

Input from Brenda Dolphin rsm

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Catherine McAuley and MERCY – a vision and a way of life

Introduction

On this special occasion which in essence is the celebration of the lived charism of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy we recall the words of St. John Paul II

“You not only have a great history to remember and to recount but also a great history still to be accomplished. Look to the future to where the Spirit is sending you to do even greater things”¹. We tell our story, we relive our great history, not to boast, but in order to say thank you to God, to strengthen the bonds of unity that exist between us, to deepen our sense of belonging, and to inspire us for the future.

What is the story that we recall?

It starts with the story of Catherine McAuley, born in Dublin in 1778 and who died in Dublin in 1841. She founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy as we know it today. **For those who do not know her story** Catherine's father, James, was a well-to-do Catholic, unusual in penal times in Ireland. He died when Catherine was just five years old. Her mother, Elinor, was also a baptised Catholic who loved the social life of the wealthy elite in Dublin of her day and very quickly after her husband's death lost her hold on her Catholic faith and on the wealth left her by her husband. Elinor died almost penniless in 1798, leaving her children, Catherine, Mary and James dependent on the kindness and good will of Protestant relatives, who loved the McAuley children but were bitterly opposed to the Catholic religion. In 1803 Catherine accepted the invitation to take up residence with William and Catherine Callaghan in Coolock House as the companion to Mrs Callaghan who was in delicate health. When William Callaghan died he left Catherine McAuley as his sole residual legatee. It was this unexpected legacy that enabled Catherine to build the House of Mercy on Baggot Street which opened in 1827. In the original constitutions of the newly established congregation in 1831 Catherine wrote: “The principal aim of this congregation is to educate poor girls, to lodge and maintain poor young women who are in danger and to visit the sick

¹ Vita Consecrata no 110.

poor". What had begun as a personal dream, had, through the goodness of William Callaghan and the urging of the Church now become the central purpose of the new religious order.

Maynooth – the early days

Maybe the fact that both Maynooth and the Orange order were founded at the same time gives us some glimpse today of the religious undercurrents in Catherine's formative years. After the 1778 rebellion (which was also the year of Catherine's birth) the London Government, needed the majority Irish Catholic population on its side because France [which had allied with America in the American War of Independence 1775 – 1783] was threatening to invade of Great Britain on behalf of its ally and so the London Government agreed to a request from the Irish Bishops to open Maynooth College. This meant that not only was it possible for young Irish men who wished to become priests to be educated in Ireland, but it was hoped that it would also offset a trend that made the same bishops very uneasy – the young men who went to France to study for the priesthood were espousing the principles of the French Revolution during their time abroad!!!

At the same time in history the Orange Order was founded by a profoundly partisan element of the Protestant Ascendancy in Armagh who did not wish to change the status quo and was vehemently opposed to the seeming leniency of the London Parliament towards the Catholic majority on the island of Ireland.

Catherine McAuley in her years as a teenager and young adult lived in a Protestant environment. She knew that she was loved and cherished by her Protestant relatives but at the same time she had to contend with prejudice and hostility which sought to undermine her Catholic faith. She constantly heard severe criticism of the priests of the Catholic Church, about how they were unfit for purpose and how they were constantly leading the people astray with, among other things, their strange practices and their refusal to allow individual interpretation of Sacred Scripture.

When Catherine McAuley's life was being scrutinised by the Vatican at the time she was declared Venerable by the Church (April 9th 1990), the theologians who read her writings acclaimed a work attributed to Catherine as an important exegesis which stated succinctly the Catholic position on points of discussion among Catholics and Protestants in the Ireland of her time. This work is called the *Cottage Controversy*², so named by Catherine herself and

² The document "*The Cottage Controversy*", attributed to Catherine McAuley was committed to paper by her in February 1838 at the request of Sr Mary Vincent Deasy of Cork. The *Cottage Controversy* is based on an originally prepared series of six conversations between Lady P (the Lady of the Manor) and Margaret Martyn (a young Catholic woman married to Thomas Lewis, a tenant on the demesne of Lord and Lady Psituated to the north of Dublin). These six conversations provided a basis for lessons to converts for Catherine and her co-workers back in 1832. The topics covered by Catherine in the Cottage Controversy include, **Apostolic Succession, Sacred Scripture, Sacrament of Reconciliation, Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Purgatory, The Real Presence, Salvation, Grace, Devotion to the Saints, Oaths and Indulgences.** In her letter to Sr. Mary Vincent Deasy, Cork, Catherine explains her reasons for preparing her instructions for converts for

prepared by her in 1832 as a series of six conversations which she used for catechetical purposes. The topics covered in these conversations are revelatory of the kinds of discussions that Catherine faced in her late teens and early adult years and the replies in the *Cottage Controversy* indicate the breadth and depth of Catherine's study of the Scriptures (unusual for her time), her unfailing trust in God and her versatility in tackling a wide-ranging series of evocative and contentious catechetical and theological questions. The Vatican theologians further indicated that the *Cottage Controversy* highlighted Catherine's attachment to and knowledge of the teaching of the Catholic Church and described her as a "well informed Catholic Apologist".

