



MERCY
Associates

Institute of Sisters of Mercy
of Australia & Papua New Guinea

One Charism, Many Paths

Chapter 5

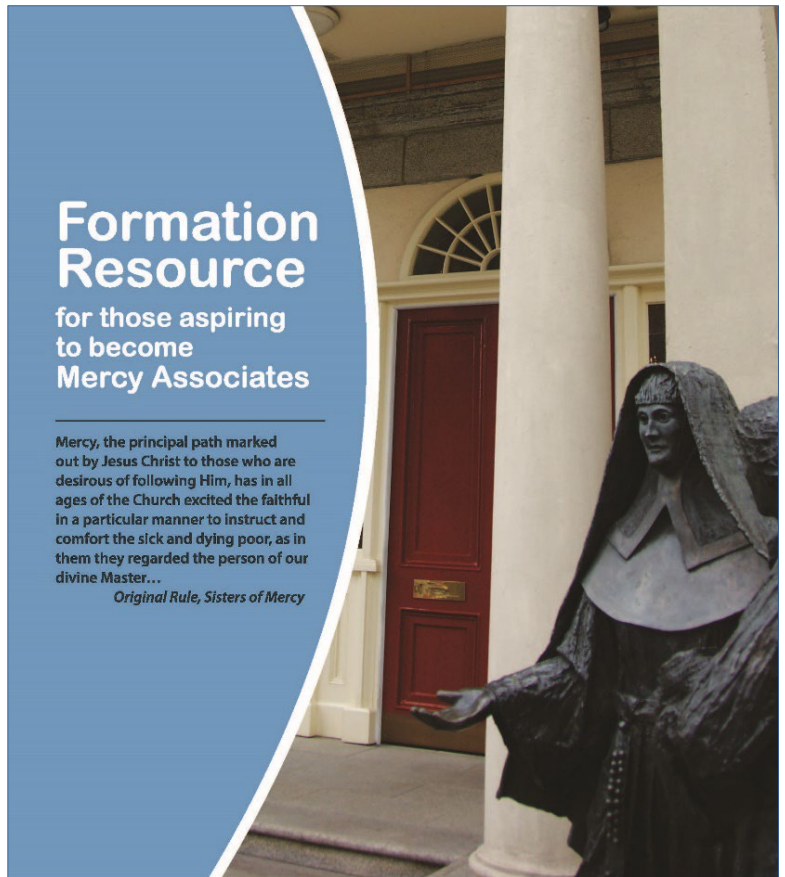
The Spirituality of Mercy

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



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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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5.0 The Spirituality of Mercy

5.1 Spirituality of Catherine McAuley

In her original Rule Catherine wrote:

*Mercy! The principal path marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow 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, 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.'*¹

Catherine's spirituality was centred on God's mercy as revealed by Jesus the Christ. Jesus' mission involved reaching out in love to the poor and marginalized. Catherine, like Jesus, responded with compassion to persons in need. She invited her Sisters to pray that the spirit of Jesus would be infused in them. Thus those they encountered would encounter Jesus.

Catherine believed that Mercy repeatedly adapts itself to changing needs. Catherine encouraged her Sisters to engage in any ministry in which they could meet the needs of those around them.

Catherine showed this flexibility in her own life ministering in a merciful way to the poor, to uneducated children, the Callaghans, her family, destitute young women, the dying poor, homeless and unemployed persons, cholera victims and her Sisters in Community. Mercy was part of who she was.



Image: Clare Augustine Moore's depiction of the Good Samaritan story in *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy*. Photo David Knight © MIA

5.2 Gospel Hospitality

Hospitality is at the centre of Catherine's spirituality. Matthew's gospel 25:31-46 instructs us as to what true hospitality is. It requires us to welcome the stranger into our hearts, into our very being. Catherine believed that God is encountered in the guise of those in need of being welcomed.

Catherine's words capture her understanding of hospitality which mirrors God's welcoming tender care. She was especially aware that our inner disposition needs to be one of humility founded on an awareness of the fundamental dignity and equality of each and every person. This flows into

relationships, in which we seek to engage at a personal level with those we serve, not simply give them food or shelter:

'There are things the poor prize more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing; among these are the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look, and the patient hearing of their sorrows'.²

5.3 Charity – A Heart of Love in Action

Catherine desired that love be the heart and soul of her Institute. For the first seven years of her fledgling community's existence, its only rule was union and charity. The community's original Rule and Constitutions stated that sisters:

'... shall ... in conversation, manner, and conduct most cautiously avoid whatever may in the least disturb their union, or lessen in the smallest degree their mutual love and charity. They shall as true followers of God walk in love as Christ loved us, preserving above all things, charity, which is the bond of perfection'.³

Catherine counselled the members of her religious community *'to be ever ready to praise, to encourage, to stimulate, but slow to censure and still more slow to condemn'.⁴*

Additionally, she instructed:

'If there is coldness in your heart toward anyone, there is a great danger of aversion following. ... If you find a shadow of this vice in your heart, lose no time in rooting it out and endeavour to plant in its place that cordial charity so much recommended'.⁵

Catherine's commitment to serving those in need was inspired by parables such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) and Gospel events such as the cure of the sick man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9) and the cure of the man born blind (John 9:1-7) which reveal Jesus' unconditional love and compassion for the sick and the marginalised. In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) Jesus promises happiness to those who follow His example. It is a happiness not only in the future but here and now for those who live as Jesus lived. Catherine calls people of Mercy to that same generosity of spirit: *'We can never say 'it is enough' (Familiar Instructions, p.2).*

