



# 2014

## Pilgrimage of Young Mercy Leaders Keynote Presentation

**Catherine's Story:  
Gift and Challenge for Us Today**  
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You've just seen a short DVD of Catherine's life. I invite you to take a moment or two to notice what stays with you about Catherine's story – and make a note of it so that you can come back to it at different times during the pilgrimage.

I want to do two things in the remainder of the time left to us in this session: I would really like to help you see Catherine McAuley as a very human person – one who was warm and kind and struggled with many challenges just as we do in our lives and I would like to lift out some aspects of her story that I feel are of particular relevance for all of us today. I would love for all of us to begin to look on a Catherine as a friend – one to whom we can turn when we find ourselves experiencing some of what she did in her times. The particular circumstances will have changed from 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland but the human journey remains quite similar.

So I would like to begin by engaging with a wonderful description of Catherine left to us by one of her early companions, Teresa White. Catherine relied on Teresa; she was a trusted companion and friend and this is what she had to say about her many years after Catherine had died:

"I never met anyone like her. She was a perfect nun and a perfect lady, **one to whom you could open your whole heart**, she was so kind, and so spiritual. She made the interests of every convent her own and **she gave each Sister a place in her heart**. She was so generous and full of humility. Her appearance was very remarkable. There was something in her so kind, yet so discerning that you would fancy she read your heart. **If you tried to speak to her on the most trifling matter, though she was**

**occupied with something, she would instantly lay all aside and give you any satisfaction in her power.** She was rather tall, 5'5" and had a queenly air. I feel sad to have outlived her."

Have you ever met anybody like that - someone to whom you could open your whole heart, somebody who could read your heart, somebody who always makes the time to listen to you, no matter how busy they may be at the time? That's how Catherine came across to her companions.

Perhaps the most important thing you may learn about Catherine McAuley in these days is that she just **loved** people of your age. For the main part it was people of your age she chose to work with her to put her vision into practice. **She had an extraordinary capacity to touch into the goodness and generosity of young people and to elicit a generous response from them to help others.** She was convinced that if the young people of her time could be given education, training and guidance they could make a significant difference in the world so that the next generation would not suffer the privations and poverty of their time. Isn't it the same kind of motivation that inspires all of us to try to make a difference in our world? There is still such a need to respond in generosity today – in fact the needs today seem even greater than in Catherine's time.

**Did you know that there are about 100 million children in this world who do not go to school?**

**Did you know that in some countries up to 70% of the girls do not receive an education?**

On last news we heard that there are over 100,000 people displaced in Gaza right now. The call to respond in a merciful and generous way comes loud and clear to us.

From when she was a young girl she experienced many of the things that I am sure are part of your own lives, for instance, loss + insecurity

Some of you probably know first-hand what it is like to lose a dearly loved parent through separation, divorce or through death: Catherine's Dad died

when she was only five years old. Needless to say of course, this was something that touched her deeply and had a profound influence on her for the rest of her life.

After the death of her father the family moved twice or three times. She experienced the insecurity and unsettled feeling we have when our lives are disrupted: perhaps some of you know what it's like to be uprooted from your familiar environment to move to another place. You leave behind the familiar, the places and the people that mean a lot to you and you try to make new friends in new surroundings. Catherine knew what that was like too. For most of her late childhood and adolescent years the McAuley family lived in rooms owned by someone else.

By the time she was twenty, Catherine had lost both her parents. After her mother's death the family split up: she went to live with her uncle's family so that she could freely practice the Catholic faith that was so dear to her heart. Her sister and brother went to live with other relatives who were Protestants. As often happens in our own lives, Catherine realised that no living situation is ideal. While living with her uncle facilitated Catherine's devotion to the Catholic faith and that was a great gift for her, she also experienced pain there. **For in that household she learned first-hand what it was like to live with the difficulties and pain of addiction:** her uncle, Owen Conway was addicted to gambling and eventually lost everything. If you or someone close to you has an addiction, you know how family or friends suffer in that situation. Be assured that Catherine can empathise with you in your pain and that of your family.

