

I'm still not sure what might be a suitable title for this paper. It's about Mercy, and Mary and Catherine McAuley and Baggot Street and September 24 and I'm hoping somehow to tie them all together but a title which encapsulates all this alludes me. The best I can do now is to ask you to come with me on a rather circuitous route as I explore the development of the concept and the image of Mary as Mother of Mercy.

To begin with let us examine this painting. It was painted by an Italian, Sano di Pietro, in the 1440s. Careful inspection shows Mary sheltering under her cloak a group of nuns or widows – let's just say a group of women.¹



And lest you think this is a 'one-off' in iconographic style let us look at a few more like it. This one was painted almost a century before the first. Its author was Italian and it shows a diverse crowd of nuns, friars, even a pope I think, under the protective shelter of Mary's mantle.²

This statue is called the Schutzmantelmadonna, and though my German does not extend to an exact translation of this title, its meaning is rather obvious.³ The statue's provenance is Ravensburg in southern



¹ Sano di Pietro C15 private collection

https://www.google.com.au/search?q=sano+di+pietro&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwicy_eH2orVAhVIOrwKHeziBx4Qir4lhQE&biw=1313&bih=562#imgrc=pLHVCV0bzD_hnM:

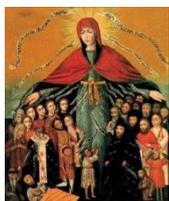
² Lippo Memmi

https://www.google.com.au/search?q=lippo+memmi&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjU8NvY2orVAhUFI5QKHfk6CgIQ_AUIBigB&biw=1313&bih=562#imgrc=tjVI9dedMCYeM:

³ Schutzmantelmadonna

https://www.google.com.au/search?q=lippo+memmi&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjU8NvY2orVAhUFI5QKHfk6CgIQ_AUIBigB&biw=1313&bih=562#tbn=isch&q=schutzmantelmadonna&imgrc=NxFcdh0r3diqlM:

Germany and it was carved about 1480. Here those seeking Mary's protection, despite their strange head wear, appear to be laypeople.



Lastly there is this icon from the Ukrainian Eastern orthodox tradition.⁴ It's later than the others (mid-17th century) but its subject-matter is similar: women, men, children, clerics and laypeople all sheltering under Mary's cloak.

Each of these four representations of Mary - two from Italy, one from Germany and the other from Ukraine - shows God's people taking refuge under Mary's cloak. And each of these images depicts Mary as the Mother of Mercy.

In preparing material for this paper, I found myself wondering about Catherine's placing her Institute under the care of Mary the Mother of Mercy, and I became increasingly curious as to how she imagined Mary as Mother of Mercy and what she understood by the title.

Catherine, as we know, spent her formative years with Protestants – the Armstrongs who adopted her sister and brother, and the Callaghans with whom she lived in Mary Street Dublin and later at Coolock. It is doubtful that she would have had any access to conventional Catholic iconography. In deference to her Protestant friends she chose not to display Catholic devotional items but rather to use the cross beams on doors and windows to

⁴ Eastern Orthodox Icon https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virgin_of_Mercy#/media/File:Icon_03050_Pokrova_Bogorodicy_Seredina_XVII_v._Ukraina.jpg

remind her of a crucifix. In all probability the representations of Mary depicted here were probably never seen by Catherine. Protestants did not encourage devotion to Mary – in fact this was one of their points of objection to Catholic doctrine. Mrs Callaghan was a Quaker and while she encouraged and inspired Catherine in many of her spiritual values and virtues,⁵ when it came to devotion to Mary she would have held a similar position to Catherine's Protestant relatives and friends.

