



THE MANY FACES OF MERCY



“HOW
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OF A MOMENT
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IN THE LIFE
OF ANOTHER.”

ANTHONY WITHAM

FOREWORD



This booklet is about a community of women who work on behalf of a better world. They do so having chosen to commit their lives in a life-long stance that unites them to God and to one another as disciples of Jesus. For many decades their work took place in very local efforts to address immediate needs for education, health care, shelter, and visitation. Individual women might or might not have been aware of the hundreds of other women laboring in lands distant from their locale; might or might not have been comforted by the larger enterprise happening under the auspices of Sisters of Mercy.

Modern technology has changed the possibilities for such awareness, however, and our knowledge of the interconnectedness of all life has

made such awareness imperative. A recent document of an international association of Sisters of Mercy proclaims:

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

Sisters of Mercy can only use our resources in this manner if we are aware of our resources. We can only respond well to issues of global poverty and the massive displacement of persons if we share with those who walk in these circumstances and hear first-hand the stories of oppression and pain.

This is the importance of the endeavor of Mercy Sister Deirdre Mullan to meticulously gather and record data regarding Mercy women from 55 nation states around the world and to verify as carefully as possible the international reality of Sisters of Mercy and Associates who work in a multitude of settings in 47 countries. Deirdre began this necessary work of connection in an earlier booklet – *Where in the World are my Sisters?* – and continues that work in this publication which addresses the question: *from where in the world do my Sisters come?* The potential of such an international network will

be realized only as these women connect their works of mercy and justice across time and across space in intentional collaboration toward the eradication of systemic causes of poverty and displacement.

Sisters of Mercy are challenged to act locally and to think globally in addressing world poverty. Local Mercy settings are asked to harness information, critical analysis and effective solutions toward an effective global synthesis for action. Using Mercy social and knowledge capital, members are encouraged to work with others to effect structural change in the world and to encourage and facilitate research and response to poverty worldwide.

This is not the Dublin of Catherine’s time nor is it the world of the early founders who ventured from Ireland to points North, South, East and West. This is, however, the largesse of merciful hearts continuing to attract collaborators in works of mercy and works of justice. This is the potential of the face of Mercy interconnected throughout the world in a grand communal enterprise of service. This is the face of Mercy today in 47 countries where Mercy Sisters and Associates keep alive the spirit of Catherine McAuley in a world crying out for Mercy.

Helen Marie Burns, RSM

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influenced by her father, James who delighted in offering material help to support the poor of the neighbourhood. What he tried to do was carefully observed by his four-year-old daughter, Catherine. When Catherine was five years old, her father died and this marked the beginning of a period of transitions for the young Catherine. One such transition took her to the home of William and Catherine Callaghan at Coolock Estate. When the couple died, Catherine became the sole beneficiary of their estate.

When the Irish woman Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland, in 1831, little did she realize the impact of her message and the outreach to nation states across the globe.

Catherine McAuley was born in Dublin, one of the three children of James and Elinor McAuley. Catherine grew up in a loving family and was particularly

Catherine McAuley could have been insulated and isolated against the miserable poverty of Dublin. Instead she responded to the call of the Spirit, and accepted her inheritance as a gift with a grateful love and a willingness to put it at the service of others. As the recipient of God's mercy, she saw herself as a steward. Gifts given were gifts for others. Direct and

practical in her response, she went out into gutter and garret to teach, to soothe and to shelter. She had discovered that her charisma, her gift for others, was mercy, a charisma to the cutting edge of brokenness or imbalance.

Given outward expression to this inner grace, with a singularly keen eye for the special needs of her time and an astute perception of the methods by which they could be successfully met, she quickly attracted others drawn by a similar call to respond to the action of God in their lives.¹

The story of Catherine McAuley and the order of Mercy is one of constant struggle for the sake of the mission. It is the story of

determination to 'move out of one's comfort zone' reflected in the gospel motto – The Word of God, a lamp for my steps.

