

On Frances Warde and the U. S. Mercy Tradition She Began

Our identity as Mercy Sisters—whether our roots stretch from Europe to Australia, the Pacific, North to Central and South America, or far beyond—is essentially based upon the history we share as daughters of Catherine McAuley. “Mercy embodied” provides us all with a sense of what was the roadmap that she drew for us. We, too, seek the God of Mercy as she and her followers did. Through history, we can trace this path down to the present by studying what Sisters have accomplished and by considering what will be our contribution to the ever-continuing saga. In this way, always present, dynamic, and proceeding onward, we advance with all who have created that story into the future.

The task of the Mercy historian is to recover and portray those stories, acknowledging the role Sisters have played and reclaiming the beauty and truth that becomes so evident in the recollection of the past. My particular assignment has been to discern the United States experience of Mercy. So much has been recorded in that particular story; so great is that solid stretch of stories; so many women have excelled as they moved the story forward that the task has proved to be a daunting one.

Yet, as I studied the reality of all that Mercy Sisters have been and done in the United States—as I sifted down the more cohesive elements of the various scenes of the Mercy drama—one outstanding realization became clear. As inspiring as the stories of our many Sisters have been, there is one woman whose life story stands out because it incorporates the quintessential image of Mercy that both prefigured and personified the Mercy mission in the United States. Little wonder that she has been given the title of our American Founder: Mother Frances Xavier Warde.

Co-founder in 1837, with Catherine McAuley, of St. Leo Convent in Carlow, Ireland, Mother Warde began her unique contribution to U.S. Mercy when she set out, along with a band of missionaries, to fulfill the founder’s dream to bring Christ to the world through the works of Mercy. Her first missionary journey to the United States occurred in 1843 after a newly-ordained bishop, Michael O’Connor, approached the Carlow community and asked for volunteers to join him in evangelizing the immigrants of his pioneering Diocese of Pittsburgh. Her heroic story was first revealed to us by Mother Theresa Austin Carroll in her best-selling series, Leaves from the Annals, (especially its fourth volume; NY, 1895). In addition, Kathleen Healy, RSM has provided us a rich picture of what this amazing woman accomplished in Frances Warde: American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy (NY, 1973).

Why do I suggest that Frances Warde still seems to be the central figure in our efforts to understand “embodied Mercy” within the American scene? One special quality of Mother Warde’s quest of Mercy provides the answer. Above all else, Mother Warde was a true missionary: she desired to be the means by which the Good News of the Gospel could be proclaimed. This attribute not only framed the American story of Mercy but it also gives direction to it today. Besides, Mother Warde’s concept of mission was identical to that of the founder. Like her, she yearned, first and foremost, to be Christ for others—to spread His Word and to ease the path of those who suffered. This she would eminently accomplish, especially among those who were beaten down by the degrading poverty of their immigrant circumstances.

The tactics and strategy she employed followed from the perspective of a missionary. This sustained her from the time of her arrival in the United States until her death in Manchester, New Hampshire, some forty years later. During these years, she established or helped to organize thirty-six convents of Mercy. Under her, the Sisters of Mercy became the first, and the largest, group of nuns from Ireland to corporately establish so many institutions of education and health care that still serve Americans. Because of her, finally, the Sisters of Mercy let no civic tragedy or natural crisis go without appropriate response. Of no other American women religious founder, I would dare to say, can such an amazing claim be made.

In imitation of both the great St. Ignatius Loyola as well as her own namesake, Mother Frances Xavier Warde would, indeed, stamp the Mercy Order in the United States with these amazing attributes. Everything she did echoed the Jesuit motto, *Ad majorem Dei Gloriam*. Encouraged by what she understood as Mother McAuley's intentions, she never relented in her desire to establish foundations, to reach out in compassion, to respond immediately to crisis: in other words, to follow "the path of Mercy marked out by Jesus Christ for those who desire to follow Him." For this reason, American Bishops did not hesitate to turn to her not only to establish new Mercy communities but also to be blessed by the breadth of her missionary vision. Strong-willed bishops like New York's Archbishops, John Hughes and Michael Corrigan, adhered to her understanding of mission. To many she perfectly mirrored Catherine McAuley in her zeal for others. Hartford's Francis McFarland, as well as San Francisco's Bishop Joseph Alemany, were among bishops who sent their own parish priests directly to Ireland to obtain additional Mercy recruits to follow in this same tradition. In fact, bishops asked other bishops to intercede with her so that they could acquire Mercy Sisters. On her part, Mother Warde saw to it that her Sisters were incorporated in the mission of their priestly brothers as they engaged in the work of the Church—even to the point of exacting contracts from bishops to secure this opportunity. In this way, her Sisters were able to fully participate in Mother McAuley's sense of mission.

