

Keynote Presentation: Pilgrimage of Young Mercy Leaders July 2013

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All of us who are here this evening are indeed a privileged people. We are privileged because we have the opportunity to be here. We are privileged because we have received or are receiving a good education. 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? If I were to ask 70% of this group to leave the room, there would only be a handful of us here. Thank God it is possible for all of us to be here this evening. Thank God we are each receiving the gift of a Mercy education. In that spirit of gratitude we gather to get to know a little more about the woman who followed her dream to make a difference in the lives of many people: Catherine McAuley.

During this time together we will do a few things:

We will watch a DVD that tells the story of Catherine McAuley;

We will reflect together on her life and ask why is it important for us to now today to know about Catherine? Why would we spend our time in this way on this July evening at the beginning of our pilgrimage when there are many other options available to us? What relevance has Catherine for us in 2013? What relevance has she for you who are pupils in Mercy schools? Does she have anything to say to your age-group?

Well I believe that what we are doing here this evening is worthwhile – in fact I would go so far as to say that this experience of pilgrimage could be a life-changing event for you and I am so happy to be part of that.

When I was a pupil in a Mercy school we did not hear much about Catherine McAuley – but I can say for sure that I did experience first-hand the very best of what a Mercy education had to offer at that time. That did not happen by book learning alone but above all else it came across to me through the example, generosity and prayer of the Sisters of Mercy who taught me and cared for me. Later when I became a Sister of Mercy myself I was able to appreciate better how that very same generosity of spirit is what distinguishes the person of Mercy. So what is it that distinguishes your school as a Mercy school? What is the difference between your school and another school in your town or neighbourhood?

I would say that my life has been blessed in an extraordinary way and especially so in the last eight years or so since I got to know Catherine at a personal level. Something happened then – I got to know her in a new way – I got to love her and understand a bit more what she was trying to do in her time. If I can impart a little of who this extraordinary woman was and is for us all during these days, I will be very happy. I really believe that she has something truly powerful to say to the people of our time. I believe that she can be a role model for us today just as effectively and vibrantly as she was to the people who crossed her path in 19th century Ireland.

So sit back and relax and enjoy finding out about the story of her life. The film takes about 22 minutes altogether – but we will watch it in two parts this evening. The first part covers her journey through childhood into adulthood. The second part deals with the last 12 years of her life which were spent here in Baggot Street.

As you watch the first part of Catherine's story I want you to pick out one aspect of her life that you can connect with- something that speaks to you.

Remember before we started watching the DVD I asked you to pick out one thing that you can connect with from this part of Catherine's story. It might be the fact that she lost her Dad at a very

young age. It might be the fact that she had a dream to help people... Whatever it was, take a minute or two to jot down one or two things that stay with you.

I keep being amazed at how like us Catherine is. Her story speaks to us because we find ourselves experiencing some of the same things that she experienced. I would now like to lift out some aspects of Catherine's life that may be significant for us today.

There is something in Catherine that has appeal for all of us. She was born into privileged circumstances but because her father died when she was so young she also knew what it was like to live with great insecurity. When her Dad was ill before his death the family moved from the big family home out on the north side of Dublin in to the city centre; and after the father died her mother, brother and sister moved twice before they settled in rented accommodation. That was a lot of movement for a small child to experience. That same pattern was repeated in Catherine's life when her mother died. At first Catherine went to live in her uncle's house while her sister and brother went to live with non-Catholic relatives, the Armstrongs. So she experienced the pain of separation from her siblings.

While Catherine was staying with her uncle she came to know the pain that happens in a family dealing with addiction because her uncle lost all his money through his gambling. At one stage she even had to sleep on the floor. She made the decision to move out of that house so as not to be a burden on his family. She would be one less mouth to feed.

What does this experience tell us about Catherine? Well, she knew first-hand the difficulty of going from having plenty to having very little. She knew the mixed feelings so many of us encounter through our experience of family. This did not make her bitter – instead it made her more sensitive to the needs of others and her desire to reach out to help others grew.

Like many families, Catherine's family was one where there was difference of opinion and divergent views. Her sister and brother decided to follow the Protestant faith while she held firmly to the faith of her childhood, the Catholic faith – yet this difference did not lead to separation; she managed to stay close to both her siblings all through their lives even though their views were very different to hers. What she believed in and what she held dear was sometimes scorned and mocked by some in her family circle. Nowadays we would probably be calling it bullying or harassment. Catherine was somehow able to withstand all of that pressure and find her own way through to what she believed in her heart.

