

## Celebrating 170 years of “Mercy” in Dundalk, Co. Louth

**October 27<sup>th</sup> 1847 – October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017**

On Friday 27<sup>th</sup> October, 170 years of Mercy presence was celebrated in Dundalk. Catherine McAuley’s bell was presented to Sr. Margaret Casey, Congregational Leader to be given to Mercy International Centre for viewing by the greater Mercy family and friends.



*Margaret Casey(Congregational Leader), Therese Clarke (Archivist Dundalk Convent) and Ann Brady(Provincial Northern Province)*

### **Sr. Therese Clarke (Archivist, Dundalk Convent) shared the following:**

In the year 1847 Most Rev. Dr. William Crolly was Archbishop of Armagh. Dr. John Coyne was Parish Priest of Dundalk. By that time Mercy convents has been established in many of the dioceses in the southern part of the country but none in the Archdiocese of Armagh or indeed, in Ulster or any town north of the River Boyne. Earlier that year Dr. Coyne visited Baggot Street convent to ask the Superior, Mother Cecilia Marmion (herself a native of Co. Louth) for nuns to establish a convent here. On October 27<sup>th</sup> she came herself with Sr. Cecilia Cassidy to accompany six nuns – Mary de Sales Vigne (always known as our Foundress), Aloysius Gonzaga O’Sullivan, Catherine Walsh, Rose Lynch, Francis Gold and Agatha Kilkelly on the long and tiring journey to Dundalk.

In the first two pages of Volume 1 of the Annals, which Mother de Sales wrote herself, we read a brief account of their coming, the blessing of the house and school-rooms and the information that St. Malachy’s, as it was called, remained a Branch House until January 20<sup>th</sup> 1850. She tells us too, that Mother Cecilia Marmion and Sr. Cecilia Cassidy returned to the Parent House on November 27<sup>th</sup>, a month after the convent was established. Sadly, she also records the decline in health of the good Parish Priest and his death in February 1848.

The sister who then became Annalist proceeds to give details of the actual journey to Dundalk. The nuns travelled by train to Drogheda. Since the Boyne Bridge hadn't yet been constructed they then had to make the rest of the journey by side-car. She tells that Mother de Sales carried a case of relics on her lap the whole way. It had been left in Baggot Street by a priest who wished it to be taken on the next Foundation.

Along with that – and I quote – “*Rev. Mother brought with her also another treasured memento, viz the small bell used by our revered Foundress Rev. Mother Catherine McAuley in the Parent House refectory from the time of the Foundation .....*” (end quote).

If you examine the bell you will see on it the following inscription:-

***This Bell was used by our Venerated Foundress Mother McAuley***

The annalist continues with amusing details of their arrival and first meal in the convent.

Dundalk had the reputation of being a healthy Community. From oral tradition we can assume that this was probably because Mother de Sales, being a practical woman, insisted on the nuns getting plenty of good, plain, wholesome food, a good night's sleep and sufficient recreation to enable them to carry out their duties to the best of their ability. She absolutely forbade extra penitential practices. Indeed, possibly as a result of her wise approach to this matter, by the time of the Golden Jubilee in 1897 just seven nuns had died.



*Headstone of the foundress Mother Mary De Sales Vigne*

Again from the first few pages of the Annals, we know that until at least 1909 and presumably much later, the precious little bell was in daily use in the convent refectory. At some stage it was “taken out of service” and mounted on the specially made wooden stand. It was displayed for many years in the old convent Reception Room.

We sisters in Dundalk have done our best to carry out the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. Along with the traditional apostolates of teaching and nursing our other ministries have been many and varied.

Through our Foundations in Ardee and Dungannon similar and other apostolates were established and Catherine's charism spread further afield.

We thank God for all these ministries and are happy that though ageing and greatly diminished in number, we continue to carry Catherine's mantle of Mercy as we celebrate 170 years in our locality. We also feel that this is an appropriate occasion to "repatriate" her little bell to the Mercy International Centre, Baggot Street where it can be seen and appreciated by the world-wide Mercy family and friends.