Where did Catherine McAuley learn what she did about the Catholic faith and how did she arrive at such maturity spiritually? Like every other human person, the interaction between nature and nurture was very evident in her life. Catherine as we know had a strong interior life hidden with Christ in God. There were also many external influences in Catherine's life that helped her grow and develop, notably the never forgotten example of her charitable good-living father which, young though she was when he died, became deeply ingrained in her soul. There was the Quaker influence of Catherine Callaghan, which though unspoken had its influence on Catherine's attitude to Scripture.

However for this occasion it is useful to look at the influence on Catherine that is connected with Maynooth. When Maynooth was founded in 1795 Catherine McAuley was a seventeen year old teenager. There are no direct extant references to Maynooth in any of Catherine's writings. However, by **1809** (by which time she was 31 years of age) she was already going to Daniel Murray for spiritual direction. Daniel Murray was President of Maynooth from 1812 to 1813 when he was appointed co-adjutor bishop in Dublin. As Archbishop of Dublin he was very influential in Catherine's life especially at the time of the foundation of the Congregation.

On **December 13th 1831** (the day after the Congregation was founded), Fr Myles Gaffney was assigned (by Daniel Murray) to assist Catherine in the drawing up of the Rule of Life for the Mercy Congregation. Fr Gaffney was spiritual director in Maynooth for 1836 to 1837. His eulogy of Catherine at the time of her death (in 1841) forms an essential part of the important Limerick Manuscript, one of the extant manuscripts that recount the life and work of Catherine McAuley for posterity.

Dr Michael Blake, later Bishop of Dromore, was known to Catherine from 1823. He too, was a close confidant and advisor and was the author of a significant letter about Catherine's holiness which he wrote to Mary Anne Doyle in Tullamore at the time of Catherine's death.

The above tells us that Catherine McAuley, recognising the gaps in her religious knowledge because of her family circumstances she took steps to know her religion clearly and

publication and she expresses her hope for its usefulness in other areas of life: she says; "*I earnestly hope it may be useful for your patients who require something amusing as well as instructive. You may assure them it is a true story, and that the distinguished personage and the humble Margaret were living not long since*".

unequivocally, because she realised that good practice is built on sound theory. **In this, as a young laywoman, she was formed by some notable ex alumni of Maynooth.**

Servant of the Poor – the making of a saint?

As Catherine grew into an awareness of God in her life, she developed an intense attentiveness to the needs of the poor –she was haunted by an all-consuming desire to **serve the poor**. In this was the seed bed of what we know as the Mercy charism today.

As her life unfolded, Catherine grew in the conviction that solid Catholic education of Irish women was one way up for the Irish people as they began to assert themselves in the wake of centuries of oppression.

She was equally convinced that **help should be brought to the sick** and so she visited the sick poor in their homes, earning for herself and her companions the title of the **Walking Nuns**. She did not recoil from offering her services and those of her companions for the daunting work of helping the sick poor in the Townsend Depot during the height of the cholera outbreak in Dublin in 1832. At the same time she did not hesitate to use her privileged connections in the medical world to gain visiting rights to the sick Catholics in established hospitals like Sir Patrick Dunn's.

As the **surprise heiress of the fortune of William Callaghan**, she poured her inheritance into building a house on Baggot Street (dubbed by her brother James as Kitty's Folly) to shelter women who were made homeless and vulnerable by life's circumstances, to shelter orphans who had nowhere else to go, to start a school for young girls..

The house on Baggot Street opened on the **24th September 1827**. That was the date settled between Catherine and Mary Anne Doyle who moved in permanently on that day. Catherine could not do so because she was still minding her sister Mary who was dying from TB and who had five small children. The choice of the date was coincidental or providential? Certainly it served to give a very definite and profound focus to what was the ongoing developing orientation of Catherine's personal vocation.