Catherine's religious formation was received at the hands of Dean Andrew Lubé, one of the Dublin clergy who became her lifelong friend, and a Jesuit, Thomas Betagh renowned for his learning. As Catherine had read extensively on religious topics, some of which, it must be said, were strongly critical of Catholicism, her's would not have been systematic instruction but rather schooling in theology or apologetics in answer to her specific doubts and questions. Eventually she was prepared for the sacraments by Dr Daniel Murray, who later became the Archbishop of Dublin. Having made the Callaghans aware of her decision to follow the faith of her baptism, Catherine was able to practise her religion openly, even though 'their objection to Catholic practices made her ... deny herself the use of the crucifix and holy pictures.'⁶

Her formation in philanthropy was received initially at the knee of her father and later reinforced by Catherine Callaghan, for whom benevolence had a strongly practical quality. The early years of nineteenth century Ireland had witnessed a significant growth in

⁵ Sullivan, M.C., *The Path of Mercy. The Life of Catherine McAuley*, Dublin, Four Courts (20120, p.32; henceforth referred to as *Path*.

⁶ *Path*, p.36.

charitable activity by women of all religious persuasions. The social problems attendant on large-scale poverty and urbanisation had gone unheeded by state institutions. Philanthropically-minded citizens, in particular women, stepped into the void and founded a range of voluntary charitable societies. Most frequently this charity focused on poor women and children and, in the case of Catholics, to whom schooling was denied, on education.⁷

Because the Penal Laws had weakened the authority of the hierarchy, women were able to exercise a fair degree of autonomy in establishing and managing projects to assist the poor. Many of them received useful support and encouragement from individual clerics but on the whole there was a certain reluctance among members of the Catholic hierarchy to associate themselves with their work.⁸

This was the world of Catherine in the years she lived at Coolock with the Callaghans. Her philanthropy was encouraged by Catherine Callaghan and when the latter was no longer able to practise works of mercy herself, Catherine McAuley assumed sole responsibility for charitable activity at the house and in the village.

When Mr Callaghan died in 1821, his wife having died two years previously, Catherine found herself the beneficiary of a considerable fortune. She was then in a position to expand her work and bring to reality a long-cherished dream. Advised in particular by her friend Father Edward Armstrong and with the

⁷ This is explored in Rosemary Raughter (1997) *A discreet benevolence: female philanthropy and the catholic resurgence in eighteenth-century Ireland* <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612029700200159> (downloaded 01/07/17)

⁸ *ibid.*

approval of Archbishop Murray, she immediately set about establishing a house in Baggot Street Dublin to be a place where the distress of the poor was alleviated. In this venture she stands shoulder to shoulder with women of her time such as Theresa Mulally, Nano Nagle and Mary Aikenhead who had initiated similar projects.⁹ We learn from one of her first companions that Catherine's early intention had been to form

*A society of ladies who would devote themselves to the practice of the works of Mercy without making vows, that they might be at liberty to visit their relations and remain with them in sickness and affliction.*¹⁰

What Catherine planned to practise at her house were the spiritual and corporal works of mercy – those practices engaged in by many of her contemporaries, Catholic and Protestant, who were possessed of a social conscience. Giving the name 'House of Mercy' to establishments where social welfare was dispensed was not an uncommon practice: many contemporary Anglican institutions, for example, were so named. History attests that neither the work practised at Baggot Street nor the choice of the name for the house in Baggot Street was really remarkable.

⁹ Teresa Mulally in May 1766 opened a school in Dublin to provide education for poor girls. Later she established a boarding school in Georges Hill which became the Presentation convent. Nano Nagle established the Presentation nuns in Cork in 1775 - a group of women who would be dedicated to the education of those who were poor and destitute and to other works that would challenge the unjust social and political structures that made and kept people poor. Mary Aikenhead founded the Sisters of Charity in Dublin in 1815. Their work included the establishment of schools, hospitals and orphanages for people in need, and very importantly the visiting of the poor, especially the sick in their homes, and those in prison.

See <http://homepage.eircom.net/~presgeorg/page4.html>;

<http://presentationssociety.org.au/about/our-founder/>;

<http://religioussistersofcharity.ie/mary-aikenhead/>

¹⁰ Sullivan, M.C. *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Dublin, Four Courts (2012), p.4; henceforth referred to as *Tradition*.

