

INSTITUTE JUSTICE NETWORK

From the depths of God's mercy we are continually called to conversion of heart, as partners in all creation, awakening reverence for life, impelling the hunger for justice, through contemplative apostolic service.



“To do some lasting good for the poor...”

Anne McGuire RSM

In describing the qualities necessary in a person seeking to become a Sister of Mercy, Catherine wrote that she must have “*an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor...*”¹ Commitment to the poor was inherent in Catherine and central to the way she lived. What we now refer to as “the fourth vow” was a constitutive element of Catherine’s life and indeed in the lives of those who came with her and after her.

Mary Reynolds RSM notes:

In a very real sense Catherine’s ‘apostolic spirituality’ was part of her search for personal union with God and it was marked by her ability to create and maintain inner spiritual space, to be constantly aware of the mystery of God and to be everywhere in the world of people. Her ‘apostolic spirituality’ may be said to have effectively translated the Gospel into the idiom of her time and to have conveyed this ideal to others.²

At the emergence of the Mercy story in Dublin, Catherine met the challenges of her time, homelessness: poverty, disease and lack of education. In the current Australian ‘idiom’ among the deepest issues facing us, are these same challenges, daily evident in the lives of our Indigenous brothers and sisters. That so many Indigenous Australians can be counted among the poor of our land is a cause of great shame. For generations we have “settled for less.” At the recent Mercy Justice Conference, Professor Mick Dodson described the destructive effects of government policies that fail the indigenous people they are meant to serve:

“Addressing specific needs does not require the elimination of any human rights in Aboriginal communities...”³

In our silence, we effectively sanction a ‘two-tiered’ approach to human rights in Australia, and as Jan Gray RSM notes “when human rights are negotiable, the centre falls apart.”⁴ Translating the Gospel into our time and place requires that we address this appalling injustice. The great sadness is that we may close ourselves to grace. We, in this ancient land have the great privilege of walking and learning alongside the oldest, continuous surviving culture on earth, what a grace!

¹ Mary C Sullivan [The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1819-1841](#). Letter No. 38

² Mary Reynolds RSM “*Like the Compass*” [Listen](#) Vol 27, No 2 2009, pg 30

³ Professor Mick Dodson at Mercy and Justice Conference 7 November 2009 private notes

⁴ Jeanette Gray RSM unpublished notes November 2009

In what we know as “The Bermondsey Manuscript” Mary Clare (Georgiana) Moore writes of Catherine:

“she was convinced Almighty God required her to make some lasting efforts for the relief of the suffering and instruction of the ignorant...”⁵

Catherine’s understanding of mercy and justice for the poor appear to have been formed and framed during two distinct periods of her life. From her father, she learned about compassionate care when he gathered the poor children of the neighbourhood for the twofold purpose of teaching them about God and providing them with food and clothing. In later years, as the companion of Mrs Callaghan, Catherine read the Scriptures aloud to her. It cannot have escaped her notice that the poor were close to the heart of God!

“Her compassion led her to make the greatest sacrifices in favour of the suffering and afflicted...”⁶

In the Book of Deuteronomy, in describing the time of Jubilee the author notes:

“There will however be no one in need among you because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord is giving you...” (Deut 15:4)

In the following passage the author of The Acts of the Apostles typically interprets the text from Deuteronomy as he describes the ongoing activity of the Risen Christ made manifest in the actions and spirit of the believers.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the feet of the apostles and it was distributed to each as had need.” (Acts 4:32, 34-35)

These passages point to the reality that we still need to meet the challenge of living into the Covenant of mercy between God and ourselves. Each Sister of Mercy has been captivated by a willingness to participate in a life of ‘apostolic service’ to strengthen this Covenant. The time will come when the poor of our land will be enriched and made whole and no one will be in need amongst us.

One might suggest this is a tall order! Gerard Manley Hopkins, the 19th century poet and Jesuit, born in 1844 just three years after Catherine’s death, appears to have been similarly inspired regarding the essence of mercy:

“I say we are wound with mercy
round and round as if with air...”⁷

Catherine was a person to whom others responded because she was acting from a deep identification with the radiance of her experience of God.

⁵ Mary C Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Notre Dame Press 1995 p102

⁶ Op cit p104

⁷ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to the Air We Breathe*

In a letter after Catherine's death, Frances Warde notes:

“She was a woman of God and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it meant to be a person of mercy, a person of compassion, to love everyone who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on. It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.”⁸

What a glorious thing indeed! May we continue to develop in ourselves that gentle spirit of “apostolic service” which urges us to respond to the spirit of those in need, for “to do some lasting good for the poor” is the deep longing in the heart of each Sister of Mercy.

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⁸ Frances Warde cited by Mary Dennett RSM Retreat notes May 2010