Catherine McAuley – a woman of God with a vision of Mercy

In Catherine we encounter a very remarkable woman, who was passionately in love with Jesus Christ, and from whom she learned that Mercy constitutes the heart of the gospel ethos.

Catherine's vision of Mercy at work in **Education, Health Care, Pastoral Care, Social Awareness** was aimed at overcoming the gaps of distance between those who were rich and those who were poor, thus restoring human dignity through transforming social relationships³. She did not stop there however; equally, she sought to inspire those she taught

³ Hope is the key to believing the passion of possibility. Authentic hope recognises and acknowledges our own powerlessness to act without the Lord. It is the act of Trust in the Lord that he can work humanly impossible things through us for His glory.

with a real and personal love for Jesus living and active in their lives. From her own close union with God sprang her graciousness, her exquisite courtesy, her respect for each one she met, especially those who were poor. She managed to convey a sense of specialness to each single person she met, something which fascinated people and drew them to her, because they sensed that she lived what she taught⁴.

So we can say that Catherine's success in her dealings with the poor lay in:

- **Her very real love for God and for people generally.** “She opened her heart to God and her hands to the people around her”. Frances Ward in a letter to M. Gonzaga O’Brien in 1879 said of Catherine her good friend, colleague and sister in religion; “You never knew her, I knew her, better than I have known anybody in my life. She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed what it meant to be a Sister of Mercy, to see the world and its people in terms of God’s love, to love everyone who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on”.
- When **she was a teacher herself**, and later when **she trained teachers**, she sought to inspire those she taught with a deep and personal love for Jesus living and active in their lives. Formation as well as information was a key educational concept for Catherine.
- She was **open to new ideas and ever ready to assimilate and adapt**. We find this in her application (13th July 1834) for the incorporation of her school in Baggot Street into the National School system as soon as it was established in Ireland. On November 14th 1839 the Baggot Street School application was approved. Incorporation into the system meant that rigorous inspections would be the order of the day but Catherine did not fear this, in fact, given her own high professional standards for her monitors, teachers and sisters she actually welcomed it. She also felt that children would improve if they expected examination. (Bishops in general in the country were slow to accept the scheme at the time but Daniel Murray was keen on it and supported Catherine in her application)
- She initiated **the “pension-school”⁵ system** starting in Carlow shortly after the foundation of the convent there. (First Pension school started in May 1837). This school was intended for the daughters of middle class parents for whom the fees of residential boarding schools were prohibitive but who also wished further education for their daughters. A small fee (pension) was charged for these day schools, although this was waived if seen necessary. Catherine saw an important social, educational and spiritual apostolate in these schools as the better off could be trained

⁴ Education was an area on which Catherine concentrated much attention and effort during her adult life, first as a teacher and later as an administrator and pioneer in the field. She started her work as a teacher early in life, with the children on the Callaghan estate and all through her life she sought to aid the recovery of human dignity through education. Though forms and methodology may change this basic aim is valid and continues into our own time.

A fact that is not well known is that Catherine, during her ten years as a founder of a Religious Congregation, opened more pension schools than she did houses of Mercy, which in itself reflected her belief in the value of sound education and her capacity to respond practically to needs of her time.

⁵ For their time pension schools had a wide curriculum: Latin, French, Irish, English, History, Geography, Maths, Book-keeping, basic Science, Music, Art, Elocution and Physical Education.

in their responsibility to the more disadvantaged. Also, she saw them as nurseries for future members of her Congregation.

