

MERCY
Associates

Institute of Sisters of Mercy
of Australia & Papua New Guinea

One Charism, Many Paths

Chapter 4

Catherine

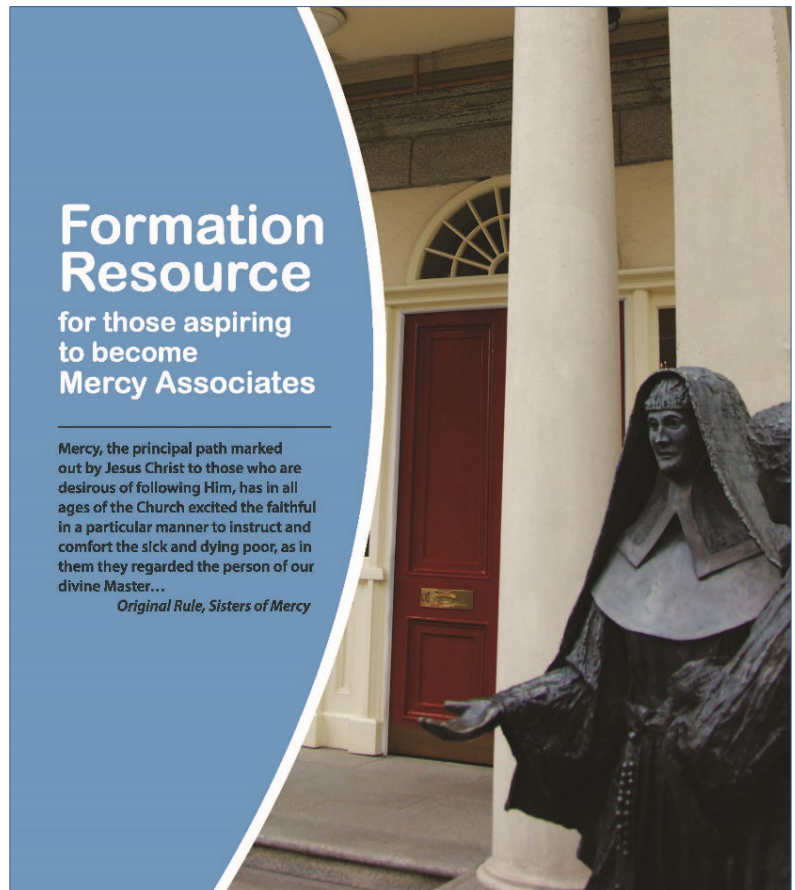
McAuley

Formation Resource

for those aspiring
to become
Mercy Associates

Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him, has in all ages of the Church excited the faithful in a particular manner to instruct and comfort the sick and dying poor, as in them they regarded the person of our divine Master...

Original Rule, Sisters of Mercy



- 4.1 Catherine's time: Ireland in the 18th and 19th Centuries
- 4.2 Factors which influenced Catherine
- 4.3 Founding the House of Mercy – Baggot St, Dublin
- 4.4 The Founding of a new Religious Congregation – the Sisters of Mercy
- 4.5 Catherine's Rule for the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy
- 4.6 New Foundations of Sisters of Mercy and Death of the Foundress
- 4.7 Sisters of Mercy around the World

Appendix - Suscipe

Notes for users:

The Formation Resource is designed for use by candidates aspiring to become Mercy Associates. This entails proceeding steadily through the resource, guided by a sponsor or other Mercy Associates, with time for reflection, discussion and prayer to discern if Mercy Associates is a suitable pathway for candidates.

The resource has a number of chapters, each available separately on the Mercy Associates screen of the ISMAPNG website: <https://institute.mercy.org.au/become-involved/become-a-mercy-associate/>

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4.0 Catherine McAuley

Catherine McAuley was an Irish woman born in 1778, who died in 1941 – yet her life and spirit continue to speak to us today.



4.1 Catherine's time: Ireland in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was suffering from the problems caused by the Penal Laws after 1691 and other restrictive Acts designed to suppress Irish Catholics by stamping out Catholicism and encouraging the Irish to become Protestants. Catholics were barred from purchasing and inheriting property, entering certain professions, holding public or military office; there also were restrictions on clergy and prohibition of education other than in a Protestant school. Catholic Schools were declared illegal. Catholics were very poor and lacked any power to make things better.