She loved children – yet she decided not to marry and have her own but she looked after many children throughout her life. When her sister died in 1827 followed by the death of Mary's husband fifteen months later their five children, ranging in age from 17 to 7, chose Catherine as their guardian. She had already adopted two of her cousin's children, one a baby and the other a little girl of 10, so that she could care for them after their mother had died a few years previously. She also took in two other children who had no one to care for them. So even though Catherine did not have children of her own, she was in fact mother to nine. Surely this must have had a big influence on her and on the decisions she made in her life.

So just to re-cap on those points that I think are very relevant for us today:

Great insecurity; going from plenty to little; addiction; difference of opinion and values and lifestyle; being the object of scorn for her beliefs; children.

Now we are going to watch the second part of the film. This section covers the last decade of Catherine's life – the time she spent in Baggot Street. The circumstances of her time – in Church and in society came together in such a way as to make it necessary for her to found an order of nuns in order for her to be able to continue the work she had begun – mainly the care of young women and girls who were at great risk and the education of children. It tells the story of how she started the order

of Mercy and how it expanded during her lifetime. It finishes by bringing it right up to our own times and how what she started is being continued to this very day.

As you watch this part of the film, I want you to pick out one thing which you did not know before now about Catherine and the movement that she started.

Again we take a moment to jot down one thing you did not know before today and one thing that seems important to you right now.

In this part of my presentation I want to share with you some aspects of Catherine's personality that mean a lot to me personally and I hope will help you also to appreciate this lovely, warm, human woman who founded the Sisters of Mercy. Sometimes I use her own words to help us get an insight into who she is.

KINDNESS:

Catherine spoke often about how necessary it is to be kind to other people

There are three things the poor prize more highly than gold, though they cost the donor nothing: the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows. What is asked of us is very simple. Everyone of us is capable of speaking kindly and listening with compassion.

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 herself was one who had seen better days .She asks us to be sensitive to the needs of those who have fallen on hard times – and God knows there are many in our world today who have the same experience.

Never speak with contempt of any nation, profession or class of people

Our kindness is to extend to all people and to our way of speaking of them.

Be ever ready to praise, to encourage, to stimulate, but slow to censure and still more slow to condemn.

Have great tenderness in all things.

FRIENDSHIP

Many times Catherine spoke of the gift that friendship is. She treasured her friends and depended on their love and support over and over.

One time she was very busy and was prevented from visiting her friend in Limerick for a long time and this is what she wrote:

When I think rest is coming – business only seems to commence. The prospect of my visit to Limerick will animate me. I need scarcely tell you that it will be a source of great happiness – for which I thank God – a pure heartfelt friendship which renews the powers of mind and body.

Another time she was writing a long letter to her friend Frances and then she included a little private note for her:

'As if you and I, like old Darby and Joan, were sitting together at the community table....'

And when that friend, Frances, was having a hard time she was advising her and said:

“This advice is quite unnecessary, for I know you do not want counsel – or comfort – yet I cannot entirely give up my poor old child.”

Another time she wrote back to the person who was in charge when she herself was away on a new foundation:

“anxiously I long to be with you in the community room – alone – telling you all the queer things I met since we parted.”

GENEROSITY

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 have easily 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?

Catherine’s same generous spirit shines through in her letters. She couldn’t bear to think of people being deprived of whatever she could offer to assist them:

“For God knows that I would rather be cold and hungry than the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford.”

She often struggled to have enough money to make ends meet and yet she was prepared to help out one of the other foundations in need:

“Let me know when you are closely pressed, and I will divide with you, be it ever so little.”

When Catherine was making a new foundation she herself went and stayed there for about two months. When she went to Birr she had intended returning to Baggot Street but then found the young woman who was the leader there in floods of tears at the prospect of being left without the guidance of Catherine to carry the burden. So she stayed on to help out this “Young Mercy Leader”!

“Since I wrote this & mentioned it to Sr. Aloysius, I have found her crying, and must try to remain a little longer.”

YOUNG PEOPLE

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 the world?

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Catherine's relationship with God underpinned everything she said and did and I just offer you three very simple sayings of hers about this important aspect of her life. I spoke earlier about her need for friendship. Well she saw God as her friend – one on whom she could rely totally

“We may address God as we would a dear friend to whom we owed a great deal...”

“Put your whole confidence in God. He will never let you down.”

“God is looking after your concerns which are all his own.”

DESCRIPTION OF CATHERINE

I would like to end with a wonderful description of Catherine given by one of her early companions, Teresa White. Catherine relied on Teresa and trusted her and this is what Teresa had to say about her many years later:

“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.”