



## Mercy Craving Realisation by Lynda Dearlove rsm

Imagine bedding down every night sheltered from the wind and rain only by a ragged make-shift tent. Imagine having to sleep in groups of six in that tent, huddled together out of fear of being sexually assaulted during the night. Imagine, upon waking, having to use the same few filthy toilets that are shared by thousands of others. Imagine this magnified by circumstances such as menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding, the responsibility for children. Imagine, then, having to queue hours for food to ease your hunger. Imagine, if you can, living with the constant fear of violence, whether from the authorities who wish you were not here, or from the prostitution rings and smuggling gangs which are becoming more prevalent with every passing day. Imagine, finally, having to live this life whilst still dealing with the almost unspeakable horrors that you experienced on your journey to get here

For many of the between 200 and 400 women at any one time living in 'the Jungle' refugee camp in Calais, they need not imagine, for this is their reality. Sexual abuse and violence are used as strategies to deprive women and girls of their civil rights. During their dangerous journeys, many women and young girls are exposed to sexual violence, rape, prostitution and trafficking. Women and girls are being forced into sex in exchange for food and housing.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, for all of the media attention these past few months on the refugees living in Calais, these women have been largely absent. We have become used to the images of the many young men who live in the camp, and who themselves have experienced traumas that we can barely comprehend, but the coverage has overlooked the very particular experiences of women living in the camp, which is only 20 or so miles from British shores.

On September 24<sup>th</sup> this year, our feast of "Our Lady of Mercy" found me in 'the Jungle' camp as part of a Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) delegation.<sup>2</sup> It coincided with the feast of Eid – so there was a sense of celebration as we waded through mud between the small encampments of makeshift tents sitting in the midst of waterlogged scrub. As we passed people, we acknowledged them often repeating back the greetings of "Eid Mubarak" and smiling in response to the proffered sweets. Around me, I saw for myself the conditions in which these women are now being forced to exist. With space only for 80 in the Jules Ferry centre (a facility funded by the French government which, in addition to providing accommodation for 80 women and children also provides one hot meal per day, as well as some showers and toilets), most women in the camp are being left without the support which they so clearly require. Those who are unaccompanied by male family workers are huddled in small clusters either within cultural/national groups "protected" by the collective (men) or in more secluded places – such as the small encampment I saw behind the church and library!

In a camp where, we were told, a significant proportion of people have trauma-related mental health issues, no psychological support is available aside from access to one psychiatrist once every month. For women who have fled war, torture and persecution, or who may be the victims of sexual or physical violence, this is not sufficient. Whilst there is a medical clinic in the camp run by Medicines du Monde (Doctors of the World), resources are limited and the incredible efforts of medical workers in the camp cannot mask the fact that women (some of whom, we were told, have become pregnant in recent months) are being left without the essential and particular medical support that they

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/missing-women-of-the-mediterranean-refugee-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> <http://enews.mercyworld.org/e-news/100-1bf833a1/editions/196-6c91d0d7/user-assets/files/Sr%20Lynda%20-%20Calais.pdf>

require. The simple lack of drinking water causes kidney problems for many pregnant and nursing women. For this to be the situation for women in Europe in 2016 is as shocking as it is shameful.

At a recent protest held by women in the camp, a sign read: "*The Jungle is not for us. The Jungle is for animals.*"<sup>3</sup> For the women I met and saw in Calais, life in 'the Jungle' is unsustainable. Without access to the most basic amenities, without the most basic support which they require, and stuck in a transitory, inhumane and dangerous existence on a patch of wasteland outside Calais, hope of a better life will soon fade.

In contrast, at the same time the previous week I was also in the midst of a memorable experience, however this time I was sitting within the sumptuously decorated Clement VIII audience hall in the Vatican awaiting the arrival of Pope Francis. It was the culmination of the five day International Symposium on the Pastoral Care of the Road/Street, organised by the Pontifical Council for the Care of Migrants and Itinerant People to develop and propose to the Church a Plan of Action in response to increasingly challenging phenomenon of women and children earning a living and/or living on the roads and the streets, and their families.

