

## **Mercy Sisters Honorary Conferring**

**3 October 2016**

### **CITATION**

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Pope Francis, while addressing priests and religious in St Patrick's Cathedral, New York during his visit to the States last September, departed from his prepared script – which he is wont to do – to speak directly to the religious women. With some emotion and force he asked: “Where would the Church be without you? Women of strength, fighters, with that spirit of courage which puts you on the front lines in the proclamation of the Gospel. To you, religious women, sisters and mothers of this people, I wish to say 'thank you,' a big thank you... and to tell you that I love you very much.”

This evening, the Pontifical University at St Patrick's College, Maynooth echoes those heartfelt sentiments of Pope Francis to the Religious Sisters of Mercy here in Ireland and beyond. In this Jubilee Year of Mercy we rejoice, celebrate and give thanks for the 185 years you have been women, sisters, mothers of strength, fighters, courageous on the front lines of proclaiming the Gospel of Mercy in education, health and social care and justice. While we

confer this honorary award singularly on Sr Margaret Casey this evening, the award embraces all Sisters of Mercy and we remember and salute all those sisters on whose shoulders you stand and who have gone to their eternal reward.

We are gathered this evening to honour an order of religious which, it must be said, had a most unlikely beginning. Indeed, one might even consider its founder a rather reluctant sister. And yet in identifying love of God and neighbour as “the real business of our lives”, in 1831 Catherine McAuley would give birth to an order of sisters which, in several congregations, today comprise some 9,000 members who are found in 44 countries over five continents.

There were few clues in Catherine’s own upbringing which could have pointed to such a legacy. Born in Drumcondra in 1778, Catherine had lost both her parents by the age of twenty. She (along with her brother and sister) was subsequently cared for by a Protestant pharmacist for five years and then, subsequently by a childless couple, the Callaghans, he a Protestant and she a Quaker at Coolock House. Although born and raised a Catholic, Catherine had drifted from Catholic religious practice for some years before her interest was reignited. She was, however, greatly influenced by Mrs Callaghan’s Quaker values and the work of a Jesuit, Fr

Thomas Betagh, in the education of poor children. Upon the deaths of the Callaghans, Catherine received a large inheritance, which would amount to some two million euros today. But by this stage it had become clear to Catherine how she would manage her newly-acquired fortune. Believing that the poor needed help “today and not next week”, her immediate focus would be on doing what she could to alleviate the appalling poverty around her.

In 1824 she leased land in Baggot Street and built what would eventually become the Mercy International Centre: it was at once a shelter for homeless girls, a school for girls who couldn't afford an education, and also a place of residence for women who wished to assist Catherine in her work. The “House of Mercy” officially opened on 24 September 1827 and soon catered for some 200 pupils in its school. Early helpers included two of Daniel O'Connell's daughters and it is said that at Christmas dinner provided for poor children at the House of Mercy that the Liberator himself carved. Later on, O'Connell's regard for the attitude of the now “Sisters” towards their vocation led him to exclaim on one occasion: “Look at the Sisters of Mercy – they are seen gliding along the streets ... to the abode of some poor sick person ... oh such a country is too good to continue in slavery!”

In these early days, however, Catherine never considered the thought of becoming a nun, for she imagined nuns as cloistered and largely confined to their convents. This was not to be Catherine's vocation. And yet, with the encouragement of Archbishop Daniel Murray of Dublin, in 1830 she and two of her helpers began their novitiate with the Presentation sisters. Catherine was already fifty-two years of age. The following year, having taken religious vows, Mary Catherine McAuley was appointed superior of her house in Baggot Street which now became a convent. The Sisters of Mercy had been born. Within a short few years they had acquired a rule and had been accorded papal approbation as a religious congregation. Their vocation was to be as so-called "walking sisters", freed to respond to the particular social and economic needs of the time in a way that cloistered religious could not.

Her vision for education embraced primary, secondary and vocational education and also teacher training (in 1877 the Sisters of Mercy established Carysfort College, Blackrock and in 1898, the foundation stone would be laid for Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, the city's oldest third-level institution). The success of the "House of Mercy" in Baggot Street led to calls for the foundation of similar convents in dioceses across the country, and

early convents were founded in Kingstown (1835), Charleville and Tullamore (1836), Carlow and Cork (1837), Booterstown and Limerick (1838), Naas and Bermondsey, London (1839), Galway, Wexford and Birr (1840). By 1928 there were 165 convent national schools run by the Mercy sisters, almost half the number of all other national schools run by female religious orders combined. Through Catherine McAuley's philosophy of education, the Sisters of Mercy have opened up new opportunities of learning and opportunity for countless numbers of children and adults for whom such education would not have been possible, unlocking potential and talents that might otherwise have remained untapped and untried forever. There is no doubt that the legacy of education by the Sisters of Mercy and other religious congregations has contributed significantly to the development and prosperity of our country.

