (and teaching) against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning, people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening: he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the wise kept silent. One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher, approached him with these words: ‘Poor stranger. You shout, you extend yourself body and soul; don’t you see that it is hopeless?’

‘Yes, I see,’ answered the Just Man.

‘Then why do you go on?’

‘I’ll tell you why. In the beginning I thought I could change (men and women). Today, I know that I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent (the politicians and the pundits, the movie stars and ‘image makers’, the indecent and the indifferent), from ultimately changing me.’

That is why I speak – not so much to change them, but so they do not change me. The essence of being a HUMAN being is never to give into despair. Never to give up. Never to stop shouting. And never to let them change me.

I offer this story because I believe that we need to ask – and continue asking – who is influencing and changing whom in our world today?

I also believe that too many of us are notoriously naïve and ignorant about the systemic/institutional nature of sin and suffering in our world. The root cause of much of the injustice is not unjust deeds done by individual people, but oppressive social and institutional forces that compel people into acting immorally, and even oppressively, towards each other. In many parts of the world, governments themselves are the most corrupt and corrupting of influences. And the mainstream religions are not without their internalized oppressions, often fostering the values and strategies of war, sexism, exclusion and patriarchal domination. The new learnings in science are challenging us to rethink the role of the human and the role of our institutions in the wider web of life upon which we depend.

Sr. Deirdre Mullan