"From the beginning Catherine McAuley sought engagement with the most excluded and created better opportunities through education, which she saw as a key determinant of quality of life. She called upon her sisters to move into the world, outside of that 'comfort zone', to take the most marginalized into their embrace and to offer them the potential and the opportunity to flourish."²

We, who live out our Mercy lives today, do so in a world which has witnessed much change. In the length of one life, most of what we





knew has changed. Today, national borders are seeping as never before in history. The whole world is becoming one. Education for global citizenship, once an ideal, is now a goal everywhere. Evolution, with its completely other explanation of the origins of life, is a given. The whole world is beginning to understand itself as only a small part of the planetary system. Gender equality, however slow in coming to some areas of the world, is nevertheless an international objective and a political issue everywhere.³

But how has this global revolution impacted the Sisters of Mercy? Thanks to many willing collaborators and friends, I have meticulously gathered and recorded data and can share that women from 55 nation states around the world have so far responded to the call to be Sisters of Mercy. There is no blueprint of what it is to be a woman of Mercy. As the UN statement

for the Commission on Social Development states so clearly, *“We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and the global are linked.”*

Sisters of Mercy and our Associates work in a multitude of ministries in 47 countries, and are linked by the Circle of Mercy which roots us in faith and lifts us in hope. Our connectedness can be compared to this image:

“If you dig a hole in the forest,” said the Mi’kmaq Grandfather, “you will find that the trees are holding hands.”⁴

This strong image of the trees holding hands touched me deeply and is an apt description of our links with each other, all over the globe, as members of the Mercy family.



When Catherine McAuley took those first steps in responding to the invitation she experienced within her – which eventually led to the founding of the Sisters of Mercy – the great voyage into the unknown had begun, and there was no one to foretell what the great unknown might yield

up. As in all crossings to the next threshold of life, sometimes the greatest challenge is to actually begin! However, there is something deep within the human psyche that conspires to remain

within safe boundaries, to stay the same in the safe and the known.

Somehow Catherine knew that she was on the threshold of something new. She knew that a threshold is not a

simple boundary; it is rather a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms and atmospheres. When Catherine received the Callaghan inheritance, she could have opted to live in a very safe environment, in a life of prestige and security. But she surrendered

to that something within, as Irish poet John O'Donohue says so eloquently in his *Book of Blessings*:

Indeed, it is a lovely testimony to the fullness and integrity of an experience or a stage of life that it intensifies toward the end into a real frontier that cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up.⁵

Just as that something called 'mercy' was woken up in Catherine McAuley, it is fascinating to discover that thousands of Sisters of Mercy, from over 55 nation states across the globe, have been awakened and have responded to a similar invitation. Though we do not know each other's names and may or may not recognize each other's faces, we are united by our passion to become voyagers of creativity and compassion, as we collaborate and cooperate to build bridges across borders and international boundaries, east, west, north and south, acknowledging the opportunity and the possibility



that is ours to be a leaven for good in a hurting world.

William James, author of *Pragmatism*, says something quite profound about why we do or do not respond to the needs of another:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation,

saying: "I am going to make a world, the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each of several agents does its own 'level best'.

I offer you the chance to take part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real

adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of cooperative work. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents sufficiently to face the risk?" [Or would you say] that, rather than be part and parcel of so fundamentally pluralist and irrational a universe, you preferred to relapse into the slumber of nonentity from which you have been momentarily aroused by the spirit's voice?⁶

Reflecting on the above passage, I often wonder what might have happened had Catherine and the thousands of women who followed not been attentive to the voice and beckoning of the Spirit?

What is it/was it that inspired so many to hear a voice called Mercy? Why did Sisters of Mercy from over 55 nation states join an organization with the primary focus of being agents of change? Is it because, as meaning-seeking women, we want to understand our place in the universe? We have





languages, cultures, and belong to a host of families and societies. And we also have the courage and example of each other.