Today that vision and ethos continues today through the CEIST – Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. Along with five Catholic Religious Congregations engaged in post primary education for over three and a half centuries, the Sisters of Mercy – *Daughters of Charity, Presentation Sisters, Sisters of the Christian Retreat, Sisters of Mercy, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart* – have, in the spirit of their Founders, together established a new moral

and legal trustee framework enabling their schools to honour its rich heritage, promoting inclusion, hospitality, excellence and compassion in a teaching and learning environment inspired by the Gospel and by the unique wisdom of Catherine McAuley. In particular, it emphasises the dignity and rights of the human person, empowering the most vulnerable in society and enabling young people to become catalysts for social transformation throughout the world.

Among your many illustrious alumni was former President Mary McAleese, who addressing the Sisters of Mercy a few years ago saluted that philosophy she said: “For the education you provide has never been just about academic excellence, important though that is. It has also been about stretching people emotionally and spiritually, bridging the arbitrary divide between intellect on the one hand, and spiritual values on the other, providing a forum where the two melt and merge and create well-rounded individuals. The type of people we need to shape a better future - people who reach out with generosity to others in the community with an appreciation of both the rich diversity and interdependence of the human family.”

Faithful to the long history of the missionary spirit of the Irish Church, the establishment of Mercy houses overseas quickly followed its expansion in Ireland: St John's, Newfoundland (1842), Pittsburgh, USA (1843), Chicago and New York (1846), Perth, Western Australia (1848), Auckland, New Zealand (1849) and Brisbane, Australia (1860). Catherine McAuley's "mission of mercy" not only followed Irish emigrants abroad and participated in what historians sometimes call "Ireland's spiritual empire", but also would go on to embed themselves firmly in their adopted cultures. These were hugely ambitious undertakings for the early pioneers of the Mercy order. Take, for instance, the case of Mary Frances Warde (1810-84), one of Catherine McAuley's most valued associates. In 1843 she led a group of six young Mercy sisters from a convent in Carlow to Pittsburgh, where they established schools, a shelter for women, an orphanage and the first hospital in Western Pennsylvania. Over the next forty years, Mary Frances Warde would go on to found some 100 mercy enterprises and a string of Mercy houses which stretched from New York to San Francisco. The international outlook of the Sisters of Mercy can be seen in foundations such as St Brigid's Missionary College in Callan, County Kilkenny, which provided women who could not afford dowries to enter Irish convents a degree of social mobility as bishops and religious congregations

were keen to recruit them for service in the “Greater Ireland” abroad. Between 1884 and 1914 some 566 women were sent from this college alone to the wider English-speaking world, including James Joyce’s sister, Margaret, who spent her life teaching music as a Sister of Mercy in New Zealand.

An interesting vignette – among a number –I discovered last week while in Pennsylvania, concerning the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburg. During the American Civil War, the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton twice asked the Sisters of Mercy based in Pittsburgh to run military hospitals. He knew them from his decade as an attorney in Pittsburgh where the sisters provided heroic care during a typhoid epidemic, founding Mercy Hospital. Religious sisters had already a reputation of excellence and heroism in caring for soldiers of both sides in the Civil War. Indeed, their indiscriminate work among the injured did much to begin dismantling the hostile anti-Catholicism bigotry so widespread in the young America of the time.

Records survive of an 1864 visit to the hospital by Lincoln, who tried to cheer the wounded soldiers with jokes, and extended solicitude to wounded Confederates. After the visit, he appointed a White House artist to paint a Sister of Mercy tending to a wounded

soldier in a tent hospital. The painting hangs in the Mercy convent in Oakland.

The painting is probably set in Vicksburg, Miss., site of another pivotal Civil War battle and where the Pittsburgh sisters had a daughter community that had tended to wounded from both sides. Sister M. Stephana Warde was taken prisoner by Union forces when she was found caring for Confederates. After her release from prison she arrived at the Pittsburgh convent in cast-off soldiers' clothing, so starved that other sisters didn't recognize her. After a short recovery, she went to care for the wounded at Stanton Hospital in Washington.

In 1924, a congressional monument to the "Nuns of the Battlefield" was erected near St. Matthew Cathedral in Washington. The organizers were surprised to learn that among the 5,000 people at the dedication was a surviving Civil War nurse, 81-year-old Sister of Mercy (O'Donnell) from Pittsburgh. The inscription says, "They comforted the dying, nursed the wounded, carried hope to the imprisoned, gave in his name a drink of water to the thirsty."

