

## A U.S. Sister of Mercy Dialogues with Tradition

Our identity as Mercy Sisters is fundamentally based upon a shared history that began in Ireland and has been extended to many continents. This brilliant record not only conveys “who we were” but it also makes possible our asking the more pressing question: “who are we today”? It brings us into what some have called the deep tradition of the charism from which we derive our sense of belonging as Sisters of Mercy. In this paper I want to explore, through history, the U.S. experience as it has been focused through the lens of one collective portrait. This singular image, I believe, can become the foundation for grasping what American Mercies can contribute to the conversation about how we can rekindle a spirit to serve as “fire cast on the earth-kindling.”<sup>1</sup>

Because the U.S. Mercy community was immensely blessed by the tremendous gift of having Mother Frances Xavier Teresa Warde as our American founder, I believe that we are in a privileged position to use her as the means by which we can not only describe our story but also guide our future course. Choosing Mother Warde as a prefigure and personification of Mercy in our quest for identity and purpose first occurred to me as I looked back to the essential sources that tell us of this great woman’s amazing contributions to the U.S. Mercy history. During the course of that research, I began to realize that the specific role that she played could serve as an excellent means by which all Mercies can visualize the future possibilities of their Institute.<sup>2</sup>

A careful study of Mother Warde’s years of service in the United States reveals how central her role was to the development of the U.S. Mercy tradition. Invited to serve God’s people in a pioneer land, this remarkable woman determined the goals she and her fledgling community needed to fulfill. Instinctively she understood that America was a perfect place to accomplish the singular mandates of their congregation. There, the Sisters could respond to their God as missionaries who wished to witness to God’s deep desire for mercy. There they, too, could “proclaim the glad tidings,” especially by instructing their fellow Irish exiles in the teachings of a Church considered alien in a Protestant land. Furthermore, in America, her Sisters could bring the passion they felt to provide comfort, solace, and assistance to God’s beloved poor, in other words, to slake the hunger of both soul and body that plagued America’s Catholic communities. Being witnesses as they stood in solidarity beneath the cross of Christ, sheltering and supporting those for whom Christ died, and doing this within the institutional, albeit pioneer U.S. Church—these were the daily goals that she knew her community could assume. Even more, in this wild, raucous America, she also encouraged her Sisters to respond in extraordinary ways, in effect, to offer their service as first responders whenever crises or disaster confronted Americans or where

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<sup>1</sup>See Margaret Susan Thompson, “Charism or Deep Story”? Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Growth of Women’s Religious History in Nineteenth Century America,” *Review for Religious*, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Three principal sources on Frances Warde are Kathleen Healy, *Frances Warde: American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy*, (New York, 1973); *Leaves from the Annals*, 4<sup>th</sup> volume, by the editor, (Sister Mary Austin Carroll) (New York, 1895); and Mary C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley: 1818-1841* (Baltimore and Cornwall, England, 2007). After first giving the entire name of a Sister of Mercy cited in this paper, I will use the simpler designation, namely, her title and last name, throughout the remainder. Thus, Mother Warde, after first designation. .

the weight of social sin bore down. Leading her community in attending to these goals as well, Mother Warde helped create an admirable, unified depiction of women who were filled with faith and ready for action—of women whose love for God was primed to spill over abundantly into the chaotic world they encountered.<sup>3</sup>

What, indeed, had inspired Mother Warde to provide us with such a vision? Who helped her realize what she could accomplish by serving the American Church in this multi-dimensional, apostolic way? In the first place, she was a true daughter of Ireland. Like her people, she had been greatly influenced by Ireland's "devotional revolution," re-awakened after the enactment of the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act. This spiritual renewal emphasized Ireland's glorious past, personified as it was by its ancient and heroic missionary Saints, Patrick and Columbanus. Had not it been Mother McAuley's devout hope to follow their example as she reached out to God's beloved beyond Dublin, even beyond Ireland? Had she not founded twelve foundations of the Order in Ireland and two in England in her brief, twelve years as superior of the Institute? Clearly, her desire to hear and respond to needs that were at the very heart of the Church became Mother Warde's preoccupation as well. Like so many other Sisters who entered Baggot Street during Catherine's lifetime, Mother Warde had learned at Catherine's feet that one's encounter with Christ was the main challenge of being a Sister of Mercy. She, too, wanted to find Him and to follow Him—if need be, to the ends of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Mother Warde's personal call to become a foreign missionary had, however, become crystallized only after an American bishop approached the St. Leo's community in Carlow, Ireland. On that fateful evening in 1843, Bishop Michael J. O'Connor, who had previously translated the first Mercy Constitution for Roman officials, made a startling request. Having just been appointed first Bishop of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the eager bishop appealed to the Sisters to join him as he took up work among the members of his impoverished American diocese. What he told them was that, in frontier America, there were souls to be saved and that the purpose of the vowed lives of witness and service that had been articulated in their Constitution fit perfectly the needs of the Irish immigrant people he had been called to serve. Just as Catherine had once enjoined her Sisters to "find Jesus Christ to love and serve with their whole heart," the bishop now begged them to fulfill that same injunction in this pioneer Church.<sup>5</sup>