5.4 The Cross and Choosing a Response to Adversity

Integral to Catherine's life and spirituality as a follower of Jesus was the belief that God was with her when she suffered setbacks and experienced opposition or diminishment. The death of Jesus was unjust and brutal, designed to inflict immense suffering and humiliation. The humility with which Jesus endured this undignified and painful journey to his death is a source of guidance to Christians encountering adversity in their lives, which may often be unwarranted or even malicious. This does not mean that all suffering is to be endured without any response to redress the injustice or alleviate the suffering, but that humility – accepting that each person may be asked to carry a cross of their own – leads to a stance of dignity and hope rather than a descent into anger or despair. Catherine willingly embraced crosses for the love of Christ. In and through her own adversities, Catherine encountered the suffering Christ yet trusted in the providential guidance of God.

One example of this ability to look at the way the presence of God might be manifest is apparent in a letter to Sister M. Elizabeth Moore that during the first years of the congregation ... *'There has been a most marked Providential Guidance which the want of prudence – vigilance – or judgment has not impeded – and it is here that we can most clearly see the designs of God. I could*

mark circumstances calculated to defeat it at once – but nothing however injurious in itself has done any injury.’ (13th January 1839, Letter 110).

Crosses manifested themselves in various ways during Catherine’s life. She suffered the death of her father, her family’s loss of financial security and her mother’s death. Relatives, even her brother James, and friends attacked her Catholicity. Opposition from those one would expect to give support to her work, including some clergy and influential Catholics, hurt Catherine. Catherine wrote to her dear friend Frances Warde:

‘Pray fervently for me that God may remove all bitterness from me. I can hardly think of what has been done to me without resentment. May God forgive me and make me truly humble before He calls me into His presence’.



‘This is your life, joys and sorrows mingled, one succeeding the other.
Without the cross, the real crown cannot come.’
(Familiar Instructions, 136)

What was most evident in these crosses was Catherine’s ability to forgive and seek reconciliation with those involved. Her inner disposition in bearing crosses demonstrated her personal ability to bear wrongs patiently, always trusting that God would bring light out of darkness.

Can you recall examples where people have retained hope in the face of adversity and/or injustice? Where they have chosen to forgive a deeply felt wrong? What difference does this seem to make in their ongoing lives and relationships?

5.5 Prayer

Catherine was a woman of prayer and she spent a considerable amount of time communing with God and meditating on Scripture. Like Mary the Mother of Jesus, she pondered things in her heart.⁶ Catherine believed that prayer enables one to develop a spirit of service in order to carry out works of mercy. In a letter to Sr. M. Angela Dunne, Catherine wrote:

*'Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you want necessities for yourself or your children.'*⁷

The most profound and passionate expression of Catherine's personal prayer is her *Suscipe*, a prayer of offering, in which her intimacy with God is most evident. Appendix B contains this prayer.

Catherine faithfully and wholeheartedly participated in communal prayer. When she was at Baggot Street, Catherine joined her Sisters, the lay women who resided there, and neighbours in evening prayer. She believed it important when the Divine Office (prayer of the Church) is read in community, that each person remains attentive to the presence of God and the meaning of the words of the prayers.

5.6 The Eucharist

In Catherine's spirituality, the sacrament of the Eucharist was of primary importance. She described the Eucharist as a *"fountain of joy, peace, consolation, and grace to all who lovingly approach it, in the spirit of faith, humility, and reverence."* (Familiar Instructions, 79)

She stressed that:

'Our lives should be a continual preparation for it [that is, Holy Communion's] reception, and all our actions performed with so pure an intention as to serve to fit us ... for the coming of our divine Guest.' (Familiar Instructions, 70)

Catherine viewed receiving Jesus in the sacred mystery of the Eucharist as the highest act of worship. The celebration of the Eucharist, a communal celebration, is the source and summit of the life of a Christian.



The Chapel at Catherine's House in Baggot St

5.7 The Essence of Catherine's approach....

The quote below, by Mary Sullivan rsm, captures the essence of how Catherine approached her ministry:

If we wish to sow the seeds of real hope in our world, I think Catherine McAuley would say: This is the way we would do it - one person at a time: one answering of the figurative doorbell, one opening of the figurative door, one embrace of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk - one person at a time. (Mary C. Sullivan, Welcoming the Stranger: The Kenosis of Catherine McAuley)



Statue of Catherine welcoming a young mother and baby to Baggot St.

¹ Mary C. Sullivan, Ed., *The Practical Sayings of Catherine McAuley* (Dublin, Ireland: Mercy International Association, 2011), 49.

² Catherine McAuley, *Familiar Instructions* collected by the first Sisters of Mercy (St. Louis: Vincentian Press, 1927).

³ *The Practical Sayings of Catherine McAuley*, 51.

⁴ A Sister of Mercy of the Diocese of Oklahoma, *The Spirit of M. Catherine McAuley* (Oklahoma city: Sisters of Mercy, Mt. St. Mary's Academy, 1922), 29.

⁵ Mary Bertrand Degan, Ed., *Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*, compiled by Mary Teresa Purcell, RSM (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952), 72.

⁶ Roland Burke Savage, S.J., *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, Ltd., 1949), 390.

⁷ Quoted in Savage, S.J., *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy*, 238.