

**Opening Address for series of lectures in Renehan Hall to mark the conferring of an
Honorary Doctorate *Honoris Causa* to the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy.
St Patrick's College, Maynooth, 3 October 2016.**

It is my great pleasure to welcome you here today to St Patrick's College, Maynooth, and especially to welcome members of the Sisters of Mercy who have been such an important part of our history for almost two hundred years. It is my privilege to chair this session of presentations in which we will have the opportunity to reflect on just some of the myriad contributions that the Sisters of Mercy have made since their foundation, both on the island of Ireland and, indeed, globally. Dr Máire Ní Chearbhaill, who has worked extensively on the contribution of the Mercy Sisters in the field of education, will be our first speaker, and her focus will largely be on this area; she will be followed by Sr Brenda Dolphin, Postulator for the Cause for the canonisation of Catherine McAuley, who, fittingly, in this Year of Mercy, will take us back to Catherine McAuley's own Vision of Mercy and how that vision inspires members of congregations of the Sisters of Mercy to this day.

My duty is simply to chair this session, but, before doing this I would like to offer some brief reflections on the world into which the Sisters of Mercy was born and to outline some of the challenges faced by those early generations of sisters who were charged with honouring the charism of their founder in new locations and ever-changing circumstances.

Born in Drumcondra in 1778, Catherine McAuley's early years were anything but stable. Having lost both parents by the age of twenty (her father had died when she was five), she found herself living with various relations – her mother's brother, Owen Conway, then a Protestant family of Armstrongs, before moving in with the Callaghans, a couple

who had recently returned from India, he a Protestant and she a Quaker. Catherine's own religious leanings were uncertain; her birth mother hadn't pressed the issue of religious observance. This led some to assume that Catherine had, in fact, been a convert from Protestantism (Edmund Rice, for one, thought as much). One early biographer was to correct this assumption, but only just: "a Protestant she was not, but yet she could scarcely be called a Catholic". Catherine's discovery or re-discovery of Catholicism would come as an adult – and under the influence of a Jesuit acquaintance, Fr Thomas Betagh, vicar general of the Dublin Diocese, a man who had a great sensitivity to the plight of the poor. The Callaghans respected Catherine's faith journey and allowed her to take the horse-drawn carriage to Mass; however, she was sensitive to the views of others who frequented the household and were not as understanding. Her approach was to take things in small steps, not large strides; this often resulted in her taking very practical decisions such as not to overstep her religious privileges by the overt display of a crucifix or religious pictures in the household in which the Callaghans had made her feel at home.

One finds in the person of Catherine McAuley a very human figure; there is nothing of the plaster-saint about her. In fact, it is her humanity and her practicality in diverse situations which renders her so attractive. Her vocation to religious life came about quite organically – through recognising a need (the provision of education for poor children) and the fortuitous circumstance of having been bequeathed a substantial inheritance from the Callaghans which led to the establishment of a "House of Mercy" in Baggot Street in 1827. Catherine could never have imagined herself as a cloistered sister – her calling was to the active provision of care for the underprivileged – and the fact that she took religious vows at the age of fifty-two would have come as a surprise to none more so than herself. It is in such unlikely beginnings at this that the mission of the Sisters of Mercy would be launched in 1831.

The religious landscape of Ireland would change beyond recognition between 1800 and 1900 – and the Sisters of Mercy played a significant role in this change. For instance, the following oft-quoted statistic provides a snapshot of that transformation. In 1800 there were 11 houses of women religious in the country and six religious orders. By 1900 those figures stood at 368 houses of women religious and thirty-five religious orders. Although the Catholic population almost halved in the years after the Great Famine, the number of nuns had multiplied eight-fold between 1841 and 1901, so much so that one sister in 1900 remarked in jest that “the labourers are many but the harvest is lacking”. Incidentally, by that same year, 1900, 58% of all Irish convents were either Mercy or Presentation. The continued extension of healthcare services provided by the Mercy Sisters is seen also in the fact that in 1900 over 22% of Mercy convents were attached to hospitals.

The success of the early Mercy Sisters can be seen in the rapidity of their expansion, both within Ireland and abroad. Within twelve years of their foundation, the Mercy Sisters were already established in London, Pittsburgh and Newfoundland, to be followed shortly after by foundations in Australia and New Zealand. And they were also in huge demand in dioceses across Ireland. They were, for instance, the first choice for the Bishop of Ferns who wanted them to open a convent in Gorey in 1843, but the circumstances were such that the Mercy Sisters were not in a position to oblige him at that time and he had to make do with the Loreto sisters instead. The eagerness with which convents were welcomed into dioceses shouldn't be taken as a foregone conclusion, however. Not all dioceses (or, rather, bishops) accepted nuns very readily. In the 1830s, for instance, Catherine McAuley predicted that the Ursulines wouldn't survive in Ennis because the local Ordinary, Dr Kennedy, “was no great patron of nuns”. Priests, too, could sometimes exhibit barely-concealed hostility towards female religious. In a letter to the Mercy convent in Carlow in the 1830s, Catherine referred to one priest who, she said, had “an aversion to veils”; however, she continued, “you know he has strange notions and must be humoured”. But it wasn't enough for a bishop and

local clergy to wish to attract a convent to their towns. Establishing a foundation was an expensive undertaking and it more often than not required the professional and business classes of a particular town to give it their full support. In fact, in the case of the Carlow Mercy convent, it was a Carlow shopkeeper who, in 1836, gave the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin £7,000 towards its establishment. Catherine McAuley was very much a woman of the world, with a sharp intellect and a business mind. In a letter to her great co-worker, Mary Frances Warde in 1840 she would write: “while we place all our confidence in God we must act as if all depended on our exertion” (her own iteration of that old adage “prayer moves mountains, but you have to bring a shovel”).

The humanity of Catherine McAuley’s approach to convent life can be gleaned in the fact that she was not a big fan of too many rules: “if you draw the string too tight, it will break” she remarked. Likewise, she was under no illusions that the convent walls were a bulwark against human nature. This led to her warning her sisters that ‘no-one should be able to say when repeating a piece of town-talk or gossip “I heard it in the convent parlour of the Sisters of Mercy”’. Instead, she mused, “if everyone could mind their own business the Convent would be heaven on earth”. Her surviving correspondence is replete with humorous rhymes she composed, which no doubt provided a release valve from the pressures of her own work and the often sad episodes in her personal life in which she experienced a great deal of loss. These could sometimes go on for a couple of pages, but one letter from December 1840 opens with the following couplet: “Don’t miss one word of this very nice letter; I often write more – but seldom write better”.

This sense of humour apparently endured to the end of her days. It is recorded that on her death bed one particular sister was reading the prayers for the dying aloud and with an almost theatrical zeal, at which point Catherine interjected “no occasion to speak so loud, my darling, I hear distinctly”. Just hours before she died she would also advise that, upon her death, the sisters would gather in the community room together for a “good cup of tea” and that this would be a suitable place for them to comfort each other.

The deep and, indeed, sometimes often flawed humanity of the founder of the Mercy Sisters, Catherine McAuley, would inspire those who came after her and, indeed, her spirit imbues so much of the work which continues to be done by Mercy Sisters around the globe to this day. It gives me great pleasure, then, to hand you over to two speakers who will elaborate in much finer detail on these opening thoughts of mine: first Dr Máire Ní Chearbhaill and then Sr Brenda Dolphin.

Thank you.

Salvador Ryan

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