Accepting Bishop O'Connor's offer, the Mercy Sisters at Carlow became the first Irish community of nuns to commit themselves to overseas ministry. This courageous step proved, in itself, to be revolutionary. By their response, the Sisters declared that they wanted to join in the official missionary enterprise. Furthermore, they made it known that they understood themselves to be co-partners, even co-adjutors, in the charismatic ministry of the Church. While they admitted that the responsibility of the clergy necessarily lay with the conferral of the sacraments and the celebration of

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<sup>3</sup> See Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2006. Scriptural passages are from Matthew 9: 9-13; Luke 4: 16-30; on wilderness, see Katherine Burton, *Her Mercy Endureth Forever*, (Tarrytown, 1946), p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, & Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (New York and Oxford, 1998), p.4; Carroll, p. 540.

<sup>5</sup> Healy, *passim*.

liturgical action, the Sisters imagined another empowering role for themselves. In America, they hoped to be capable partners on a great missionary journey.<sup>6</sup>

Through their willingness to accept the bishop's request, the Carlow Sisters demonstrated their desire to be united in spirit with the intentions of Mother McAuley. More, they indicated the training that they had received from her disciple, Mother Warde, who had served as both their first superior and novice director. Like her, they wanted to imitate the zeal of St. Francis Xavier in his burning desire to "convert souls;" like her, they wanted to adhere to the Ignatian motto, Ad majorem Dei gloriam. As Mother Warde had taught them, so they were willing to act on the belief that witnessing to Christ's love was the only aim in life worth striving for—the raison d'être of their lives. Another renowned American founder, Mother Mary Baptist Russell would later echo the same Mercy resolution that gave Mother Warde purpose, namely, to live one's life solely to fulfill God's provident will on behalf of souls. "Let us then leave ourselves humbly and confidently in the Hand of Divine Providence," she wrote, "do all we can to glorify Him, by living as true religious, real Sisters of Mercy..." An early California missionary captured this same intention when she wrote back home: "Pray a great deal, please, for us and our mission. Bear in mind, beloved Sister, that in your quiet convent home you may convert thousands in America."<sup>7</sup>

From the time of the Carlow Sisters' departure for America until their superior's death in Manchester, New Hampshire in 1884, Mother Warde remained the primary spokesperson of the Mercy Sisters' intentions. More, she functioned as the compass point around which the Sisters came to understand their own particular mission. In whatever burgeoning area of the United States in which the Sisters began to settle, her missionary spirit seemed to inspire and lay the foundation for grace. Note the deep respect that Mother Russell expressed to Mother Warde about the place she held even in that early period. In a letter written five years after Mother Russell founded the San Francisco community, this intrepid missionary from Kinsale, Ireland, acknowledged Mother Warde's special role among the American Sisters. In her words, "Every house in America with very few exceptions claims the honor of being founded by Mother Warde..."<sup>8</sup>

Under Mother Warde's careful watch, in fact, thirty-six American foundations were established throughout the United States; seventeen of these would become motherhouses or centers of enduring significance. Furthermore, by her death in 1884, these original foundations had grown to include more than one hundred houses and apostolates. Even the few houses that Mother Warde did not directly establish reflected her influence in complicated, yet palpable ways. No other American founder, Mercy or otherwise, approximated such a record of prodigious accomplishment. An excellent organizer and administrator, she was the one who