Some respite for Catholics came with the First Relief Act 1783, which repealed the 1709 Penal Law. Catholic Emancipation continued over the next four decades, culminating in Catholics receiving the right to vote in 1828. Yet Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was still suffering from the problems caused by these Penal Laws.

In 1775 Nano Nagle established the Presentation Sisters but like other religious congregations up to that time, they were semi-cloistered, so the poor had to come to them. However Catholic development was being delayed by the shortage of priests and teachers and the lack of spiritual and material resources. Schools for the poor were high on Archbishop Troy's wish list. The hierarchy of the Church was well re-established by the 1830's and sought to win back the Irish poor to the Church.

Dublin of the early 1800's was a city of two very different experiences, depending on your place in society. It was a city of wealth and sophistication, with universities, libraries and hospitals, music, art, poetry and culture, inhabited by the wealthy and mainly protestant middle and upper class who were the minority. It was at the same time a city of poverty and oppression, illness and disease, of wretched living conditions, inhabited by a large number of poor who were mainly Catholic.



With this background over such a lengthy period of time, we can see the divide between rich and poor was not only about material wealth and access to education, hospitals and employment opportunities, but was by this time ingrained in the fabric of how the society understood itself.

One room tenement dwelling, Dublin, Francis St, Dublin. Photo from National Archives, Ireland.

4.2 Factors which influenced Catherine

When one looks at images of Catherine McAuley, one notices that she is not always portrayed wearing a habit. This reflects the fact that Catherine was a vowed religious woman for only 10 of her 63 years of life.



We can reflect upon what may have driven this woman to devote her life to practical works of mercy, firstly as a lay woman and later in life as a vowed religious. What and who influenced her to act as she did? Though each of us has myriad influences that shape us, three particular points of influence for Catherine were:

- **her family, especially her father James**
- **the Callaghans, a Quaker couple who Catherine worked for over a twenty-year period and**
- **the scriptures, the Holy Bible.**

Though Catholic at a time when Catholics were derided, **Catherine's family** was amongst the small number who were successful, well off and accepted in polite society thanks to the great skill of her father, a renowned and much sought-after builder in the midst of the Georgian building boom.

Catherine's father, James, was a committed Catholic and as a young child Catherine came face to face with the poor as she saw her father ministering to the poor in their home. Tragically, he died when Catherine was still a young child. Her widowed mother, a woman with many social skills but lacking financial acumen, died when Catherine was in her late teens. Her mother's death led to the breakup of the family, Catherine going to live with her uncle. Within one year, however, poverty forced her, together with her brother and sister, to live with a Protestant family.

In 1803, aged 25 years, Catherine became acquainted with **the Callaghans**. She became a companion to Catherine Callaghan, a Quaker woman, and lived with her and her husband William at Coolock House (*pictured overleaf*) set on ten hectares (20 acres) on the outskirts of Dublin. Quakers were known for their study of scripture and Catherine read the scriptures each day to Catherine Callaghan. The Quakers also had a strong commitment to social justice and women would often undertake visitations outside their homes in pairs.



The Callaghans supported Catherine's work in the parish to help the poor, although they remained suspicious of Popery (Catholicism) and forbade religious images in their house.

In 1822 following the death of the couple, Catherine, now aged 44, found herself heiress to almost all they possessed. She inherited between 20,000 and 30,000 pounds, some of it being in the form of annual income payments and some a lump sum (equivalent to about \$10m in today's currency). Catherine continued her charitable work bringing orphans into her house and distributing food and clothing daily among the needy of the village.

Scripture taught Catherine to respect the unique dignity of each person. The Genesis text is foundational in establishing the respect and dignity due to every person regardless of their place in life.

So God created humankind in God's own likeness, in the image of God, God created them.... God saw everything that God had made, and indeed it was very good. Gen 1:26-31

This key conviction guided Catherine's life – the inherent goodness of every person made in the likeness of God – in practice this means every person must be treated with equal respect and dignity.

The passage below in Matthew's Gospel led Catherine to undertake works of mercy; to welcome the stranger, feed the poor, visit the sick and so on:

Come, and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.... Just as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me. Matthew 25:34-36 & 40.

**So God created humankind
in God's own likeness, in the
image of God, God created
them.... God saw everything
that God had made, and in-
deed it was very good.**

Gen 1:26-31

4.3 Founding of the House of Mercy – Baggot St, Dublin

Catherine understood the great social, economic and political oppression under which the poor struggled, and she had bitter experiences trying to find shelter for abused servant women and homeless girls who were turned away by many institutions.