The symposium was made up of delegates from 42 countries plus 12 Catholic Institutions and religious congregations, tasked to produce the plan in the light of the Teachings of Pope Francis, the conclusions of the 8 international and continental meetings on the same reality which many of the delegates had also taken part in (I had been involved in the European conference) and their current expertise and experience.

Pope Francis is well known for his simple two roomed apartment in a Vatican guesthouse rather than the more lavish papal apartments and his desire to be an ordinary pastor despite the enormity of his task. It was this ordinary pastor that our group of 42 church social action leaders came meet and greet albeit we were a bit overawed by the sumptuously decorated Clement VIII audience hall. The Vatican's grandiose buildings give testimony to a time when Popes lost their way and became powerful princes with armies and sumptuous palaces rather than followers of Jesus, carpenter's son who had experienced a migrants life with his family when they fled through Egypt, an itinerant moral teacher, a person of the "road" travelling about without status or worldly power and who challenged a nation's leaders to have mercy, compassion and do justice for the wretchedly poor people of God. Pope Francis is trying to revive a prophetic voice in the Church on behalf of the downtrodden and the marginalized and challenge the rich and powerful. Sadly too many of prelates, bishops and clergy have sided with the rich rather than the poor in the world today and Pope Francis is not their favourite. But by his example he will entice them back to follow and imitate Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter.

When the side doors of the hall opened a group of elderly distinguish visitors, of high status, dressed in morning suits and tuxedos emerged in solemn procession. They had been present in the previous audience, which also included the Italian president, and were making their exit through the hall where we were waiting. Everything was choreographed exquisitely. They were distinguished looking elderly elites. They passed in silence wearing gold chains; medals and ribbons. A squad of colourfully dressed papal guards lined up in front of us to form a ceremonial guard of honour for them not us. Then they were all gone.

A few minutes later Pope Francis came in to meet us. He looked weary and why wouldn't he after listening to some boring speech or conferring some award perhaps on the previous delegation. They are unavoidable duties of Vatican protocol. From our group of simply dressed folks there came a spontaneous applause to greet Pope Francis and immediately he lit up, smiled instead of taking his chair he came over close to where I was sitting and he happily greeted Cardinal Veglio (the head of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral care of migrants and itinerant people) who was standing nearby.

Then Francis took his seat and the cardinal gave an introduction. There was a joke, Francis gave a cheerful laugh, and then he listened seriously as our work defending the dignity of the exploited and abused children and women was explained. But it was clear he knew it already. This is a mission that is close to his heart and in the past on several occasions he made statements and has done a lot of action behind the scenes to make church, government leaders and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-324770/What-life-REALLY-like-migrant-women-children-trapped-Calais-Jungle-camp.html>

officials wake up and challenged them to address the crisis of many millions of displaced people, migrants and refugees and put ending human trafficking on top of their political and social agenda. Within in this he has called for an end to human trafficking and exploitation of children and women who live on the street, recognising that they are the most vulnerable to human traffickers and exploitation through prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis was well briefed and prepared, his engaged body language and non-verbal responses during the Cardinals presentation of the fruits of our labours indicated his understanding and agreement, and his address to us left with no doubts of the concern he had for women and children on the streets plus his commitment to the churches imperative to address those needs.