- Before the establishment of the **Vocational Schools System in Ireland**, Catherine, because of her close association with the poor and her keen awareness of their need to be trained to earn money for themselves, had already established “technical training schools” where girls learned dress-making, shirt-making, lace-making, embroidery, laundry skills and cooking skills. Together with these skills, Catherine also insisted that her pupils were trained to be **trustworthy, responsible in positions they would assume and capable managers of the businesses that in the future would be theirs.**
- She encouraged **preparation for classes.** She was an experienced teacher herself but as her Congregation grew she had to withdraw from full-time teaching in the classroom. This forced withdrawal led her to adopt the **Lancasterian or Monitorial System.** This meant that in each class there was presiding sister or trained teacher in charge, who was assisted by another sister or teacher and a number of pupil-teachers or monitoresses. In introducing the pupil-teacher system Catherine was ahead of her time. In Baggot Street she introduced courses for promising pupils who wished to train as teachers or governesses in the homes of upper class families. No other place in Ireland offered the training system begun by Catherine until the Model Schools were opened in 1833
- As **an administrator**, she devoted much of her attention to her associates knowing that they in turn, if well trained, would carry through her vision to their pupils. She encouraged her associates, many of whom were gifted and highly competent to continue their studies in languages, music, maths and art and she tried to place them in classes suited to their tastes. **As an administrator Catherine was also strict about record keeping**, registering Holy Communion and Confirmations and she stimulated healthy competition by rewards and encouragement. **She codified nothing however**, holding the firm belief that professionally well-trained sisters and teachers would make changes and improvements as needed.
- **She co-operated with other Congregations** for example in setting up a pension school in Limerick she worked with the Poor Clare Sisters and in Cork, she did not open a poor school, because the Presentation Sisters were established there already. She brought her English Sisters to visit the schools run by the Presentation and Poor Clare Sisters in Cork, Dublin and Newry.
- Her **care of the Sick** was phenomenal. She nursed her ailing mother Elinor, her sister Mary Macauley and other members of her family. She devoted many long hours to caring for Catherine Callaghan, whose companion she was for upwards of twenty years. She nursed her friends Frs Nugent and Betagh when they were dying. She knew instinctively what to do for sick sisters in her community, many of whom she nursed personally when they were dying of TB. She was not afraid to work in the Townsend Street depot at the time of the Cholera in Dublin, at the same time she would don her bonnet and get into her carriage to gain entrance to Sir Patrick Dunn’s and other established hospitals in order to bring spiritual consolation to dying Catholics. After her death and continuing up to the present day her followers continue the development of health care systems second to none on all five continents.
- In all areas of her broad apostolate of Mercy, Catherine was **very practical** and very aware and she was utterly single minded in doing what she saw needed and could be done for the poor of her native Dublin and elsewhere. Her experience of poverty in her own life, her long time connection with the poor both in Coolock, Middle Abbey Street and later in Baggot Street all served to enable her to know how to be with and

for the poor in a way that left both them and herself mutually ennobled, enriched and enabled.

- **She was a missionary.** Catherine had ten short years from the time of the foundation of the Congregation (1831) to her death (1841). From 1836 until 1841 besides Baggot Street, Dun Laoghaire and Booterstown in Dublin, she established seven foundations in Ireland and two in England and had plans underway for New Foundland in Canada. Ten years after her death the Mercy network was already establishing itself in Canada, North America and Australia

All that Catherine accomplished in her work is but one ray from the prism of light which is the life of this great woman. Like the apostles with the five loaves and two fish, she did what she could with what she had at her disposal. Like the apostles with Jesus, God blessed her work with an increase that went far beyond anything that she could ever have imagined or dreamed. [Today there are 11,000 plus Sisters of Mercy, in 45 countries, with more than 200,000 collaborators, partners and associates engaged in countless varieties of service to the poor. An extraordinary network of good works that blossom into miracles of grace.]

Which brings us to Mercy today

We are here today because of the Year of Mercy which has highlighted the Mercy charism, with which Catherine was gifted, and in which all mercy women and men, sisters and collaborators share alike. How we give expression to it may differ in some ways from Catherine's time but the core remains the same.

For Catherine her charism, her expression of Mercy is always the **feminine characteristic** of practicality (the woman is great at multi-tasking). The corporal and spiritual works of mercy⁶ were always her focus. She understood how useless it is to preach the gospel to one who is hungry. At the same time, when she relived someone's hunger (need), she never failed to help the person turn in gratitude not to herself but to the giver of all that is good, God.

Catherine was very aware of the fact that in the end we will be judged not by our sins but by our omissions, our failures to do good. Mercy more than justice (which in its essence means giving everyone including God, including ourselves what is her/his due) is a matter of attentiveness, sensitivity to the needs we meet with in our day to day life, going one step further. (Pope Francis said; "we will have to answer for our failure to look our brother and sister in the eye, our tendency to look the other way").

⁶ **The corporal works of mercy include: feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; welcome the stranger; heal the sick; visit the imprisoned; bury the dead. The spiritual works of mercy include: counsel the doubtful; instruct the ignorant; admonish the sinner; comfort the afflicted; forgive offences; bear insults patiently; pray for the living and the dead.**

Today, as in Catherine's time the charism of Mercy, continues to be a practical mercy that seeks to put **the spiritual and corporal works of mercy into practice in the ordinary day by day**. As such it highlights a four-fold poverty in our world (Kasper: Mercy):

1. physical, economic poverty
2. cultural poverty e.g. illiteracy
3. emotional poverty as in lack of relationships, loneliness, isolation, the loss of a partner.
4. spiritual poverty.