In addition to founding tending to soldiers on both sides of the American Civil War, the early Mercy sisters also supplied some

nurses to the British army during the Crimean War (1854-6), some of whom died of fever and are buried in the Crimean peninsula, having seen appalling conditions in makeshift hospitals. Although the Mercy sisters did not enjoy the easiest of relationships with Florence Nightingale (whose temperament does not always come across in the most positive light in some of the sisters' diaries of the time), nonetheless they proved themselves to be in huge demand as valued members of what we call today the "caring profession". In 1849 some Sisters of Mercy in Limerick hastened to Barrington's Hospital and St John's Hospital to assist with an outbreak of famine fever. They conducted themselves with such professionalism that the Board of the Protestant-run Barrington's Hospital invited them to remain there permanently, an indication of the regard in which they were held. Some three years later (1852) the order had founded the *Mater Misericordiae* Hospital in Dublin and, five years after that (1857) the Mercy Hospital in Cork.

The Sisters of Mercy who returned from the Crimea were keen to build on the valuable nursing experience which they gained there and thus began serving in workhouse hospitals which paved the way for sisters to provide nursing labour for workhouses run by Poor Law Unions from 1861. By the turn of the century over half

the workhouse hospitals in the country were run by nuns as was the case in my own native Thurles. Just to take one example.

The records recall that on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1877, four nuns from the Sisters of Mercy set out from Doon, Co Limerick for Thurles to begin what was to become a long and beneficial association with this hospital. These newly arrived Doon Nuns were soon to raise hygiene standards by cleanliness and bringing about major change through leadership by example through their roles as workers and carers. Srs Ita, Baptist, Bonaventure and Clement (who only died this year) were beloved by the people of Thurles and are still recalled. The Hospital of the Assumption which is a treasure in the town and quality and standard of care continues to be praised. A true Mercy legacy.

It is testimony to their reputation of care, that some Protestant-founded hospitals, such as Dublin's Charitable Infirmary and Cork's South Infirmary would later be staffed by Mercy Sisters. The foundation of the Irish Guild of Catholic Nurses in 1922 would contribute enormously to the professional development of nursing sisters and the provision of lectures to members on medical and nursing ethics and other areas of continuing professional development. Many historians have noted that through the

twentieth century, religious life gave women the opportunity to claim an ongoing professional place in society which, for many, was unattainable once a woman got married.

All human endeavour has its quote of light and shade. Just as we honour the overwhelmingly rich and noble legacy of the sisters of mercy, we share the suffering and uncomfortable truth which has emerged in recent times and which we have all experienced in every area of Church life and ministry. With characteristic courage, humility and honesty you have faced that challenge and with great determination you have worked to redeem, renew, rebuild, re-energise and reconnect with the vision and values of Catherine McAuley.

From its earliest days, then, this congregation of women inspired by the charism of Catherine McAuley, had already demonstrated what might be considered the hallmarks of its “mission of mercy” in education, healthcare and the provision of a range of social services, often in the very difficult and challenging conditions of a country beset by widespread poverty, unemployment and emigration for many periods during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This mission continues to this day on a global scale and using the most appropriate channels to effect meaningful change

for those who struggle to have a voice. One striking example of this is the establishment in 1998 of “Mercy Global Action” at the United Nations, a tool of advocacy in the spirit of Catherine McAuley drawing on the wisdom, insight, experience of congregation over almost two centuries put at the service of the next generation and the poor in association with other international agencies; a process aimed at influencing decisions regarding policies and laws at national and international levels designed to promote and protect the rights of the most vulnerable and assist policy-makers to find solutions.

Pope Francis states that the Church’s “very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love of God.” The Sisters of Mercy’s have been the credible and authentic face of God’s mercy and compassion for 185 years in Ireland and throughout the world. Your generous and selfless service has been leaven in the lives of many people and continues to be so in many parts of the world. The light that Catherine McAuley lit still burns brightly as you pass the torch for a new generation of those who have the courage to follow her footsteps to the frontlines of proclaiming the Gospel of Mercy.

Sr Margaret Casey, on behalf of the members of the Pontifical University at St Patrick's College Maynooth, I am delighted to invite our Chancellor, Archbishop Eamon Martin, to confer on you the Doctorate in Philosophy *honoris causa* and through you to honour and thank all the Sisters of Mercy. For, indeed as Pope Francis said, where would the Church in Ireland, this country and even this world be without you?

Prof Michael Mullaney  
Acting-President  
*Given at the College Chapel*  
*St Patrick's College*  
*Maynooth*  
*iii.x.mmxvi*