We knew from his words, looks and gestures that this rare and unusual meeting with us was a direct endorsement and support of our mission coming straight from the Pope himself. Getting the backing of this man of God and people with immense popularity and influence was the greatest gift for women and children whose lives are tied to the streets. His words came from the heart more than from the text. He spoke to us with appreciation of commitment “to care for and promote the dignity of these women and children” and encouragement to persevere in our work with “confidence and apostolic zeal” and “not be disheartened by the difficulties and challenges encountered”. He waved his arm, he gestured strongly and his face and voice rang with conviction and the power of love and compassion for the plight experienced by women and children earning a living and/or living on the roads and the streets:

*“The often sad realities which you encounter are the result of indifference, poverty family and social violence and human trafficking. .... every child abandoned and forced to live on the streets at the mercy of criminal organizations is a cry rising up to God, who created man and woman in his own image. It is an indictment of the social system, which we have criticized for decades but we find hard to change in conformity with criteria of justice. .... Street children and women are not numbers, or “packets” to be traded; they are human beings, each with his or her own name and face, each with a God-given identity. We can never refrain from bringing to all, and especially the most vulnerable and underprivileged, the goodness and the tenderness of God our merciful Father. Mercy is the supreme act by which God comes to meet us; it is the way which opens our hearts to the hope of an everlasting love.”*

He ended his address to us with the following blessing “I entrust you and your service to Mary, Mother of Mercy. May the sweetness of her gaze accompany the efforts and firm purpose of those who care for street children and street women. Upon each of you I cordially invoke the Lord’s blessing.” After which we were all greeted personally.

Yes, the connections between the two events are very obvious in terms of the plight of the most vulnerable of women and children. But perhaps more so for us as sisters of mercy as we move between the year of Consecrated life and the Holy Year of Mercy, the Mercy link between these two events is more notable. To explore this further I need to turn the clock back further to Catherine McAuley.

When Catherine was asked for the necessary qualities in a person seeking to become a Sister of Mercy, she began her reply with “an ardent desire to be united to God and serve the poor”.<sup>5</sup> Thus nuances of the interplay between a contemplative heart and compassionate spirit within our Mercy Charism were already embraced within these dozen words long before the term “contemplation in action” was coined! When taken alongside other words from Catherine e.g. from her Retreat Instructions “What advantage are our works to God? But our working hearts He longs for, and her pleads for them with touching earnestness”,<sup>6</sup> “Need is our Cloister”<sup>7</sup> and within the “Spirit of the Institute” “We ought to have great confidence in God in these discharge of all these offices of mercy, spiritual and corporal – which constitute

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<sup>4</sup> In his address to the members of the General Assembly of United Nations on 25 September 2015 Pope Francis said “Our world demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical and constant, concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences: human trafficking, the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labour, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism and international organized crime. Such is the magnitude of these situations and their toll in innocent lives, that we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism which would assuage our consciences. We need to ensure that our institutions are truly effective in the struggle against all these scourges.”

<sup>5</sup> Letter 38, p 77, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>6</sup> p.73, Sister M. Teresa Purcell RSM (ed.) The Retreat Instructions of Mother M. Catherine McAuley (1952)

<sup>7</sup> Reference unknown

*the business of our lives*<sup>8</sup> it would seem to me that Catherine has left us a number of clues regarding how to navigate new and emerging needs, particularly as they relate to women and children.

Catherine's own actions give us further evidence of how we might discover within us a Mercy response to need that cannot be ignored. In her vows Catherine takes the bold step of amending the usual formula of the day by spelling out that we are "established for the Visitation of the Sick Poor, and charitable instruction of poor females"

Catherine stood out from the other philanthropists of her day primarily because of her ability to imagine life differently. In her article from Listen focused on "The Business of Our Lives", Mary Reynolds rsm states "*Many of her contemporaries were prepared to provide handouts but could not imagine or even desire a society where those who were oppressed, marginalised or excluded would find a central role and a sense of belonging in that very society. Catherine's genius was that she could stand as a bridge between the rich and the poor, employing whatever advantage her own background and her connection with people of influence afforded her in the relief and advancement of poor people. She had a particular ability to address immediate need in a practical and loving way while at the same time addressing the systemic issues that underpinned those needs.*"<sup>9</sup>