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Chicago Mercy manual, in Eileen Mary Brewer, Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women (Chicago, 1987), p.36. On missionary zeal beginning in Ireland, see Suellen Hoy, "The Journey Out: The Recruitment and Emigration of the Irish Religious Women to the United States, 1812-1914" in Journal of Women's History, 6, (Winter, 1995) *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> See Healy, pp.97-119, on the compilation of her Spiritual Maxims of Mary Frances Warde, used in Carlow, Naas and Wexford; on Mother Mary Baptist Russell, see Kathleen Doyle, Like a Tree by Rounding Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell, California's First Sister of Mercy (Nevada City, CA, 2004), pp. 177-178. On California mission, 1859 correspondence, see Carroll, p. 25

<sup>8</sup> Doyle, quoted letter is on p. 202; see also pp. 207-215. See also Healy, p. 206.

oversaw what was happening under the Sisters' care during the formative years of their American adventure. Through her, most bishops made direct requests and often negotiated contracts in order to establish a community of Sisters of Mercy in their dioceses. At other times, bishop enlisted the help of other prelates to accomplish the same effect. Through it all, Mother Warde remained the central figure as Sisters were acquired—whether from American motherhouses or directly from Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

As Mother Warde neared her death, New York's Archbishop Michael Corrigan was among those bishops who acknowledged the remarkable leadership she had provided—both her ability as founder and her phenomenal power to attract new members to the Mercy community. Even as the Mercy community expanded beyond his jurisdiction, he suggested that she was “still the religious superior.” So powerful did her influence linger in the minds of those who had early come to experience the quality of her leadership, moreover, that Providence Bishop Thomas Hendricken actually referred to the Mercy community as the one “which she almost founded.” Back in London, Mother Mary Clare Moore, an outstanding missionary in her own right, struck the right chord when she suggested that Mother Warde should be known as “Mother Exodus” since she was continuing to lead others, in Moses-like fashion, toward the “Promised Land.” Just as Christ had invited the apostles to “go, sell all you have and come, follow me,” Mother Warde urged her Sisters to see their Mercy vocation as an opportunity to be disciples of Christ and partners in the American mission. As one priest noted, it was clear that the Mercy unity of purpose and charity had been shaped by this clear goal. True discipleship bestowed the badge of honor that Mother McAuley desired for them and made them “one heart and soul in God” in their religious pursuits.<sup>10</sup>

Mother Warde's goal, however, was not to be seen as founder, but as missionary. She wanted to spread the message of God's love as clearly enunciated by the Scriptures. Enlivened by the spirit of the founder who had been so motivated by Gospel values, Mother Warde always urged her Sisters to exhaust themselves as Catherine had. This meant that they were united to Christ in mission—easing the path of the “neighbor in need,” supporting “God's dear little ones,” standing by those who suffered. In no time, young women began to follow her example and joined the community. Little wonder that impoverished Irish immigrants, in particular, turned to this new, faith-filled community and became the first recipients of their determined energy. Rapidly, the Mercy Sisters “...won their way into the hearts of the people, whether in the hospitals of plague-stricken cities or in the prisons, by the couch of the dying or the cradle of the orphans.” From city to city, they began Sunday Schools and adult education classes, usually conducted at night. These became the surest way the Sisters had to fulfill the first intention of their Constitution to “draw souls to God.” At the same time, within their convent homes, the Sisters renewed their strength through prayer and, in their spare minutes, brought peace and comfort to orphans and women

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<sup>9</sup> Healy, “Institutions of Mercy Founded by Frances Warde,” pp. 518-522; see also p. 59. For number cited (36), see Carroll, p. 261. The matter of contracts was routine; for almost every bishop signing a contract was routine. See Bernard O'Reilly's contract with the Sisters of Mercy, 1851, Archives of the Archives of Hartford, CT, as one example.

<sup>10</sup> on Corrigan's opinion, see Carroll, p. 247; Hendricken, p. 263; Moore, p. 161; on Fr. Dean, see Healy, p. 164.

who had shelter among them. Always, the sick, homeless, and elderly were tenderly served.<sup>11</sup>

Because of episcopal priorities, the Sisters soon became more involved in the specific works of the diocese. These efforts became organized as they cooperated with the clergy in developing parish schools, local hospitals, and health care facilities. In the midst of this variety of organized services, however, the Sisters continued to focus upon immediate concerns and remained especially alert to news of sudden disasters or crises. For a religious community that had scarcely earned the right to be “walking Sisters” in Ireland, the irony was clear. In America, the Sisters had discovered that there was no boundary to the works of mercy, no restrictions to their passion for the poor. In effect, the Sisters could fulfill the fondest hopes of their founders. As American Sisters, they could be all things to all persons: instructors in the faith, teachers, hospital workers, first responders, and, yes, even fellow mourners should tragedies befall God’s people.<sup>12</sup>

