



Catherine
her story



Sisters of Mercy
Bathurst Congregation
St Joseph's Mount

The Pathway Appears

Catherine McAuley was born in Dublin in 1778. Her father James earned a comfortable living through the building trade, and provided well for his two daughters and his son.

His compassionate spirit and charitable work for poor in Dublin set an example for Catherine that remained with her throughout her life. His death in 1783 began a long period of instability for his survivors; his wife Elinor was not as financially astute as her husband and the family gradually declined into a state of poverty, becoming dependent on the goodness of relatives.

Elinor was deeply affected by her husband's death: she stopped practising her faith, and when she contracted tuberculosis in 1798 she faced death consumed by fear and anxiety which had a profound affect on Catherine, remaining with her until late in life. Catherine, along with her brother James and sister Mary lived with William Armstrong and his Family; there, under the strong influence of the Armstrong's Protestant faith, Mary and James stopped practising their Catholic faith, yet Catherine held steadfastly to it despite the limitations of her religious education and regular questioning and ridicule.



Preparing for the Journey

In 1803 God's goodness manifested itself in the form of an invitation to take up residence with Catherine and William Callaghan, friends of the Armstrong's recently returned from India. Catherine was to be the companion of Mrs. Callaghan, who was in poor health, at their estate Coolock House.

This was to be a twenty year sojourn, a time of learning and deepening conviction. Here the tender power of mercy began to more clearly shape Catherine's life. She now had the opportunity to study and practise her faith freely.

She could attend services and was instructed by local clergy in the tenets of her faith. Respecting the Callaghans' wishes not to display religious artefacts in their home, Catherine found the sign of the cross kneeling before the intersecting panels of her bedroom door and the interlacing branches of trees.

Inspired by the memory of her father, Catherine began catechetical instruction among the servants in the Callaghan home, and taught needlework in the poor school in Abbey Street, opening a small shop to sell the pupils wares.

As Mrs. Callaghan's health became more frail she took great comfort in Catherine's hourly reading of the scriptures. Ultimately inspired by the gentle devotion of her loving care giver, Catherine Callaghan converted to Catholicism.

She died, as did a cousin of Catherine's soon after, leaving two small children to Catherine's care in Coolock House.

As William Callaghan's health began to fail, he asked Catherine what use she might make of an inheritance, to which she responded that she would provide protection and education for servant girls. As Mr. Callaghan prepared for death, Catherine became concerned for his spiritual well-being.

Eventually he consented to having a priest visit him on occasion, and as a result he converted to Catholicism the day before his death - November 10, 1822. Catherine was fortunate to inherit approximately \$1,000,000.00 by today's reckoning.

A Direction Chosen

Catherine began to implement her plan, and now able to think in broader terms due to her inheritance, she extended her vision to include a wide range of services for poor women and children. In 1824, she leased property at the corner of Herbert and Baggot Streets in the heart of affluent Dublin. Her hope was that those whom God had blessed with material security would thus be moved to support and perhaps join in her service. During the three years of the erection of the building, Catherine prepared herself for the years ahead by studying educational methods in France and Ireland, also becoming an instructor at St. Mary's Poor School in Dublin.

She continued to oversee the management of Coolock House while awaiting its sale. Her sister Mary died in 1827 and her husband two years later, leaving Catherine the guardian of their five children bringing the number in her adoptive family to five. The house on Baggot Street became ready for occupancy on September 24, 1827. By coincidence or act of providence it was also the date of the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, and thus they claimed an identity and a spirit for their building and its works, naming it the House of Mercy. Over the next three years the House of Mercy and its works flourished: the first year saw two hundred girls enrolled in the school; to the ministry of education were added the visitation of the sick poor and the refuge for young women. Many volunteers, inspired by Catherine's work and spirit, joined their energies to hers.

Each one of us has a unique, personal life-journey; a journey lived in situations where we come face to face with our limitations and frailties. Deep pain and anguish, which can be part of day to day living are lifted by enduring hope and the knowledge that we are accompanied by one who has journeyed there before us.



A Path Named Mercy

A core group of twelve women lived at Baggot Street in these early years, living simply and over time dressing similarly, light-heartedly calling one another "sister". The question of their status gradually became serious, and the Archbishop of Dublin and several others among Catherine's friends and advisors encouraged them to establish a religious congregation.