Catherine's expression of living out her vows in relation to the "Visitation of the Sick Poor" moved her from the private sphere of bringing food and comfort to people in their own homes into the public sphere of workhouse hospitals, within they were initially treated with contempt and refused access to sick "not of their own persuasion". The care shown to the sick must have become recognised within a very short time though because only months after their founding, when the devastating epidemic of cholera struck Dublin in May 1832, the Health Board appealed to Catherine for help. Her immediate approach to Dr Murray for leave to attend the Depot Hospital, as described in Clare Moore's letter from Bermondsey in 1845, gives a clear example of Catherine living out her own words "*The poor need help today not next week*". Once given, for seven months the Sisters of Mercy worked in four-hour shifts at a makeshift cholera hospital set up on Townsend Street, in a slum area. During its peak hundreds died each day, within hours of being stricken. Catherine herself was there all day. Late one night, she carried home in her arms the new-born baby of a poor young woman who had just died of cholera. Catherine had "*such compassion on the infant that she brought it home under her shawl and put it to sleep in a little bed in her own cell.*" But as no-one in Baggot Street could nurse the baby, "*the little thing cried all night, Revd. Mother could get no rest, so the next day it was given to someone to take care of*" – presumably a wet-nurse!

In the second area "charitable instruction of poor females", evidence shows that Catherine's "*approach to education was an offshoot of her ideals to empower the poor by providing them with necessary opportunities and to assist the emancipation of women through the medium of education.*"<sup>10</sup> We know from the Original Rule that Catherine the education of women as central to the mission of mercy: "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 where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found."<sup>11</sup> Additionally we know from archives and Catherine's writing that there is clear evidence that she set out to fully explore appropriate system of education prior to the establishment of the religious order, she visited France in 1825 whilst Baggot Street was being built and considered the French systems she saw alongside of what she saw in the Kildare Street Schools which were operating out of a British system. From within these she developed her own version of ministerial system through which senior pupils became salaried monitresses, in effect as assistant teachers. Baggot Street quickly thus gained status of a monitress training centre which provided assistant teachers to other establishments wishing to educate girls, which eventually led to Baggot Street being formally recognised as Ireland's first teacher Training School for Female Teachers in 1877. In addition to this in

<sup>8</sup> The Spirit of the Institute, p462, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>9</sup> The Business of Our Lives. By Mary Reynolds rsm. Listen, Vol. 27 No. ". 2009. P22

<sup>10</sup> The Business of Our Lives. By Mary Reynolds rsm. Listen, Vol. 27 No. ". 2009. P24

<sup>11</sup> Catherine McAuley – Original Rule and Constitution, Chapter 2, Article 5

1834 Catherine had the foresight to see that placing the poor schools within the evolving National School system would not prevent religious instructions and open up the possibility of the children gaining recognised qualifications whilst at the same time bringing in a guaranteed stipend per pupil of £40 per year! Alongside of this, within the House of Mercy, the young women who came for shelter were equipped with practical skills that would enable them to gain economic independence whilst also being enabled to grow in their faith.

And when in 1837 and 1838 the sacramental needs of the poor girls in the school on Baggot Street and the women in the House of Mercy were unmet because Father Walter Meyler, the vicar general, refused to assign them a regular, full-time chaplain, Catherine told John Hamilton, the archbishop's priest-secretary: "for ourselves we ask for nothing—but [for] our poor young women"—who now have to go into the city for Mass, and are not yet strong enough to resist the city's alluring solicitations. She grieved that they "are still about the streets, taking advantage of the irregularity which has been [unjustly] introduced among them".

Additionally in the Original Rule Catherine wrote of the centrality of the education of women as follows "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 where ever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found."