Catherine planned to establish a house of mercy, not the House of Mercy.

What is interesting is that, a hundred and ninety years ago, this particular House of Mercy became connected with Mary, Mother of Mercy through a series of events which may have been serendipitous, may have been providential. Catherine, with her firm reliance on the providence of God would undoubtedly have affirmed the latter interpretation.

Mary Ann Doyle, Catherine's first co-worker, tells the story:

On 24th September 1827, the day I selected for commencing, not ever knowing it would [be] the Order of Mercy, the school opened.¹¹

Later accounts of the story show evidence of some embellishments. In one we read:

Miss McAuley wrote to Miss Doyle to say that as all needful preparations would soon be completed she might enter if she pleased on the 23rd or 24th of the month which was September. Miss Doyle, though, though she did not then know of the feast, fixed on 24th but in another note remarked that she should be particularly rejoiced to begin her labours on that day as it was dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, suggesting at the same time that 'House of Mercy' would be a good name for the institution.¹²

¹¹ Tradition, p.41.

¹² Tradition, p.48.

Clare Moore, another of Catherine's early associates, also asserts that it was Mary Ann who chose the name 'House of Mercy' and indeed she may have done but let us remember that most of the accounts on which we rely were written several years after the events they describe and there could be some details which may not necessarily be one hundred per cent accurate.

*Miss Doyle [writes Clare Moore] was delighted at the thoughts of beginning her work on such a feast as that of Our Lady and suggested that the name of the Institution should refer to it and so the House and Order got their name.*¹³

However, Mary Sullivan, a Sister of Mercy from the USA and the best authority on Catherine's life, accounts for the naming in this way:¹⁴

Anna Maria [Doyle] wished Catherine to set a date, soon, so she did. She picked September 24, 1827. They later realised they had chosen the Feast day of Our Lady of Mercy and together agreed to place the infant establishment under the patronage of the Mother of God with title of 'the most amiable of her attributes by which she most resembles Him whose mercies are above all His works.' It would be a 'House of Mercy'. Later when its works of mercy were more fully

¹³ *Tradition*, pp.199-200.

¹⁴ Mary C. Sullivan, R.S.M., is a member of the Rochester, New York regional community. She is professor emerita of language and literature, and dean emerita of the College of Liberal Arts, at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She is the author of numerous works, including *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, and *The Path of Mercy*.

*operational, they would ask Archbishop Daniel Murray for permission to use this name publicly’.*¹⁵

The following year on September 24 Catherine applied to Archbishop Murray for permission to have the Institute styled ‘of our Blessed Lady of Mercy’ which he kindly granted.¹⁶ A year later the Chapel was dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy.¹⁷ Increasingly the group was identifying itself with Mary under this title.

We need to be aware, however, that the ‘Institute’ Archbishop Murray named was not in any way comparable to our Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Catherine’s was a group of laywomen, without vows, who were free to come and go, even though when they were at the House of Mercy they led a regular life and prayed together in chapel. Initially those who joined the Baggot Street community were simply called ‘the ladies’ but before too long the ‘ladies’ began calling themselves ‘sisters’.¹⁸ Mary Sullivan notes that by 1829 ‘*some members of the community had harmlessly taken to calling one another ‘sister’ and observes that ‘even nurses did that’.* There was no suggestion that they thought of themselves as nuns or religious of any kind and they were a long way from living a conventual life, but suspicions were aroused as to just what they were.’¹⁹

We can understand Catherine’s reluctance to found a religious community on account of her having ‘*imbibed certain Protestant*

¹⁵ *Path*, p.64.

¹⁶ *Tradition*, p.103, 159; *Path*, p.71 .

¹⁷ *Tradition*, p.162.

¹⁸ *Tradition*, p.201.

¹⁹ *Path*, p.90; *Tradition*, p.104.