She consulted priest friends about how best to meet the needs of the destitute. She also consulted the Irish Sisters of Charity, although she had reservations about the restrictions she thought religious life would impose on the works of mercy to which she felt called. Until her time, women religious were required to remain in their convents, and whatever works they undertook were undertaken from that site.

The general wellbeing and education of girls was a particular problem and with no education and few skills, many young women were forced to live on the streets.

Catherine built a large house on Baggot Street (pictured) in which she could educate poor girls and offer shelter to homeless young women. When planning the house, Catherine instructed the architect to create two large dormitories for homeless women and servant girls, two large rooms to serve as classrooms for poor girls, some very small bedrooms for the residents who would assist her and a chapel.

On September 24, 1827, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, Catherine's cousin Catherine Byrn and Anna Maria Doyle, moved into the partially finished house. This house was to be called '*The House of Mercy*'.

Catherine chose a location in the midst of the prosperous area of Dublin because she wanted the rich to see the poor. Prosperous people, especially the married women and their daughters, usually did not come into contact with poor people because the poor lived in slums, a distance from the homes of the wealthy.

Catherine's hope was that if the rich did see the poor, they would become aware of their needs.

Catherine thought that the married women could help as volunteers for a few hours each week and the single women could help for many more hours until they married. In turn, she anticipated that those young women who trained for domestic or other work at the House of Mercy would obtain work more easily because of her location.

While at the House of Mercy women were given skills to assist them in earning income or gaining employment to break the cycle of dependence, as well as accommodation for them and their children. Employment options for poor women were limited and domestic service was one of the options available. Catherine set up a commercial laundry in the basement of the house and also provided training in domestic chores.

This section adapted from "Foundress", <http://www.mercyworld.org/foundress/story>

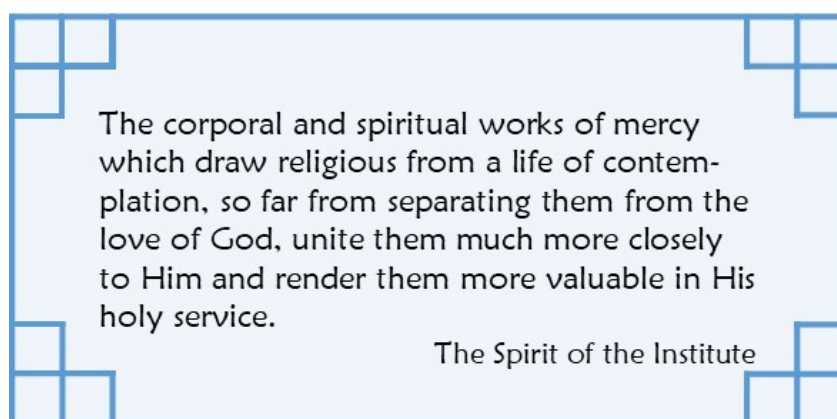


4.4 The Founding of a new Religious Congregation – the Sisters of Mercy

Catherine's work was not always well received. She faced opposition both within and without the Church. After all, the Sisters of Charity were already working with the poor and Catherine could join them. It was in response to some of this opposition and her increasing awareness that if her work was to continue after her death it would have to be through a religious congregation, that she decided to establish her little group as a regular religious community. This was despite her initial reluctance and fears that becoming a religious congregation, with its attendant structures, would impinge on her practical works of charity.

In 1830, she, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley entered the Presentation Convent at George's Hill in Dublin to train as Religious Sisters. They professed their vows and became the first Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters of Mercy were founded on 12 December 1831 when Catherine was 53 years old.

Catherine's Sisters were not going to be locked away in convents. They focused their attention on local needs and were soon known as the 'walking nuns' as they walked the streets to help others as distinct from the Presentation Sisters who by this time were enclosed in their convents. They were especially concerned with the education of girls, visitation of the sick in their homes and the protection of distressed women of good character. This service focus was so central to the Sisters of Mercy that whereas most religious profess vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Sisters of Mercy take a fourth vow of apostolic service.



4.5 Catherine's Rule for the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy

In order to gain Church approval Catherine had to write a Rule (like a constitution) for her new institute. The first paragraph of the Rule sets out clearly the objects of the work of Catherine and her Sisters. The latter section spells out the particular characteristics of the Rule of the Sisters of Mercy.