Catherine could have ignored the cries of the poor "invisible to rich of her day", she could have declined to found the Sisters of Mercy, she could have ignored needed works of mercy beyond the streets of Dublin, she could have said she was too old to venture such things, she could have turned down new foundations because, as she said, "*We are very near a Stop . . . a full Stop—feet and hands are numerous enough, but the heads are nearly gone*".<sup>12</sup> She could certainly easily have avoided volunteering to nurse for seven straight months during the cholera epidemic of 1832—on the grounds that there were only ten, mostly young, women in the Baggot Street community at that time, and they were already running a school for hundreds of poor girls and a House of Mercy for at least thirty homeless women. But she didn't.

It seems to me that her bold step of amending her vow formula which in legacy is our fourth vow, in my own vows professed as "to be of service to those in need", is not only the bridge between the Year of Consecrated Life and the Holy Year of Mercy, but is also our moral imperative to engage with biggest refugee crisis and movement of displaced people the world has ever experienced. Both women and men are victims of war and conflict, and are fleeing their homes but it often hits women and children the most. Climate change hits the poorest and most vulnerable people the most, a majority of which are women and girls. Fewer women make their way to a safer place. As already stated women and girls do not have the same opportunities as men and boys to cross borders and are more often left behind in conflict areas or refugee camps. A gender perspective has to be included in all refugee policies, and the issue has to be met in the Agenda 2030. Clearly UN Member States therefore have to allocate more resources for women's necessities in refugee camps and war zones. We can and should engage with this escalating humanitarian crisis at all levels. Initially by doing what we do best, responding to need in practical ways in our local area but more than that we can work collectively and across borders to ensure a gender perspective in all refugee policies, actions in conflict zones, refugee camps and movement of displaced people, plus during asylum processes and service provision within our own counties.

I think the words of Sister Joan McNamara rsm (deceased), encapsulate the challenge to us, to endeavour in the coming Holy Year of Mercy, to risk fully embracing of our fourth vow by following Catherine's example of becoming engrained with the smell of the sheep<sup>13</sup> through "mercy-ing"<sup>14</sup> to the needy in her midst.

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<sup>12</sup> Letter 94, p 151 The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, Ed. Mary C. Sullivan

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis - March 28 during the chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis - During an interview in 2013, Pope Francis reflected that the first word of his Latin motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo*, didn't translate well into Italian or Spanish. To capture the sense he desired, the Pope coined a new word in Spanish—*misericordiando*. "Mercy-ing" in English.

## Joan McNamara rsm – Mercy Craving Realisation - “I can make all things new,” says the Lord”

I can lift you up  
out of the crumbling fragments of older days,  
free you from binding routine of past ways.

I can make all things new  
but not without pain –  
pain in you.

I cannot give you the new  
unless you loose your hold  
on safe, trusted ways of old.  
And between letting go and receiving,  
loss and grief give ground to faith and hope  
engendering loving risk and patient exploration.

I cannot fill your hands  
until you empty them.  
Then I can lift you up  
as I was lifted up  
(averse to it all,  
in loneliness, failure and pain  
on a cross of shame)  
into life’s fullness.

The process is old,  
old as the fruit-bearing grain.  
The fruit is always new.

Why do you loiter (without clear intent)  
in half-filled houses of a land  
where homelessness is crying pain?  
Why do you cling to serving yesterday’s need  
when the here and now anguish for Mercy?  
Why do you shore up the status quo,  
silent before inequality and pain  
when my fierce Word  
burns to be heard?  
Why do you patch, mend and maintain  
what is past effective repair  
when dismantlement is the only way  
to new possibilities demanding exploration  
and Mercy craving realisation?

Come, follow me, with open hands.  
I will lift you up and make you new

I give the final words to Catherine who exhorted us to keep on keeping on, because as Sisters of Mercy.....  
**We can never say "it is enough".<sup>15</sup>**

Lynda Dearlove RSM (Institute of Our Lady of Mercy) for Mercy International Association’s Special eNews Series for the Year of Consecrated Life. **Published October 2015. E:<mailto:lynda.dearlove@watw.org.uk>**  
[www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine McAuley - Familiar Instructions, p. 2