*prejudices which she retained for a very long period. She did not like the idea of Religious vows and disapproved of Conventual observances etc.*²⁰ Similarly we can understand the unease of Archbishop Murray when he began receiving reports questioning what was going on at the Baggot Street establishment.

There is a wider context, though, in which we can understand the pressure which the Archbishop put on Catherine. It has been shown that one of the effects of the re-establishment of Irish hierarchical authority following the repeal of the Penal Laws, was the marked diminishment of the autonomy of women who had founded philanthropic societies. To control them, church authorities allowed female charities to practise only within strictly-defined limits. This meant in effect, that the women involved in them were required to submit themselves to clerical direction and control as professed religious or to cease their activities altogether.²¹

We know the result of the Archbishop's visit to Catherine and the choice presented to her that her group 'should either appear as secular ladies or become Religious':²² Catherine and two companions began their novitiate with the Presentation Sisters.²³ Their Act of Profession on the morning of December 12, 1831 saw the founding of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy.²⁴

²⁰ *Tradition*, p.102.

²¹ See Rosemary Raughter (1997) A discreet benevolence: female philanthropy and the catholic resurgence in eighteenth-century Ireland [1], *Women's History Review*, 6:4, 465-487. Raughter observes that the same phenomenon occurred in post-Reformation Europe. *Ultimately, like their co-religionists in Counter-Reformation Europe, charitable women felt obliged to accept the restrictions inherent in membership of a religious congregation, thereby setting the pattern for the Catholic female philanthropy of the next century.* <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612029700200159>

²² *Path*, p.91.

²³ Mary Ann Doyle and Elizabeth Harley

²⁴ *Path*, p.106.

But the question must be posed: What was Catherine understanding when she referred to Mary as ‘Mother of Mercy’? One of the early manuscripts which recount the origins of our Mercy story states that the title was chosen *‘which in an especial manner placed the house and subsequently our Holy Order under the protection of His Immaculate mother and caused them to be named from the most amiable of her attributes by which she most resembles Him whose mercies are above all His works’*.²⁵

Obviously these are not Catherine’s words. In fact we are not sure who wrote them; all we know is that they come from the pen of ‘One of the First Sisters of Mercy.’²⁶ We search in vain through Catherine’s letters or other writings to find references to Mary under the title ‘Mother of Mercy’. The greatest number of references to Mary in any guise can be found in the Original Rule, the essence of which we know Catherine copied from the Presentation Rule, so we can’t attribute these words to her either, even though we can conclude that she agreed with them. In the Original Rule we read

*The Sisters shall always have the warmest and most affectionate devotion to her, [Mary] regarding her in a special manner as their Mother.*²⁷

But this is not specifically in reference to her title of Mother of Mercy. In reality there is very little written about Mary that we can ascribe directly to Catherine.

²⁵ *Tradition*, p.48.

²⁶ *Tradition*, pp.45, 353.

²⁷ Original Rule, in *Tradition*, p. 310.

Amongst those sayings traditionally accredited to Catherine is this:

*Her [Mary's] dignity is expressed in one title - Mother of God.*²⁸

This seems to me to be the crux of the matter. When Catherine wrote or spoke of mercy she most frequently had in mind God's mercy. That this is so can be inferred from a section of the Original Rule which, according to the experts, is Catherine's own composition. To Catherine, mercy was 'the principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him'. The daily attempt to collaborate in God's mercifulness was the principal work of Christians and thus of Sisters of Mercy.²⁹ God's mercy had inspired Catherine 'to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them [she] regarded the person of [her] divine Master who has said 'Amen, I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me'.³⁰ She urged her sisters to 'have great confidence in God in the discharge of all these offices of Mercy, spiritual and corporal – which constitute the business of our lives - and assure ourselves that God will particularly concur with us to render them efficacious'.³¹ Catherine's theology was sound.

So, back to the question: What is the connection between Catherine's sisters, Our Lady of Mercy, and the feast celebrated on September 24th?

This requires a slight departure from our plotted course. We need to travel to thirteenth century Spain.