The Sisters admitted into this Religious Congregation besides their principal and general end of all Religious orders, such as attending particularly to their own perfection, must also have in view what is peculiarly characteristic of this Institute of the Sisters of Mercy, that is a most serious application to the instruction of poor girls, visitation of the sick, and protection of distressed women of good character.

Catherine devoted chapters of the Rule to these three areas. The chapter on the Schools shows clearly the importance to be given to religious instruction. Catherine placed great emphasis upon the education of women, because she believed that:

The Sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and wherever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found.

The Visitation of the Sick concerned the instruction and comfort of the sick and dying poor in their homes. Catherine called for great tenderness to be shown and for the Sisters to *ease and comfort the patient, since we are ever most disposed to receive advice and instruction, from those who evince compassion for us.* The cholera epidemic of 1832 left so many people ill and dying that the Sisters also embarked in earnest on health care as a ministry.

The Rule also reinforced Catherine's commitment to the spiritual and material needs of the poor. Distressed women of good character were to be provided with religious instruction and with practical instruction (what we would now call vocational skills) to enable them to gain suitable employment as this would enable them to support themselves in the future.

4.6 New Foundations of Sisters of Mercy and the Death of the Foundress

Over the next ten years Convents of Mercy were established throughout Ireland (nine additional foundations and two branch houses in Dublin) and England (two additional foundations), with Catherine personally founding all but two of these herself in response to requests from local Bishops for help.

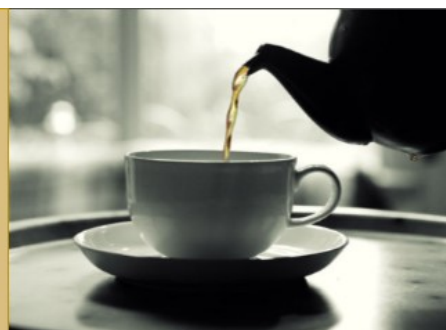
The last of these was in Birmingham in England, and during her time at this new foundation Catherine's health began to fail. She had achieved an extraordinary amount both at Baggot Street and by being a part of the foundation of eleven other convents, and eventually this workload took its toll. She returned in very poor health to Baggot St in mid-1841 and was cared for there by Ursula Frayne and other Sisters until her death on November 11th 1841, aged 63 years. Catherine was buried at the Baggot St site (pictured).



As Joanna Regan RSM has noted about the legacy of her life: *She died ... having set in motion what was to become the largest congregation in the world ever established by an English-speaking founder.* (*Tender Courage*, 1978, p. 24). After Catherine's death these foundations in Ireland and England established further foundations locally and around the world.

Will you tell the Sisters to get a good cup of tea ... when I am gone and to comfort one another.

Letter of Mary Vincent Whitty RSM to Cecilia Mammion RSM, quoting Catherine McAuley, as she neared her death.



4.7 Sisters of Mercy around the World

The spread of Mercy congregations around the world was extensive, each following Catherine's pattern on founding an independent congregation supported by another in its early days until it became established and had its own approved constitutions. In 1992 these congregations formed an association, Mercy International Association (MIA), located at Catherine's House in Dublin. This centre draws together the efforts and resources of Mercy congregations around the world, and provides opportunities for voluntary service as it strives to retain the heritage of Catherine's original foundation and continues to share her charism with visitors and via a newsletter, with women and men of Mercy around the world. MIA also coordinates Mercy initiatives in areas of need including human trafficking, cosmology and eco-justice, and other justice-related issues. It provides pilgrimage and leadership programmes for those with a commitment to mercy: including secondary students, senior staff and boards of Mercy ministries, visitors in general and Sisters of Mercy.

Below is a map showing the countries where Sisters of Mercy currently work.



Source: *History of Mercy International Association*, p. 20. PDF on http://mercyworld.org/about_mia

APPENDIX – SUSCIPE

The Suscipe is a prayer Catherine McAuley wrote and prayed as a way of reconfirming her lifelong commitment to her faith and her ministry.

Some details about the background to this prayer may enrich its meaning. Mary Sullivan has written:

Catherine never said or wrote that 1837 – with its five deaths, fatiguing travels, human separations, and severe clerical controversies – was one of the hardest years of her life. But one may hazard a guess that it was. Was it then that she began, privately, to compose her Suscipe, the prayer that is now sung throughout the world, in many languages, the singers perhaps little realizing what its words meant to their author. (Mary Sullivan, The Path of Mercy, the life of Catherine McAuley, p. 216)

Image from www.mercyworld.org/spirituality

