

Remembrance is a form of meeting... Kahlil Gibran - Part One



This year marks the 160th anniversary of the arrival of three founding Sisters of Mercy, Ursula Frayne, Joseph Sherlock and Anne Xavier, in Melbourne. In the Mass on 11th November each year in the chapel at Fitzroy where Ursula is buried, the Sisters recall the anniversary of Catherine's death, and our Sisters who have died during the past year.

Throughout the month of November, in this special anniversary year, there will be remembrance rituals in the cemeteries in Victoria where our Sisters are buried. In this way, we will name and remember, in a simple yet deeply significant way, these women, known or unknown to us personally, strangers, relatives, friends, companions, Sisters, who gave their lives to Mercy.

This brings us personally to reflect on the lives of Mercy women, 'the cloud of witnesses', who have been significant to our own Mercy story, and to actively connect with them in the communion of saints in this special time of remembrance. These stories reflect the diversity of Mercy ministries, great and small, happiness and deep sorrow, all part of the tapestry of the Mercy story. As we continue on the journey, we are encouraged by the knowledge that they too often lived in uncertain times, in which 'joys and sorrows were intermingled', and their faithfulness energises us in to the future.

This time of remembrance also invites us to re-read Mary Elizabeth Moore's poignant letters to Mary Anne Doyle and Mary Angela Dunne which 'record the calm and gracious dying of a beloved woman',¹ Catherine McAuley. They confirm Catherine's capacity to let go and let God, her continuing, lived experience of trusting in the Providence of God, her graciousness and expansiveness, such an example for us who look to her to show us the way to be Mercy. She

¹ Mary Sullivan. *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy.* (Notre Dame, Indiana. University of Notre Dame Press), 1995, pages 254-257

expressed confidence that the work of Mercy would continue without her, for ‘the Order is God’s work-not mine. It will do just as well without me.’² She did not cling to leadership or ‘succession – planning’, as we would term it: On her death bed, the last day of her life, being asked to name the sister whom she would like to succeed her, she answered, ‘The Constitutions give the Sisters liberty of choosing for themselves, and I will not interfere.’³ Rather, Catherine, continuing as she had lived, recognised the Sisters’ distress at their impending loss, and knowing they would need to be together to comfort each other, instructed that after she died, they gather together in community for a ‘cuppa’ .

Mary Vincent Whitty, in a letter to Cecilia Marmion at Birmingham in England, dated November 16, 1841, wrote: ‘we have only to endeavour to imitate her that we may die like her-and she was such a picture of total abandonment of herself and all that belonged to her into the hands of God.’⁴

During November, may we all engage in some time of reflection and re-membling in gratitude our foundress, Catherine, and all those who have walked the path of Mercy ahead of us, naming them and telling their stories, inspired by their commitment and courage, to go forward, ‘one step at a time.’

‘In the evening of our lives, we shall be examined in LOVE.’(St John of the Cross)

Helen Glasheen, Patricia McDermott, Anne McGuire

Mercy, bidden or unbidden - Part Two

Reflecting on Catherine McAuley’s last days and her open-heartedness towards her nascent, grieving community, despite her own suffering, led me to reflect on Mercy, given and received, in unexpected places, that capacity, even in the hour of one’s own greatest need, to extend womb compassion to someone else. At the same time, I read the following description of an act of mercy: ‘Once when I was very ill and in pain in hospital, a nurse

² Familiar Instructions, page 136

³ The Practical Sayings of Catherine McAuley, page 29.

⁴ Mary Sullivan. *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame), page 245

appeared-seemingly out of nowhere-and placed a cool compress on my forehead. That act of mercy allowed me to get through a diagnostic test and wait for pain medicine.’ The writer goes on to invite reflection on ‘moments when you have known mercy, moments when someone has extended themselves unbidden to come to your aid or to offer comfort.’⁵

Such experiences of receiving mercy when I, as a pastoral carer in a community- based palliative care service, expected to bring mercy to the patients and families were often surprising, and sometimes only became apparent on reflection. And so it was with George...

I accompanied a nurse to visit a patient in his home, an elderly man, living alone, with a cancerous, open wound on the side of his head. The house was chaotic, unkept, and George’s only company was an equally elderly greyhound living in the kitchen. While I looked for a clear spot to sit, and to quiet my churning stomach at the sight of the wound, the nurse gently changed the dressing, and talked to George about going to hospital where he could be cared for ‘appropriately’. I was getting increasingly distressed at what I saw as suffering and loneliness, as George quietly responded that he wanted to stay at home. He glanced across at me, and said softly, ‘I’m alright, you know!’ When the nurse finished her work, he walked in all his frailty to the door, thanked us for our kindness to him, and assured us again that he would be ok. It was some time afterwards, when I could get past my need to fix, save, sort, do anything to make his life more comfortable for him, that I realised the depth of the compassion that he offered to me. And so I wrote...

Vignette of Grace

George

The greyhound and George are mirrors of each other,

Long limbs pared back to the bone now.

Energy is running very low.

No more racing for these two,

Who are mutually heading for a finish line,

Yet...

There is a remnant of gracefulness here

Amid the chaotic house

Where every surface seems covered in dust

⁵ Mary Earle. *The Desert Mothers. Spiritual Practices from the Women of the Wilderness*. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), 2007

That has turned to dirt...
And stuff everywhere.
It is hard to find, this grace,
In such a comfortless place,
Where the old man suffers deeply.... and alone,
With an open wound in the side of his head.
Yet...
He recognises my distress...
He assures me he is ok,
And he walks us unsteadily to the door,
Ever a gentle man,
Thanking us for coming...
I emerge from the dark house in to the sunshine,
Sitting in my car for a long time,
Praying for him...
And for me...

Helen Glasheen

I invite you, in this month of November, a dedicated time of remembering , to reflect on your own experiences of Mercy, often unbidden, seemingly unremarkable, shown to us in the life and death of our foundress, Catherine, and in each other, on our journey in Mercy.

Helen Glasheen, Patricia McDermott, Anne McGuire