²⁸ See <http://www.mercyworld.org/foundress/index.cfm?loadref=226> Mary Sullivan calls into question whether the document *Familiar Instructions of Reverend Mother McAuley* from which this is taken is 'a completely reliable and authentic source of Catherine's sayings. (See *Path*, pp.381-84).

²⁹ *Path*, p.170.

³⁰ *Tradition*, p.297.

³¹ *Path*, p.170.

Mary, Mother of Mercy, is the patron saint of Barcelona. In that city in 1218 or thereabouts a religious order was founded by St Peter Nolasco with the object of rescuing Christians who had been captured by the Moors. The Mother of Mercy has been associated with this order since the mid-thirteenth century and in 1272 her patronage was made official when the order was named *The Royal, Celestial and Military Order of Our Lady of Mercy and the Redemption of the Captives*. It was also called the Order of Our Lady of Ransom. Another of its titles was the Order of Mercy and its members the Mercedarians. The official feast day of the Order, commemorating the day of its foundation, was chosen as September 24, a feast celebrated initially in France and Spain and extended to the whole church at the end of the 17th Century by Pope Innocent XII.

Even now in the official calendar of the Church, September 24 is listed as the feast of Our Lady of Mercy or of Our Lady of Ransom, more usually the latter.³² It is likely therefore, that had either Catherine or Mary Ann Doyle been present at a Mass celebrated on September 24, the order of the Mass would have been that of Our Lady of Ransom, celebrating the foundation of the order associated with Peter Nolasco. Our Lady of Mercy as we imagine her was in no way connected with that feast.

In the Generalate of the Order of the Mercedarians in Rome is a painting of Our Lady of Mercy, reproduced here. It's interesting, as it depicts Mary



³² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12640a.htm>

sheltering a group of women, men and children under her mantle. conforming with the established themes of Catholic iconography of Mary under this title.³³

So is it reasonable to propose that our early Sisters of Mercy, if they stopped to consider how their patron might be depicted, would have imagined her protecting her children in a motherly embrace within the folds of her cloak? Not only reasonable I suggest, but correct! And the basis of my assertion is this.



This statue was once located in the Convent of Mercy at Birr, Catherine's last foundation in Ireland.³⁴ On 27th December 1840 Sisters Catherine McAuley, Aloysius Scott, Teresa White, Rose Lynch and a postulant, arrived in Birr at the invitation of Fr Spain, the parish priest. On New Year's Day they attended Mass in the local church where they renewed their vows and were presented to the congregation by Fr Spain with the following words...

*"My dear people, I have a present to make to you ... I present to you the Sisters of Mercy, who by their example and pious instruction will draw upon our town the blessing of heaven."*³⁵

After a century of the sisters' ministering in Birr as Fr Spain had predicted, some changes were necessary. As congregation numbers declined and the large convent designed for them by

³³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_the_Blessed_Virgin_Mary_of_Mercy

³⁴ <http://institute.mercy.org.au/feast-of-our-lady-of-mercy/>

³⁵ Sullivan M.C. (ed.), *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*, Dublin, Four Courts (2004) p. 342; henceforth referred to as *Correspondence*.

Augustus Pugin, became less practical, they reluctantly took the decision to leave. The convent came into public hands and Offaly County Council converted a large section into municipal council offices and library. Too big to remove when the convent was sold, the statue, showing Mary sheltering the faithful under the protection of her cloak now stands in the local Council offices with an inscription which reads: 'Mother of Mercy, pray for us'.³⁶ We need no clearer indication that in mid nineteenth century Ireland this was the prevailing style for images of Mary, Mother of Mercy.

I am now going to enter the realms of conjecture: There is, I believe, another possible connection between the Sisters of Mercy and the Order founded by Peter Nolasco which may merit some investigation. To one who is a rank amateur in heraldry there seems to be some similarity between this – the insignia of the Mercedarians - and these two crests formerly used by Sisters of Mercy in Australia. The oval one



Lady of Mercy; the shield with the lamb was that of the Australian Federation of the Religious Sisters of Mercy.