As a result of the poverty that her uncle's family endured as a result of the addiction of gambling, Catherine actually had to sleep on the floor and go to bed hungry. I am convinced that this experience engendered a great compassion in her for people who have fallen on hard times as later in her life she wrote: **We should have compassion for those who have seen better days, and are ashamed to make known their indigence. We should assist them privately.**

Catherine made the decision to move from her uncle's house so that she would not be a burden on that family and she moved to live with her siblings in the home of the Armstrongs. While they were good, kind people, they had little understanding of the Catholic faith and of Catherine's desire to live by it. At times Catherine suffered because that which she held dear became the object of scorn. She must have felt hurt when her Catholic faith was mocked. She must have felt inadequate when she was unable to refute in an intelligent way what was being said about her faith. Unfortunately, in the times we live in, it is probably true to say that very few of us in this room have not experienced some form of hurt or humiliation when something really important to us was mocked or ridiculed. Don't we all feel the pain of inadequacy at some time or other? Catherine can be our friend in such times – she also knew that pain.

Later Catherine went to live with another couple by the name of Callaghan. During her time with them, in her twenties and thirties she came to a place of security and stability in her life – because they treated her as a daughter. She grew in confidence and gained experience, skills and expertise that stood her in good stead for what lay ahead.

All during that time Catherine managed to stay true to what she believed in her heart – she held on with determination and courage to the faith her father had implanted in her young heart. When she herself had everything she needed she never forgot those who were less fortunate than herself. In the Callaghan household Catherine wanted for nothing – but she made space in her heart and in her life for so many who were in need: for a time she continued to come back into the city to help poor children. She looked after Mrs. Callaghan with devotion and tenderness. She adopted the baby of her cousin, Anne Conway and later her older sister. She brought home a baby who was left homeless on the street. She also brought home to Coolock an old lady who was homeless and who was quite difficult to manage. She helped the servants to believe that they too had rights and those rights needed to be honoured even if they themselves did not have the means to do so. She invites us to do the same: always to have our eyes and our ears and our hearts wide open to be alert to the needs of others within our circle: be that within our own family, among our friends, in our school or college community or indeed

anywhere in the world. Her example challenges us to go **beyond being aware** to doing something **practical** to help the person in need.

Can you imagine the surprise it must have been for Catherine when she learned that Mr. Callaghan had left her everything? That act of generosity seemed to her to far outweigh her own generous giving to him and his wife for over twenty years. Generosity begets generosity. Because Catherine now had the means to do something on a far grander scale than she could ever have thought possible she made big decisions. She could easily have held on to Coolock House and lived in a generous way with the children she had adopted, and she could have continued to help the servants there and she could have found many other outlets for her loving. Instead, she sold it all and with the proceeds she set about building a big house – four storeys high – to provide shelter and safe haven for the servant girls who were at risk and to provide a good education for Catholic girls who were poor. **Catherine spent all her inheritance on building the house on Baggot Street. She gave everything she had for the good of others – others who could never give her anything in return.** She did not save up her fortune. She did not invest it. She did not keep back part of it for the rainy day, for some time in the future. She spent it all in one go – is it any wonder that her family called what she was doing “Kitty’s Folly?” It certainly did not make any economic sense to do what she did with what had come to her through the goodness and kindness of Mr. Callaghan. But then when did the Gospel ever make economic sense? Imagine winning a vast sum of money in the lottery? Or imagine that you are left a few million by someone who thinks a lot of you. What would you do with that kind of money?

Now that Catherine had emptied her purse and poured all her wealth into building the house on Baggot Street one might have thought that her giving was complete! But we often find when we live our lives by listening to the promptings of God the invitation to total giving goes on. A few years into the project it became clear that the only way to give a sense of stability and permanence to Catherine’s initiative was to form a community that would hold it and so the invitation came from the bishop to establish it as a religious community. Catherine felt resistance in herself to that suggestion – but ultimately she realised it was the only way open to her at that time if she

wanted her work to continue into the future and so the Sisters of Mercy came into being. They were affectionately known as the 'walking nuns.' **They went out** to visit the poor in their homes in the lanes and alleyways of the city. **They went out** to the hospitals to visit the sick. **They went out** to the cholera depot to look after the cholera victims. The children came in to them to be taught. They made a space in their home for the girls who lived with them in a place of safe shelter for they were invited to this house at night as their home. This was quite a revolutionary step for Catherine and her companions to take. What does this tell us about Catherine? She teaches us that when we face obstacles, when all that we hold dear is threatened, if we can be resourceful and creative we will find a way around so that the dream is not compromised. She teaches us that when the invitation comes from God to give all, over and over again, our God will not be outdone in generosity.