One of the most important distinctions I have learned as I live out my life as a Sister of Mercy is the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue; hope is an active virtue. When connected to Mercy, hope gets things done! To be a carrier of Mercy means that we must become converted to “the consciousness that makes us one with the universe, in tune with the cosmic voice of God. We must become aware of the sacred in every single element of life. We are helped to bring beauty to birth in a poor and plastic world by working to restore balance to the human community. We must grow in concert with the God who is within and become healers in a harsh society.”⁷

Writing about *Mercy*, and how it might be defined, Australian Sister of Mercy Mary Wickham describes it this way:

*Mercy is a woman of indeterminate age
and unremarkable appearance.
She is not fussy about the company she keeps,
and tends to be full of excuses for her friends,
having seen life from their angle.
Her heart, like her pockets, is capacious.
She has a voice rich in tender understanding
but is at her best in silence when she sits alongside
the grief stricken and the guilty
and their sorrow seeps into her soul.
Curiously, she sees herself reflected
in the eyes of both murderer and victim,
so sits not in judgment but companionably.
She is a subtle teacher.*



*She makes strong cups of tea, cup after cup.
Her hands are worn by work but eagerly sought by the dying.
Her feet are calloused from the long roads
trudged with refugee and beggar.
She is an endurer of all horrors.*

*Mercy has a face wrinkled with kindness
and worn by cost of living,
but even in hovels she has been given to laughter
and awareness of simple pleasures.
She has a store of lore and wisdom
but is never heard to complain
that she has heard any story a hundred times before,
believing each teller to be entitled to a hearing as if to the one and only.*

*Mercy is a lady comfortable to be with-
the safest and soundest-
blessed in her being
with the indisputable reality
that she is a true daughter,
in manner and mind
of the maker of the universe.*

Mary Wickham, RSM



Reflecting on this poem and the outreach of Mercy, I am indebted to the many Sisters of Mercy who responded to my enquiry about the birth countries of the Sisters of Mercy. This booklet forms a companion to the booklet entitled *Where in the World are my Sisters?* published in 2007.



THE BIRTH COUNTRIES OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY

We come from Australia and China; from England and Wales; from Hungary and Guam; from Iraq and Ireland. We hail from Guyana and Trinidad; from Malta and Panama; from Peru and Scotland; the USA and New Zealand; the Philippines and Goa; South Africa and Vietnam; Argentina and Bohemia; Chile and Canada; Ceylon and France. Women born in El Salvador and Germany, Guatemala and Holland, Hong Kong and Honduras have responded to the call of being Mercy, along with women from Italy, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lebanon,

Lithuania, Malaysia, Mexico, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Puerto Rico, Poland, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Spain, Switzerland, Tonga, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

And regardless of our differences, background, language or concept, one focus unites us all – *Mercy*, that divine gift that can open doors, and bring healing and transfiguration to the lives of the giver and receiver alike.

The fact that Catherine McAuley was 52 years old when she founded the Sisters of Mercy is a reminder to each of us that we need to stop

equating numbers and age with effectiveness. It only takes one person with courage to change the direction of our world.

And so I ask: What has happened to our voice in a world grown coarse and cruel? Whom have you spoken up for recently? Surely the function of religious life is to model courage and conscience, calling the world to another way of being.

As Mercy women hailing from 55 nation states around the globe, who would have believed that the “YES” of one woman in a small island state could have resulted in the outreach of Mercy across the globe?

And yet, we cannot rest in the nostalgia of the past. Our world needs Mercy now, as never before. We live in a time when the call to full and critically aware citizenship could not be more urgent.

Notes:

1. *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1998, p.900.
2. Michael Hayes, Inaugural Address, University of Limerick, February 2012.
3. Commission on Social Development, United Nations, NY, 2009.
4. Kristin Bieber Domm, *The Hatchling's Journey*, Nimbus Publishing Ltd., Halifax, NS, 2003.
5. John O'Donohue, *Book of Blessings*, Bantam Press, 2007, p. 65.
6. William James, quoted in *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, NY, 2003, p.192.
7. Joan Chittister, *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 81.



As you contemplate the power of one, remember that as Mercy women we are never alone, and may the wisdom of the Mi'kmar grandfather inspire you on the days when you do feel alone because like the trees...

When you dig a hole in the forest, you will find the *Mercy Women* holding hands.

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Deirdre Mullan
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Sisters of Mercy
6 South 29th Avenue
Longport, NJ 08403, USA
Deirdremullanun@aol.com