Furthermore, some Mercy schools and colleges have coats of arms with similar characteristics. These crests of Mercy schools in, respectively, Ireland, the USA and Australia on the face of it have a

³⁶ See n.30 above.

lot in common with the emblem of the Mercedarians as well as those of the two former Australian Mercy groups.



Perhaps the bars represent the prison bars from which captives were freed. I don't know. Speculative though this last point may be, it is possible that there is more than a loose connection between the Sisters of Mercy and the Order of the Mercedarians whose feast is on September 24. And another piece of evidence which piques my interest is that Catherine listed St Peter Nolasco among the saints to whom the sisters of her Institute were to have particular devotion.³⁷

Nevertheless it must be admitted that, despite its charm, we here in Australia are not familiar with the image of Mary, Mother of Mercy, sheltering the poor under her cloak.



The question remains: How did the accepted image of Mary Mother of Mercy morph from this to this?



To answer that question we need to go to Rome - to second-century Rome, in fact. I would assume that not many of my

³⁷ Tradition, p.280.

readers is familiar with St Pudentiana.³⁸ According to legend she was a second century saint and martyr. Also according to legend her father Pudens, gave shelter to St Peter.³⁹

A church dedicated to the saint was erected in the fourth century on the site of her father's house. Today the church on the *Via Urbana* is recognised, rightly or wrongly, as one of the oldest places of Christian worship in Rome.⁴⁰ Another reason for its fame is that inside the church is a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy where there is a painting, said to be miraculous.⁴¹

As early as 1587 Pope Sixtus V had granted special graces to anyone who prayed in front of this painting, invoking Mary as the Mother of Mercy.⁴²



Equipped with that knowledge let us now take a short walk across the city to the Irish College, a seminary established in 1628 to train young men for the priesthood when such establishments were forbidden in Ireland. Since 1849 the Rector of the Irish College had been Archbishop Tobias Kirby, a native of Waterford and a friend of the Sisters of Mercy.⁴³ Kirby had studied for the priesthood in Rome at the Pontifical Colleges where one of his fellow students had been the future Pope Leo XIII. With Leo's

³⁸ <https://www.google.com.au/search?q=church+of+st+pudenziana&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjl2f68lo3VAhUGxrwKHU6tCkEQ7AkIQg&biw=1313&bih=611>

³⁹ It is believed that St Peter lodged here while he was in Rome. The house in which he stayed was owned and provided for by St Pudens, a Roman Senator. Since early Christians did not have public places for worship it is also presumed that St Peter celebrated Mass here. Remnants from the ancient wooden altar used for these Masses are said to be preserved in the chapel dedicated to him on the left side of the main sanctuary. <http://www.saintsinrome.com/2013/08/february.html> See also <http://zephyrinus-zephyrinus.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/lenten-station-at-basilica-of-saint-10.html>

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ [http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Pudenziana;](https://www.google.com.au/search?q=miraculous+painting+our+lady+of+mercy+st+pudenziana&tbm=isch&imgil=q354DptNwOCJ3M%253A%253BQjFrCeafvslwfm%253Bhttps%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.pinterest.com%25252Fpin%25252F305822630932444398%25252F&source=iu&pf=m&fir=q354DptNwOCJ3M%253A%252CQjFrCeafvslwfm%252C&usq=xilioB_5B4rqpPTqoJJCefMPIAl%3D&biw=1887&bih=838&ved=0ahUKewjuovOEs5HVAhVHGJQKHcg2C0QQYjclPA&ei=nD5tWe7kE8ew0ATI7aygBA#imgrc=q354DptNwOCJ3M:&spf=1500331682253; and <a href=)

⁴² See letter held at Mercy International Centre, Baggot St Dublin. Sixtus was pope from 24 April 1585 until his death in 1590.