For Catherine the call to generous giving continued as gradually over the ten years of her life as a Sister of Mercy she was called to spread the Congregation of Mercy to 11 other places in Ireland and England. Each new place required careful planning and negotiation and as she herself gave everything with an open heart, she was now being asked to give her best companions to the spread of the Order. So much so that she wrote in a rather amusing way at one stage: "Hands and feet we have plenty but the heads are all gone." Just as she herself gave everything she somehow succeeded in calling her companions and followers to the same kind of total giving. Otherwise the Order of Mercy could not have spread and survived to this day. Just think for a moment: If that spirit of generous giving had not prevailed none of us would be here in this place today.

We may well ask: "What was it in Catherine that allowed that spirit of generosity to be the hallmark of her life?" I think the answer to that question lies in one truth, namely, her relationship with God. She grew into the awareness that everything she had and everything she was came from God. God was her friend and she encouraged her companions to be in relationship with God in the same way. **We may address God as we would a dear friend, to whom we owed a great deal.** She saw everything in life – even the most difficult and painful suffering - as coming from the hand of God, indeed as a blessing from God. She saw all within the context of God's

love which never fails and she trusted God completely. **Put your whole confidence in God, he will never let you down.** That was her most frequent piece of advice to her followers. Everything she tried to do, every project, every foundation, came from her desire that every person would know and experience in a practical way the tender, compassionate love of God. Once when one of her companions was suffering a lot because one of the young Sisters had died suddenly, Catherine wrote to console her **“God is looking after your concerns which are all his own.”** Isn't it a wonderful source of strength and inspiration for us to know that all the concerns of our hearts are indeed God's very own concerns? God is looking after your concerns which are all his own. That's what Catherine believed.

Catherine's ordinariness and her humanness shine through in her relationship with God. She was very aware that God was in some strange way guiding her and all that she was trying to accomplish. But she was also very aware of her own shortcomings. At one moment she prays to allow herself to be totally entrusted into the loving care and providence of God and then in the next breath she prays in a very simple and heartfelt way: **Take from my heart all painful anxiety.** I'm sure there are times when we too feel ourselves in the grip of anxiety – in the midst of life in College when there are deadlines to be met, projects and assignments to be completed we can make Catherine's prayer our own: Take from my heart all painful anxiety.

One time she suffered a lot through being misunderstood and being unfairly dealt with by some of the local priests. She spoke about this in a letter to her dear friend Frances Warde: **“Pray fervently to God to take all bitterness from my heart. I can scarcely think of what has been done to me without resentment.”** Have you ever felt like that when you were wronged or treated unfairly? Have you ever cried out to God from the depths of your own resentment, bitterness, hurt or anger?

Catherine was also very aware of how impatient she could be at times. One of the prayers she has left us says: **“I come this day to ask of Thee, my God the virtue and the divine gift of patience which is so necessary to carry me through the difficulties of my charge. There consists my great neediness in this point...”** Which of us does not stand in need of praying for patience

often in our daily lives? So we see that Catherine was very human: she experienced great anxiety, she knew the pain of being treated unfairly, she found herself impatient at times and she brought all of her humanity into her relationship with God. We can do the same.

I would like to bring this reflection on Catherine's life to a close by quoting to you a passage written about her by another of her early companions - one of her very dear friends: Frances Warde. Frances was a great friend of Catherine's niece, Mary and so she knew Catherine before ever the house on Baggot Street was built. Frances was about 31 when Catherine died and for the rest of her life she felt the influence of Catherine. She wrote the following words in a letter nearly forty years after Catherine's death:

**“You never knew her. I knew her better than I have known anybody in my life. She was a woman of God, and God made her a woman of vision. She showed me what it means to be a Sister of Mercy, to see the world and its people in terms of God's love, to love everyone who needed love, to care for everyone who needed care. Now her vision is driving me on. It is a glorious thing to be a Sister of Mercy.”**

I think the gift that Catherine offers us is that she was very like us, she suffered and struggled; she tried to make a difference; she reached out with a big generous heart; she had many joys in her life; her friends were important to her; her God was important to her; she cared for people who were in need. The challenge she offers us is for us to be as generous in our time, to love everyone who needs love, to care for everyone who needs care wherever we find ourselves.

May Catherine's vision continue to inspire each one of us so that all will know and experience through us the tender compassion of our God.