Mother Warde’s encouragement that the Sisters engage in such broad-scale ministries remained the pattern set for all subsequent U.S. Mercy endeavors. Perhaps this is the reason why, in the fourth volume of Mother Mary Austin Carroll’s Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Mother Warde’s name recurs repeatedly—even when the stories of other foundations are recounted. In chronicling the flurry of activities that constantly transpired in the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, Mother Carroll continued to mention how influential Mother Warde remained in setting the pace of missionary zeal. This is true, too, of those foundations begun by Irish Sisters from Dublin, Naas, Ennis, or Kinsale. In some way, it appears that Mother Warde was always considered some part of the entire enterprise. Although Mother Patricia Waldron had been originally recruited by Mother Warde from the Diocese of Tuam, Ireland to work as her novice director in Manchester, for example, she remained her faithful disciple after being reassigned to take over the duty of superior in Philadelphia—a responsibility Mother Waldron maintained magnificently for another fifty-five years. In the case of far-off California, Fr. Hugh Gallagher successfully used Mother Warde’s influence when he sought Sisters from Kinsale in 1854. Years later, Mother Warde was of even more direct assistance when she replied affirmatively to Grass Valley (CA) Bishop Eugene O’Connell’s request to establish a mission at Yreka, California. In this way, two Mercy foundations were soon well established in the distant gold-rush fields of California, once again with Mother Warde’s knowledge and help. Because of both clergy and benefactors who admired the work of Mother Warde, Cincinnati, Little Rock, and the Connecticut communities of Middletown and Meriden were also begun, from Ireland, during the same period.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Carroll, p. 517, Doyle, *passim*. Quote from Souvenir of the Centenary of the Sisters of Mercy, Savannah, Georgia: 1845-1945, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> The term “first responders” has become the common one to designate emergency workers. It appears to be the best term to designate the Sisters of Mercy of any age. See Edna Marie Leroux, RSM, “In Times of Socioeconomic Crisis” in Ursula Stepsis and Dolores Liptak, RSM (eds.), Pioneer Healers: The History of Women Religious in American Health Care (New York, 1989), pp.118-143, as one example of this phenomenon.

<sup>13</sup> Mother Austin Carroll (New Orleans) Mother Angela Fitzgerald (Hartford), and most other founders represent perfect examples of Sisters who both admired and feared Mother Warde yet saw her as their guide. On Mother Austin’s perspective, see Sister Mary Hermenia Muldrey, RSM, Abounding in Mercy: Mother Austin Carroll (New Orleans, 1988), p. 222 ff. On Fitzgerald’s, see Carroll, pp. 518-519. The interactions of bishops and priests with Mother Warde showed much evidence of the respect

The New York Mercy community is an apt example of a foundation deliberately initiated because of the first impression that Mother Warde had made when she arrived in the United States in 1843. After meeting Mother Warde when he hosted that first stopover, the famed Bishop John Hughes immediately realized that he, too, wanted Sisters of Mercy for his diocese. Three years later, he personally managed to convince Mother Agnes O'Connor to leave the new ministry she was pursuing in London in order to serve New York's Irish immigrants. Joining her in this mission would be Sister Mary Camillus Byrne, Mother McAuley's beloved godchild and Mother Warde's close friend. According to accounts, she was the one who put the entire American Mercy mission into an unique perspective. She wanted to go to America, she told them, so that she could then truly take "my godmother's place, for I know how she would have loved to go." For many of the Sisters, the desire to reflect Mother McAuley's spiritual quest to be a missionary proved as inspirational as it had for Mother Warde. Perhaps this willingness to go to unknown lands, as Catherine would, in order to witness to, and sacrifice their lives for Christ, is best captured in a simple word picture composed by an Indian chief and written fifty four years after Mother Warde had established a mission among the Indians of Maine. In this letter, Chief Louis Nicholas proclaimed: "The Sisters of Mercy, who know no home but the Heart of Our Lord, have labored untiringly among the Penobscot Indians... Many sacrifices were made by them for the education of our children...many weary hours were spent visiting the sick and the dying."<sup>14</sup>