⁴³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobias_Kirby

ascendancy to the papacy in 1878 the Irish found they had ‘a friend at court’ and, it is true, Kirby did wield significant influence in Rome – not necessarily politically but in all manner of church affairs (which I suppose really is ‘politically’).

Sometime in either late 1889 or early 1890 the said Archbishop was invited to give benediction at the church of St Pudentiana. Curious, he sought out the miraculous painting and decided that his friends the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland would appreciate a copy of it. Accordingly he had ‘an able artist’ reproduce it and, in the tradition of the time, decided to ask his friend Pope Leo to bless it. The Pope was unaware of the existence of the Sisters of Mercy but Kirby was quick to enlighten his ignorance. He ‘made special inquiries about your Order’, Kirby told the sisters in Dublin, ‘its nature, object etc. I told him that I knew your zealous foundress and that the Almighty has so blessed her work that her convents number today in all parts of the world, something between six and seven hundred.’⁴⁴



Pope Leo was impressed with both the information and the painting. The latter he pronounced ‘multo bella’ and in response to the former he commissioned Kirby to send the picture to the convent at Baggot St in his name as ‘the special image or painting of the entire Order of the Irish Sisters of Mercy’. He also granted special blessings to anyone who prayed ‘before it or before any copy of it whether painted, engraved or photographed’.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Letter accompanying picture, held and displayed at Mercy International Centre, Dublin.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

Not wanting the value of the papal gift to be underestimated, Kirby instructed the Dublin community: ‘You will have the inauguration of its being placed in veneration, done with a devout ceremony’!⁴⁶

This was done according to instructions. On the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 1890, the painting was unveiled by Bishop Donnelly of Dublin. A plaque commemorating the occasion and telling the story of the picture and its provenance can be found with the painting in the chapel at Baggot Street. The letter written by Archbishop Kirby is also on display.



The sisters present at the ceremony were doubtless unaware of the significance of the occasion.

September 24, 1890 would have been the first formal association of the Sisters of Mercy, their feast day and this particular image of Mary, Mother of Mercy.

At this point the story takes some more twists and turns. It seems to me that the key words in Pope Leo’s statement are ‘before it or before any copy of it whether painted, engraved or photographed’, for in the years following 1890 a profusion of copies, engravings and photographs appeared. One of the earliest was printed on a small card which can be found with the painting in Baggot Street.

Word of the gift must have spread rapidly. Kirby was inundated with requests for engravings and copies. In the year following the ‘inauguration of its being placed in veneration’ he received

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

numerous letters, from New York and New Orleans, not to mention several from England and Ireland, all wanting either a copy of the painting or of the small card featuring the engraving. Later requests came from New Zealand, Broken Hill, Pittsburgh and Queensland.⁴⁷ In an age when photocopying was yet to be



copies, artistic licence began to exert itself and variations appeared in the detail of the work.

In the early years of my religious life I was familiar with this version: in fact I found this copy recently in the front of the Prayer Manual that I received when I began my novitiate in 1962. While it is similar to the Baggot Street painting – there are some differences, for example, in the colouring, in the size and shape of Mary’s crown, the embroidery on her dress, the angles of Jesus’ head and Mary’s hand, the detail of the throne and in one both of Mary’s feet are visible, covered by red bootees.



Other copies abound: in black and white and in colour. Some resemble one another, distinguished only by subtle differences. Others are decidedly different as is this one

by Sr Aloysius McVeigh in the style of an icon; and this by Leopoldine Mimovitch in her distinctively ethnic style.



⁴⁷ <http://www.irishcollege.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Kirby-Catalogue-Part-8-1891-1895.pdf>. *Passim*.



One reproduction which has captured the imagination of the Sisters and their co-workers in ISMAPNG is this one, painted by a Sister of Mercy, a member of the former Ballarat East Congregation who was, it goes without saying, a gifted artist.



