

In the years between the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy and her death, Catherine McAuley undertook a great deal of travel to establish new communities and visit existing ones. Always this travel was sacred—aiming to build the congregation in new locations and increase the numbers of Sisters so that greater service could be provided to people in need, especially women and children.



After the opening of the House of Mercy and the flood of women and children in need into it, Catherine and her companions were under immense pressure to operate the House as a religious congregation, not as lay women. Eventually Catherine and the **community** of helpers decided to proceed with becoming religious sisters to secure the future of the House for the works of Mercy. To guide the task of identifying which congregation best aligned with their purpose, Catherine gathered Rules from local congregations. As Mary Sullivan writes, “Eventually, she and they decided that among the Rules submitted to them that of the Presentation order was most in accordance with their vocation...”

The pressure on Catherine to take religious vows was a burden she carried **alone**, taking much time to discern God’s will for her and her works. Yet once she reached her decision, she sought the input of **her community** to discern the most suitable way to proceed.

*Hurra for foundations,  
makes the old young  
and the young merry.*

Letter to Cecilia Marmion  
January 4, 1841



As the service of people in need flourished at Baggot St, Catherine was keenly aware of desperate need in other places in Ireland and England. The notion of the ‘**walking nuns**’ who journeyed to where people in need were gained acceptance, as did the reality of a new women’s religious congregation that was not enclosed, but rather went physically to where the needs were:

*Catherine founded nine additional autonomous Convents of Mercy in Tullamore (1836), Charleville (1836), Carlow (1837), Cork (1837), Limerick (1838), Bermondsey, London (1839), Galway (1840), Birr (1840), and Birmingham (1841), and branch houses of the Dublin community in Kingstown (1835) and Booterstown (1838). **She traveled with the founding parties by stage coach, canal boat, steam packet, and railway, humorously enduring the fatigue and inconvenience such travel entailed**, and remained at least a month with each new community, anxious to “begin well,” so the poor could be immediately served, and claiming: “God knows I would rather be cold and hungry than that the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford.”*

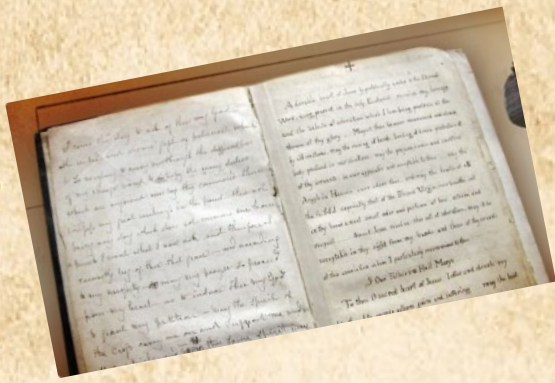
<https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/chronology/expansion/>

**To ponder:** In an era where we can travel swiftly and in comfort and safety whenever and wherever we want to, the contrast to travel as it was experienced in Catherine’s era could hardly be greater.

These journeys to establish new foundations were occasions of sacred travel, undertaken to bring the mercy of God to people in need in additional locations. On these journeys, Catherine was **accompanied** by the Sisters who would found **the new community**. Most likely, these were journeys of joy, despite the harshness of the modes of travel and the weariness each journey would have entailed.

Ponder occasions in your life when journeys have been undertaken in the service of others, especially to begin something new. How did you experience the journey? Joy? Hope? Anticipation? Were you **alone**? **With others**? Trust in God supported Catherine and her Sisters—in what ways does it also support you?





When Catherine established a new foundation, though she returned to the House of Mercy, she remained in contact by letter with each new location. Her letters were skillful, carefully crafted pieces of correspondence that convey how deeply she reflected on the sisters in each place, both as a community and as individuals. They were not left alone, the thread of connection to the mother house meant they always remained part of the larger community of the Sisters of mercy.

**To ponder:** Catherine wrote: “We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back.”

Catherine’s ‘tripping about’ was extensive, undertaken with clear purpose, in uncomfortable vessels, trains and vehicles, and sometimes in uncertain health. At the time of her death, 100 women had become Sisters of Mercy. Catherine could not have imagined the Sisters of Mercy would come to Australia and New Guinea—indeed, to Perth only five years after her death. And in all, to 44 countries. The power of Catherine’s faith to inspire and influence others was truly extraordinary...

**God’s mercy is from age to age...**



Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

John 21:17-19

As Catherine’s life drew to a close, one of her final actions was to arrange the burning of a parcel wrapped in brown paper and twine that contained her boots, an action completed by Mary Vincent Whitty. Other than asking that this task be done, Catherine provided no comments about why this was important to her.

Yet in a life that entailed much movement, around Dublin, to Coolock, and to the Mercy foundations Catherine established, Catherine knew that she, the founder of the ‘walking nuns’ would no longer need her boots. As she said to her brother James in her final hours, “’Tis come to a close”.

**My God, I am yours for all eternity.  
Teach me to cast my whole self  
into the arms of your Providence  
with the most lively, unlimited  
confidence in your compassionate,  
tender pity.**

**Grant, O most merciful Redeemer,  
that whatever you ordain or permit may always be  
acceptable to me.**

**Take from my heart all painful anxiety;  
suffer nothing to afflict me but sin,  
nothing to delight me, but the hope of coming to  
the possession of You  
my God, in your own everlasting kingdom.  
Amen.**

