



Today, Sisters of Mercy, through Mercy International Association, use their resources to respond to issues of global poverty demonstrated in the massive displacement of persons worldwide.

Reflection for Thursday 20th June

I think we all realize that throughout her whole life Catherine understood and lived these words of Mark's Gospel – she knew how to pray, she knew how to depend on God and to trust in God's providence, she knew how to forgive, she even exhorts us, her sisters, not to let the sun go down on our anger.....

So, instead of a Gospel reflection I would like to offer you a short personal reflection on aspects of "Watering the Roots..." so far

Back home Aboriginal people use the term "country" to refer not only to the environment in which they were born but also to the people, the stories, the songs and dances, the lore, that nourished them. It is not a geographical or regional definition, it designates a person's source of life and spirituality. I feel it is such a privilege to be in Catherine's country and I am reminded "to tread softly for I walk on sacred land"

It was a profound moment to step out of the taxi in front of 64A Lower Baggot Street. I gasped to see the front of the house and the red door. I do not recall seeing the statue of Catherine and the young mother and baby. I don't recall anything that Sylvia told me. But in no time I was in my room, a very small room but warm and welcoming with sunlight streaming in through the window.

As I unpacked I wondered who had slept in my room since the beginning – what stories my room could tell, what secrets it holds.

That first evening it was the squeaky floorboards that I wanted to keep hearing as I imagined Catherine walking in and out, crossing the room to her prie-dieu, or later to visit her sisters who were sick, then finally the footsteps of the sisters as they crowded around to comfort her as she lay dying. At first I was a bit shocked at what seemed an almost sacrilegious act years later of sisters cutting out pieces of her clothing to keep as treasured reminders, but soon realized how these

women must have loved and valued Catherine to want pieces of her clothing as keepsakes.

It was with a feeling of excitement and anticipation which soon changed to awe as we were led on a tour of Mercy International Centre. To be in the Heritage room among our treasures from the past, the Callaghan room with furniture and crockery sets from Coolock – a reminder that Catherine believed strongly in training women in marketable skills, the Doyle room in which we as a group began “watering our roots” was just a wonder-filled experience.

This week with Madeleine and Aine’s gentle guidance we have been led deeper into our heritage through Catherine’s story. I had not realized that Coolock was “in the country” and on a clear day would have had a view of the sea. Again it was humbling just to sit in Catherine’s bedroom and to be led quietly by Aine to understand that the threads of the Quakers respect for silence and their daily scripture reading were being woven around Catherine to nourish her contemplative nature, which was the underpinning of her active and practical Mercy life.

And then we walked Catherine’s Dublin to meet her father and mother, James and Elinor, her siblings Mary and baby James. We met the Armstrongs, the Conways and finally the Callaghans, all significant people who in their own ways both positive and negative had loved, nourished and encouraged Catherine deeply into her Mercy journey.

Georges Hill seemed lost. It was gloomy and sad. It led me to a deeper appreciation of the imposition that had been placed on Catherine and her two companions in requiring them to participate in the novitiate. But our ritual with Catherine’s ring, and our own rings and mottos enabled me to realize that Religious life was probably inevitable for Catherine at that time in the Church’s history and political climate. I experienced a sense gratitude to those three women of Mercy. Although Catherine always said “Thy will be done” I can quite understand the urgency with which they ordered their carriage to collect them and take them home finally immediately after their profession as our first Sisters of Mercy on December 12th 1831.

We visited our foremothers in Mercy where they lay in the vault of the Carmelite church, those 13 sisters who died well before Catherine, the youngest a postulant 19 years of age, and others not long professed at all. I was struck by the powerlessness Catherine must have felt at not being able to minister to these very sick sisters or to comfort the others during these times of grieving. Her enclosure in Georges Hill at such times must have been difficult to accommodate and very frustrating.

I was also struck by the fact that South Australia was in its infancy, the first white settlers arriving on December 28th 1836, while at this time the Sisters of Mercy were moving about Ireland starting new foundations - between 1836 and 1841 Catherine herself travelled far and wide even across the sea to England.

We now have a much deeper appreciation of Catherine as a woman of Mercy, a woman solid in her commitment to her God and the poor, a woman of action and contemplation, and in her own words she reminds us:

“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.