Born in 1909 in Kousba, Syria (now Lebanon), Olga Batros was one year old when her family arrived in Australia, settling first in New South Wales. They subsequently moved to Victoria and Olga was educated at St. Anne's School, Warrnambool and later at Sacred Heart College, Ballarat East. In March 1930 Olga took the decision to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Ballarat East and on February 7, 1933 she was professed, taking the religious name of Sister Margaret Mary. A deeply prayerful person, Margaret Mary was commissioned by her superior to turn her artistic talent to painting a copy of the image of Mary, Mother of Mercy.

There follows one additional historical detour.

A decision was evidently made to 'return to the sources' and a connection in Rome was given the task of obtaining a photographic copy of the original. Fr John Scullion S.J. a student in Rome in 1959 and a relative of another of the sisters, was assigned the task. However it was not as simple as it might have been. He explained to the sisters back in Ballarat:

*The painting is on the façade of the Church, in a triangle above the door, about twenty feet up and quite small. ... The only view of the painting that I have been able to get so far is from about 25 yards through great iron gates.*⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Letter from John Scullion S.J. to Sr M Perpetua RSM dated 7 April 1959, held in community archives at 151 Victoria St Ballarat.

He was correct in one sense; mistaken in another. There is a painting on the façade and its subject is Mary, Mother of Mercy.



A view of the front of the church shows the 'great iron gates'. In the tympanum a fresco is visible the detail of which is



revealed on closer inspection.⁴⁹

It is without doubt a rendition of the miraculous painting but it is not the painting which Kirby had copied. The fresco was painted in 1870 when the church was restored; the original in the chapel dates from the late 1500s. Had Fr Scullion gone inside the church he would have found, in the chapel of Our Lady of Mercy, the miraculous painting. This one!



From the material she received Margaret Mary produced a masterpiece, but it is obvious that her painting is based not on the miraculous original in the chapel but on the fresco on the façade. This does not matter, of course, as Pope Leo was explicit in saying that blessings accompanied 'the painting or any copy of it whether painted, engraved or photographed' and without doubt that applies to copies of copies!



In each of these paintings the figure is $\frac{3}{4}$ of full length. The perspective is much closer— allowing for greater intimacy. Were we able to obtain a clearer picture of the fresco we would

undoubtedly uncover more similarities.

In Margaret Mary's rendition Mary is regal, but by no means aloof; rather she has a pronounced softness, accentuated by the

⁴⁹ The mural fresco in the [tympanum](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Pudenziana) of the pediment, by Antonio Manno, is from the 1870 restoration and depicts Our Lady enthroned with the Child Jesus on her lap. http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Pudenziana

softer tones of the painting. Her gaze is one of compassion. Jesus with his mop of curls has a distinctly human quality, inviting the observer to approach and receive the mercy of God. There's no orb to suggest his kingship; the keys which are in his left hand look less like symbols of power and more like a toy - a baby's rattle, even. His right hand reaches out, perhaps to bless but perhaps also to beckon as a child beckons someone to come closer. I think if Pope Leo XIII or indeed our current Pope were to see this painting, each of them would, without hesitation, describe it as 'multo bella'.

Two years ago Pope Francis called on all Catholics to participate in a Jubilee Year of Mercy. He pleaded with us to

*open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!*⁵⁰

He challenged us to

enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome

⁵⁰ *Misericordia Vultus*, Bull Of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy ¶15 See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.htmlhttps://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html

the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.

And recently he has added another challenge – to care for the earth, our common home.⁵¹

In writing of the Year of Mercy Francis also alludes to the role of Mary, Mother of Mercy. In words which echo the sentiments of Catherine McAuley he declares:

*Mary attests that the mercy of the Son of God knows no bounds and extends to everyone, without exception. Let us address her in the words of the Salve Regina, [Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy] a prayer ever ancient and ever new, so that she may never tire of turning her merciful eyes upon us, and make us worthy to contemplate the face of mercy, her Son Jesus.*⁵²



⁵¹ http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/09/01/new_work_of_mercy_enshrined_in_papal_message_for_creation/1255084

⁵² *Misericordia Vultus, op.cit.*, ¶24.