Because of their desire to be at the heart of the Church's missionary work, however, the Sisters were to have an unexpected, and perhaps forgotten, impact upon the larger American culture as well. In the first place, the uniqueness of the Sisters' vocation and the various ministries they performed played into the hands of those American Protestants who already feared the power of the Catholic Church. Freed because of their vows in religion from Victorian restrictions, the Sisters inadvertently threatened the dominant social view that women should be wives and mothers and that the family was the proper sphere for women's activities. How were Protestants, then, to deal with women who lived celibate, communal lives of prayer and service and, furthermore, saw parish, convent, and church ministry as the primary centers for passing on the faith? Anger over what contradicted their tradition of dispensing faith "from the hearth" complicated the good intentions apparent in the Sisters' ministry to the poor, sick, and ignorant, and, for a while, caused the Sisters great suffering. In 1855, Mother Warde became the first Sister of Mercy to directly confront this particular problem when the Mercy Motherhouse at Providence, Rhode Island came under attack by a mob alleging that they were unlawfully confining a Sister. Although Mother Warde, the bishop, and the Irish workmen who assembled around the convent building on the night of the proposed reprisal were successful in turning away the

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and trust Mother Warde used to build upon in order to extend Mercy communities. See also Healy, pp. 352-390 re Bishops de Goesbriand (Burlington); Bacon (Maine), Bayley (New Jersey), Purcell (Cincinnati), Kenrick (Baltimore) etc. On Waldron, see S M Eulalia Herron, The Sisters of Mercy in the United States: 1843-1928 (New York, 1929), pp. 249-254. For Cincinnati's and Little Rock's beginnings, see Carroll, pp. 286-296; on Little Rock, see Herron, pp. 71-74. On Ennis, see S. Pius O'Brien, The Sisters of Mercy of Ennis, (Killaloe, Ireland, 1992), pp 27-32.

<sup>14</sup>For quote by Sister M Camillus Byrne, see Katherine Burton, His Mercy Endureth Forever (Tarrytown, NY, 1946), p. 69. For quote on the Indians of Maine, see Healy, p. 422.

wrath of the rioters, she never failed to be wary of the reality that the lifestyles of the Sisters could be used to do them harm.<sup>15</sup>

Because of such encounters, moreover, Mother Warde came to realize that the Sisters were perceived as threats not only because of their Catholic faith but also because of their independent way of pursuing the organized ministries of teaching and serving the sick poor—rights actually being denied nineteenth century Protestant women. That women religious worked closely with clergy in order to contribute to the development of schools, in particular, proved so alarming, in fact, that the famed Yankee educator, Catherine Beecher, declared openly her suspicions over the propriety of such interaction and suggested that the cooperation that Sisters maintained with priests was proof of an ongoing Catholic conspiracy to “take over America.” At one point, Beecher published her views, arguing, ironically, that nuns held “posts of competence, usefulness and honor for women of every rank and of every description of talents.” While she begrudgingly admired this development as supportive of women’s rights, she resented the “privileged independence from certain societal norms” and the power that Sisters wielded. Thus, Mother Warde became a target of Catherine Beecher’s attack on the independence of nuns just as women religious, in general, suffered because of their adherence to the tenets of the Catholic Church. Yet, as Mother Warde indicated, this kind of suffering could only be counted as gain. Here, in America, the Sisters had been called to be witnesses, through whatever means, of God’s desire to save souls.<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, such threats and mistreatment were to dissipate more quickly than Mother Warde imagined. In fact, within the very next decade after the Providence affair, the fact of the Sisters’ independence was to take on a far more positive connotation. As the Civil War erupted in 1860, the Sisters found themselves in a perfect position to offer their services—this time as first responders in the greatest crisis that ever befell American society. Had it not been, in particular, for the immediate opportunity seized upon by the Sisters of Mercy, in Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD, to volunteer their facilities and their service and later to become involved in the work of army hospitals, on the battlefields, and in hospital ships, they could never have been able to prove to such a wide audience of Americans that their lifestyle of service was not only worthwhile but genuinely and immensely productive for all involved. Indeed, the Sisters’ participation in wartime service proved that vowed, celibate women were highly capable of making significant contributions to the shaping of American culture.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the Mercy Sisters’ reaction to the Civil War became the most dramatic example they could employ to show their fellow Americans what had always been at

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<sup>15</sup> The Protestant ethic, and the antagonism that occurred because of it is discussed in numerous books; with respect to the implications regarding women see Marie Anne Pagliarini, “The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America,” in Religion and American Culture, 1999, pp. 97-128.