This fourfold description of poverty points to the pervasiveness of poverty and we are reminded starkly of Jesus' words "the poor you have with you always".

In the 1820's and 1830's in Ireland Catherine was faced with enormous physical and cultural poverty. The nation was not self-governing. There were no social service back-ups to be had. Poor people had no access to education, healthcare or social services and there was no state aid for someone who fell ill or was out of work.

Today we may have the social fabric that meets the basic human needs of the people of our country (education, health care, social security) but where are the lacunae in these services and in other areas, where are the gaps, especially in the areas of emotional, cultural and spiritual poverty? (The spiritual works of Mercy)

What are some of the trends that we meet in our world today? How can a heart for mercy find enough oxygen to beat in this world of ours? Who are the poor of our time who call to the Mercy heart??

Trends in our world that cry to Mercy:

1. The **displacement of persons** –Mercy tries to respond in the face of the enormous physical and economic poverty brought on by this global human tragedy. **Human trafficking?** Migration of peoples.
2. **The cry of the poor earth.** The escalation of **resource wars** is something that stares us in the face. We try to rethink consumption. The encyclical (Laudato Si) by Pope Francis on the earth's resources and their distribution is a recent clarion call to continue and deepen the response of Mercy that has already been initiated in this area.
3. Today its "**social everything**" Social technologies surround us. Everywhere there is mobility and connectedness. The trend is towards mobile optimisation but who is being left behind? Who is being impoverished as a result of this movement? (Social media, everything can be had at the touch of a button if you have an Ipad or an Iphone)? The efforts of Mercy to help with adult literacy and computer and mobile education, especially the poor and the elderly. What about cyber – bullying and its impact on young people?
4. What about the **development of the cyborg (cyber organism half human half machine) and the robot with a brain, the mobile robots that are controlled by a remote control located many miles distant, the drones?** Who gets left behind and what is the downside for the human person as a result of all this development? Mercy tries to build and counteract lack of relationships (intimate relationship not merely connection and acquaintance), loneliness and isolation and the spiritual poverty that is rampant in the world today

5. Health is wealth in today's world. Mercy tries to promote wellness wherever it is possible – women's groups, parish groups, self-help groups, age action.
6. One interesting **trend among young people** is that they seek experiences they can share for the good of others rather than possessions (perhaps mobile phone excluded!!). Mercy can have influence in this aspect of the young person's world?

Trends in the area of religion.

7. **Modes of belief, identity and belonging and ritual** are changing. Those who have lived through much change and upheaval in these areas have a wealth of experience to share
8. Everyday **lived religion** is thriving. Hierarchical **institutional, dogmatic church is in decline** as "millennials" have little attachment to institutions. How might Mercy witness?
9. The decline of Christianity in the Western world had led to a loss of a sense of community and a loss of the importance of God in people's lives. True Mercy seeks encounter. Pope Francis has said that "Mercy is a culture of encounter".

Conclusion

Where to for Mercy in a world where the above trends are rearing their heads?

Looking at Catherine McAuley and the essence of what she embodies as Mercy the following are just some simple ways that enable us today to follow her example:

1. **In the face of need do not look the other way.**
2. **Let Love of the other be sincere** and out of that love do the little you can to raise the person/planet up. Don't underestimate the power of one single person! (Story of Starfish). Start where you are at, a smile, a helping hand and you are on your way. Rejoicing at another's joy or success is often a greater sign of love than compassion when another is in difficulty!
3. **Be a witness to mercy.** Young women were attracted to Catherine and her project because of what they witnessed in her life. Hearts are touched by witnesses/images of dedication and compassion. Like Catherine, Pope Francis is one such witness because not alone does he speak mercy, he does mercy (Examples). As members of the Church, as men and women of mercy we too can be such witnesses. The roots of mercy cannot be stifled.
4. Mercy is a **culture of encounter (Pope Francis)**, of meeting the other where he or she is at, like Jesus does. That is always a possibility for us.
5. Catherine used **her imagination** in planning how she would use her inheritance for the poor. **John Henry Newman says that a heart is reached not through reason but through imagination.** Unless we can imagine something we cannot do it. It is our imagination that helps us to make God more real in our lives. If the imagination is not touched or nourished the great realities of faith such as mercy will remain vague, conceptual or unreal. The battlefield today is "religious imagination". If Mercy is not on fire then it is merely notional. Notional mercy was not Catherine's way!

Thank you

Brenda Dolphin RSM

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