May Catherine's spirit and that of her former postulant and novice, Mother de Sales Vigne and the Sisters who went before us continue to inspire and enlighten us.

**Words spoken by Ann Brady (Provincial Leader, Northern Province) during Ritual of Transfer at Mercy Convent, Mill St, Dundalk on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017**

This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Today we rejoice in the gracious welcome extended to us by Sr. Maol Iosa on behalf of the community here at Mill Street, Dundalk. We rejoice in the story of the foundation of St Malachy's Convent, Dundalk so ably recounted for us by Sr. Therese.

Today October 27<sup>th</sup> we celebrate and rejoice in 170 years of faithful Mercy ministry in the Dundalk area, in Ardee and Dungannon and in Mobile, Alabama where foundations were made from St. Malachy's, Dundalk.



*Srs. Margaret Campbell, Scholasticah Nganda, Agnes Crowley and Therese Clarke*

We rejoice and give thanks that we have the opportunity to mark this Anniversary in a unique and special way celebrating this Ritual of Transfer of Catherine's Bell, gifted to this Community 170 years ago, to our Congregational Leader Sr. Margaret Casey. This little brass Bell with its dark wooden handle and measuring 8cm x 5cm will be on display at Mercy International Centre to be enjoyed and admired by the wider Mercy Family.

We have been very privileged in our Northern Province to have had a number of artefacts personal to or closely associated with our Foundress; Catherine's ring was preserved at Crumlin Road, Belfast; Catherine's Cincture was lovingly and safely stored by the Sisters at Downpatrick; the Sisters at St. Joseph's Tullamore were in possession of letters written by Catherine to the Sisters in the early days of the Foundation there as well as a Manuscript of the original Rule and Constitution. The portrait of Dr Blake, Bishop of Dromore, who invited the Mercy Sisters to Newry, has been given on loan to Mercy International Centre by the community at Catherine Street, Newry. An Icon written by the late Sr. Aloysius McVeigh, Derry also hangs in Mercy International Centre.

As we admire Catherine's little bell, we remember and pray for the sisters who over many years answered its call to awareness and prayer. We give thanks to the custodians of the bell, particularly the archivists in this community who have been faithful keepers of the story for 170 years now.



*Ann Brady and Margaret Casey signing the Deed of Transfer*

I now invite Sr. Margaret to join me in signing this document entitled 'The Deed Of Transfer'. The Deed states that the parties involved in this transfer represent the Northern Province and the Congregation of The Sisters of Mercy, it gives a description of the Bell and states the reason for the transfer. We will sign three copies of the document, one to go to Central Leadership, one to our Northern Province Archives and the third copy will remain with the community here in Dundalk.

**Words spoken by Margaret Casey during Ritual of Transfer at Mercy Convent, Mill St, Dundalk on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2017**

It is my pleasure and privilege to accept this treasure – the bell used by Venerable Catherine, brought here from Baggot Street by Mother de Sales on the occasion of the founding of Dundalk Convent. It is a source of wonder, joy and gratitude to us that you have preserved it and still have it. Your Provincial Leader Sr. Ann is giving it to us, representing the

Congregation, and in time we will give it on permanent loan to Mercy International where along with other artefacts from Catherine's life and time – her cincture, letters etc. it will become available to a much wider Mercy family and general audience.

We all have our own associations with bells from our earlier days – for me it was usually calling us to something – prayer (Mass, liturgy of the hours) to silence, to the parlour to welcome visitors or in this particular case to eat. We give thanks for all the times it has been used, for the people who were part of its story up till now, for the memories it holds for us.

Let us continue to hear the call of God through Catherine to us to live Mercy life in its abundance. So we give thanks for all that has been and pray God's blessing on us now and in the future. May the music of Mercy ring loudly in our hearts and lives.

*Therese Clarke rsm*  
*Northern Province*