Throughout her life, Mother Warde led by example. As Mother Mary Clare Moore of Bermondsey famously quipped, she was, in fact, known to those back home as Mother Exodus because she was so intent upon leading all to the promised land. Because of her, U.S. Sisters of Mercy came to see their role as following in the footsteps of the great Irish missionaries, Columbanus and Patrick. In America, they could be true witnesses to the faith—martyrs in the classic, theological sense; moreover, they could participate in "proclaiming the glad tidings" in the fiercely Protestant, strongly anti-Catholic New World. Following her example, they could engage in the works of Mercy, providing women and children with safety and shelter; the sick-poor with solace; and immigrants with instruction in the faith. Mother Mary Baptist Russell, famed California founder, deferred to her judgment regarding the spirit, mission, and ministry of Mercy, as did Mother Patricia Waldron in Philadelphia, Mother Agnes O'Connor in New York or the many other founding Sisters including those that she, herself, trained here in the United States. In each circumstance, the Sisters' primary task was to slake the spiritual thirst and ease the bodily hunger or pain of those in need. A Passamaquoddy Indian chief in Maine perhaps put the mission of the Sisters best. In his words, the Sisters of Mercy

understood their plight; they cared for them because they, themselves, knew “...no home but the Heart of Our Lord.”

In the process, the Mercy congregation multiplied rapidly and extended from coast to coast even before the turn of the twentieth century. First their work was within parishes and involved the simpler works of religious instruction and visitation of the sick. Yet, so clear was Mother Warde’s understanding of the breadth of Mercy’s purpose that she readily encouraged flexible responses that led her Sisters into a variety of ministries that helped both church and society. Her readiness to encourage the Sisters when they volunteered to become nurses during the American Civil War—over one hundred thirty Mercy Sisters served among the 650 Sister nurses during the four bloody years of that conflict—is the most dramatic case at point. With her approval, Sisters ran dispensaries, served on battlefields or hospital ships, or even assisted retreating armies during this bloody war between brothers. Both Northern and Southern troops noted their skills—but, especially, their spiritual purpose. As one bishop remarked: [the Sisters of Mercy and Charity] “have commanded respect and have brought about the conversion of a large number of unbelieving and heretical (sic) soldiers who had not been able to avoid admiring the heroism of those Sisters...” With similar dedication and heroic endeavor, the Sisters responded to the multiple, life-threatening epidemics that beset America, especially in the nineteenth century, and responded to such disasters as floods or earthquakes. Well into the twentieth century, moreover, it was her example of encouraging Sisters to respond to every need that allowed Mercy academies and colleges, hospitals and other health care facilities to spring up in most of the major metropolises of the nation.

In every regard, the Sisters of Mercy took the three-fold path of Mercy as missionaries, co-creators of the church’s institutions, and first responders—all because of the leadership initially provided by Mother Warde. Today’s Sisters remain in the forefront of all three aspects of being Mercy. They have especially gained reputations as leaders in the works of education and healthcare while they have always remained anonymously among the poor in the daily drama of salvation. More recently, they took up the responsibility of developing more than twenty missionary locations beyond their borders. Finally, they have added their voices to the cause of mercy and justice, becoming spokespersons for the oppressed, victimized, or homeless. Today, Mother Warde’s words and actions continue to urge Sisters to “mobilize [their] passion... in order to give God to the world.” By modeling Mother McAuley perfectly, Mother Warde has remained the quintessential image of Mercy in the United States.

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November, 2007