<sup>16</sup> For quote on Beecher see Kathleen A. Brosnan, “Public Presence, Public Silence: Nuns, Bishops, and the Gendered Space of Early Chicago,” in The Catholic Historical Review (July, 2004), p. 486.

<sup>17</sup> Wartime service for the Sisters of Mercy is detailed in numerous monographs regarding local communities. See in particular, Carroll, pp. 66-105 on both Northern and Southern fronts; *passim*. On change of attitudes that resulted whenever Sisters faced challenges in society, see Carol Coburn and Martha Smith, Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920, (Chapel Hill and London, 1999) touch on this theme with respect to American nuns in general.

the heart of their intentions in the United States. During this war between brothers, almost one hundred thirty of the 650 sisters who eventually nursed on both sides of the conflict were Mercy nuns. Though the Sisters had already amazed other citizens by their immediate involvement in periods when epidemics or disasters struck, the Sisters' services during this war became the greatest proof of their desire to proclaim God's love through deed. In a letter sent to Propaganda Fide, Hartford's Bishop Francis McFarland was perhaps the only American bishop to note the religious impact of the Sisters as they responded to war. He wrote: "...[T]he abnegation of the Sisters of Charity & Mercy ...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 on the battlefields and in the hospitals." His remarks explained the essence of the Mercy vocation. The Civil War had provided the ultimate means for them to prove their purpose, and, thus, their most important victory.<sup>18</sup>

What must be remembered, furthermore, is that there is no record that the Sisters ever acted under the belief that they needed official Church approval to become involved in tragic times. Instead, they responded as if it were their very birthright and the driving force that had brought them to America. Well into the twentieth century, Mercy Sisters were among the first to rush to every emergency whether this involved epidemics that plagued the urban ghetto or accidents and disasters that occurred in the mining or lumber camps of the west. They were prepared when floods or earthquakes destroyed whole cities or towns. Free to respond to any crisis, they consistently drew the admiration of those in charge. What seemed like ordinary work to them became, for outside observers, extraordinary service. This continual willingness to rush to those who were suffering became, in fact, the crowning glory upon which the U.S. Sisters of Mercy dispelled any doubts about their proper place in American society.<sup>19</sup>

In the twentieth century, the Sisters of Mercy continued to give the same special impression both within the institutions of the Church and on society in general. No longer feared because of the impact of differing lifestyles, they perfected their educational expertise, assisting in the professional development of diocesan schools and establishing academies and colleges. By the mid century, for example, the number of Mercy colleges organized was second only to those begun by the American Jesuits; in 2007, there are still eighteen Mercy colleges. On both secondary and primary levels, outstanding Sisters educators acted as *de facto* supervisors of schools or planners of nation-wide curricula. Many Sisters achieved national prominence in both educational and health care professions. In particular, Sister Mary Joesetta Butler, then of the Chicago province, was honored for envisioning the broader picture of creating educational possibilities. Not only was she a college president, but later she initiated and directed the international Better World Movement, collaborated in establishing the North American Sister Formation Movement, the Overseas Education

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<sup>18</sup> On Sisters of Mercy during the war, see Sister Mary Denis Maher, To Bind Up the Wounds: Catholic Sister Nurses in the U.S. Civil War (Baton Rouge, 1989), p. 70. Maher distinguishes among local groups; her numbers are 18 Mercy Sisters from South Carolina; 18 from Vicksburg, 11 from Cincinnati, 22 from Baltimore, 15 from New York, 34 from Pittsburgh, and 10 from Chicago (approximately 130 sisters). For Bishop McFarland's assessment, see correspondence of Bishop McFarland, Hartford, to Propaganda Fide, Paris, 12/29/1863, Archives of the University of Notre Dame.

<sup>19</sup>See chapters by Edna LeRoux and Judith Metz in Stepsis and Liptak, Pioneer Healers, pp.39-68; 118-144. Also see Maher, passim.