Once satisfied that their work among the poor would remain central to their endeavours, Catherine McAuley, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley went to the Presentation Convent in Dublin to begin their noviciate. Catherine was 52 years of age. Fifteen months later, on December 12, 1831, the three novices professed their vows, thus giving birth to the Sisters of Mercy. Catherine stated the principle aims of the Congregation as "to educate poor girls, to lodge and maintain poor young women who are in danger...and to visit the sick poor." What had begun as a dream now took its place, through the beneficence of William Callaghan and the urging of the Church, as the central purpose of the new order.



For many people death is the passing through one realm to another. It is part of the on-going journey into wholeness. Light, life and peace await us as we cross the threshold of this life into the next.

The Pathway Branches

The rate of growth these principles nurtured was nothing short of phenomenal. As Catherine's passion for the poor took root in the hearts of companions, her charism of Mercy spread across Ireland and England. In the ten years between the founding of the order and her death, Catherine founded nine Convents of Mercy.

The first was in Tullamore in April 1836, where a pattern that was later carried on to many subsequent foundations was established. Tullamore was chosen as it suffered severe poverty. "If we don't take Tullamore, no other community will," she declared, relying as usual on her Provident God to prosper the work and provide for the sisters. Over the next five years Convents of Mercy were established in the Irish towns of Charleville, Carlow, Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Birr. Bermondsey and Birmingham in England were also among Catherine's foundations. She would in all cases remain with the new foundation for its first month, assisting in the establishment of the ministry and leading the thirty days of prayer. Another custom begun in Tullamore was the holding of a public profession ceremony to introduce the public to the work and vocation of the order, and to inspire other young women to join them in their efforts.

Time after time she was to deplete the number of sisters in Baggot Street to respond to a need urgently expressed. She placed her whole confidence in God who rewarded her generosity in kind. In a letter to Sister Elizabeth Moore in 1839, Catherine wrote: "We have now gone beyond 100 in number, and the desire to join seems rather to increase, though it was thought the foundations would retard it, it seems quite otherwise. There has been a most Providential Guidance which the want of prudence, vigilance, or judgement has not impeded, and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God." In another letter to Sister Elizabeth two years later, she described the esprit which characterised the congregation and its members: "All are good and happy. The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us and oh what a blessing, it should make all else pass into nothing. All laugh and play together, not one cold, stiff soul appears. From the day they enter, reserve of any ungracious kind leaves them. This is the spirit of the Order, indeed the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us..."

A Journey's Toll

While each foundation remained governmentally independent of the mother house at Baggot Street, Catherine visited them regularly and wrote letters constantly, calling the latter Foundation Circulars and through them conveying news of the congregation, offering and seeking advice, and creating amusing verses to amuse or to soften correction.

In one such letter in December 1840 she wrote with her frequent insight and consolation for the difficult challenges the congregation faced: "We have one solid comfort...our hearts can always be in the same place, centred in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back. Oh may He look on us with love and pity and then we shall be able to do anything He wishes us to do, no matter how difficult to accomplish or painful to our feeling."



Often we can experience a visitation of God in our encounters with one another. The God in each of us can draw out and affirm the faith of another. The deep faith response of Mary can be ours, and the conviction that with God all things are possible.

A Step Towards Eternity

Catherine's health began to decline in 1841, and it was during her last trip to a new foundation in Birmingham that she began to make preparations for her last days, secure in the knowledge that the Holy See had granted confirmation of the Rule and her congregation was firmly established. The fear she had held of death for so long since her mother's death had blessedly faded. She died on November 11th, 1841 at Baggot Street, and was laid to rest, according to her wishes, in the ground with the poor. "Each day is a step we make towards eternity," she told her sisters, "and we shall continue thus to step from day to day until we take the last step, which will bring us into the presence of God." The path of Mercy upon which Catherine McAuley faithfully walked, had finally led her into the presence of the God she loved and served with her whole heart.

Catherine's Prayer

My God,
I am yours
for time and eternity.
Teach me to cast myself entirely into the arms of
your loving providence
with the most lively, unlimited confidence in your compassionate, tender pity.
Grant me,
O most merciful redeemer, that whatever
you ordain or permit
may be acceptable to me. Take from my heart
all the painful anxiety;
suffer nothing to sadden me but sin,
nothing to delight me
but the hope of coming to the possession of you, my God and my all,
in your everlasting kingdom.
Amen.



When we experience deep suffering in life we can for a time be trapped within the pain, unaware of the vibrancy of life around us. It may be necessary to stay in that place for a while. There is life in and beyond suffering. The cross, transformed by Jesus through his resurrection, is a symbol of hope and life-giving love.



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