Program, and the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium—all amazing proofs of her Mercy vision, especially regarding improving the lives of women. The healthcare profession would also benefit from excellent Mercy leadership. Sister Mary Maurita Sengelaub, a Detroit Mercy, brought her preeminent skills to the field of health care. Early in her career, she oversaw the progress of the twenty-seven hospitals of her province and later worked as consultant to administrators in every Mercy province. Her career was crowned by her becoming an administrator for the Division of Health Affairs of the United States Catholic Conference and, later, as first woman president of the Catholic Health Association. Finally, from the time that Mother Carroll founded a Mercy community in Belize, Central America before the turn of the twentieth century, various Mercy congregations would continue to respond to the founders' convictions about becoming God's messenger of the Good News. Because of the efforts of U.S. congregations, Mercy Sisters have today remained involved in the development of some twenty branches of the Mercy Order in the Caribbean, as well as Central and South America.<sup>20</sup>

To this day, Sisters have addressed immediate social problems. Freed, during the 1960s, in particular, from certain restrictions imposed by the 1918 Canon Law revisions, and in conformity with new legislation developed by both Church officials and community chapters, they have become public witnesses. They have often organized or joined protest marches, especially ones that demonstrated against racial injustice. They have sought out opportunities to live and work among the most disadvantaged in society. They have created numerous national organizations aimed at making fundamental changes. They have led movements on behalf of those politically oppressed or victimized by the latest scourge of disease, often becoming the solitary spokespersons or accepting leadership positions in order to lead the fight for social justice. Their accomplishments, at the very center of human need, would encompass several full-length monographs.

In recent times then, the U.S. Sisters have taken two well-worn pathways in order to follow in the footsteps of their founders. They have responded to the words of their Constitution that required them to use every means to live out Christ's challenge to "Follow me." They have remained bearers of the Gospel, missionaries, first responders, women who have stood by the Cross with Christ. What, then, should be said of us and of our intentions for the future of Mercy? Our outreach will bear little fruit unless we see that every project that we engage in today continues to be done with the same hopes and dreams of Mother McAuley in mind. As U.S. Mercies, we must remember what motivated Mother Warde and those who followed her. We must recall their passion.

A recent news article suggests that such a vision of Mercy's future is, indeed, very much alive. It announces the desire of the Burlingame (CA) regional community to put their full power into a massive effort to change lives through Mercy. In the words

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<sup>20</sup>For statistics of Mercy colleges in 2000, see p. 19; since then one college, Trinity College, Burlington, Vt. has closed. Re S. M. Josetta, see Mary Jeremy Daigler, Through the Windows: A History of the Work of Higher Education Among the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, (Scranton, 2000), pp. 119-121. During its first year, S. Josetta's Overseas Project, organized in 1960, located 30 colleges to host 83 Sisters from 28 foreign communities, see Angelyn Dries, OSF, The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History (Orbis, 1998), p. 205. Re S. M. Maurita, see Stepsis and Liptak, pp. 239-249.

of the creators of this plan, their “passion for the poor” has impelled them to make “poverty history.” Their initiative, called Mercy Beyond Borders, is reminiscent of many other Mercy national organizations that have already proven their worth, including such highly successful initiatives as Mercy Housing, Inc., and the McAuley Institute, both of which have responded, for some twenty years, to the issue of finding affordable housing for the poor. The Burlingame initiative is a logical outgrowth of such efforts, It goes one step further since it desires to address global poverty. For Sister Marilyn Lacey, RSM, its present spokesperson, what is needed for the Mercy community is to reflect the same passion that drew all Mercy founders beyond Ireland to embrace the God’s beloved poor. It asks that we become part of a “million-nun movement” that connects U.S. Mercy resources with projects already established in developing countries. Embedded in the plan, however, is the same desire, expressed from the time of Mother McAuley, that our Sisters continue, by their lives, to testify to, to witness to, God’s incredible Mercy.

Such ambitious hopes remind us of the words of Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, whose groundbreaking book, The Nun in the World, first published in English in 1963, launched a generation of American Sisters toward what he referred to as “salvific activity.” Then he argued that Sisters had to be at the very center of the drama of human salvation and that it was their responsibility to break through the restraints of the past to follow Christ’s example through active mission. Sister Lacey’s words—that we must “mobilize our Mercy passion”—are in harmony with this view. They are also strangely reminiscent of the ones that compelled Mother Warde to lead a band of Sisters across an ocean. Every Mercy Sister would do well to remember what impelled our first missionaries to cast the fire for the first kindling and made the Sisters “mobilize” their efforts to “give God to the world.” Such remembering, indelibly marked as it is upon the soul of the U.S. Mercy community, can help us recall who we were and can be again. In this way, we, too, can cast the fire of our passion and, thereby, proclaim the glad tidings of the Good News.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, The Nun in the World is quoted in Amy L. Koehlinger, The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s, (Cambridge & London, 2007), pp. 38-39. Re the Burlingame proposal regarding global poverty, see Catholic News Service, USCCB, 8/31/2007.