

# Sabbatical Report



Walking and Praying With Catherine McAuley Group Photo

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September 26-28 2008

*David Adams-Jones*

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## Report

The program began on Friday afternoon with a prayer and welcome at Baggot House in the Doyle Room (named after one of the first Sisters in the Mercy Order). After the informal greetings and general get to know each other, the first session began with a DVD on Catherine's life. Following on from the DVD Sister Anne RSM from New York provide a briefing on history of Baggot House leading us up to the present day of operations. Currently there are 6 Mercy Sisters living in the house from all parts of the world. The Sisters are working on a two year contract which is managed by the Director of the International House.

**Day One: Session 1. History: Summary**

### **Catherine McAuley (29<sup>th</sup> September 1778 - 11<sup>th</sup> November 1841)**

Catherine McAuley opened the House of Mercy on Baggot St here on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 1827 as a place where she and a number of companions could undertake charitable works. In choosing to locate in the heart of fashionable Dublin, Catherine's aim was to alert the wealthy to the plight of those less well off.

The House of Mercy was soon to become home to a school, hostel, orphanage, sheltered workshop, employment agency, Adult Education centre, as well as a base for various social services. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 1831, the house was designated as the first Convent of Mercy with Catherine McAuley as Mother Superior.

Catherine McAuley was born at Stormanstown House, Co. Dublin to James and Elinor McAuley. Her life was motivated by her Catholic faith and spent in charitable works in Dublin and beyond. She sought to address the needs of the sick, the poor, women in distress and young girls in need of education. Catherine was able to establish the House of Mercy on Baggot Street for this purpose when she became an heiress.

In order to give security to the continuation of her ministry, Catherine chose to establish a religious order, founding the Sisters of Mercy at this Baggot St house on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 1831. She was 53 years old at that time. The Order grew rapidly with Catherine establishing 11 convents during her lifetime in Ireland and England. Catherine's vision has been carried forth by thousands of Sisters of Mercy in at least 44 nations since her death on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 1841.

Catherine's burial site is located in the Sacred Garden of Mercy International Centre. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1990, Pope John Paul II declared Catherine McAuley "Venerable", the first step in her cause for canonisation. She was the first Irish woman to receive this honour.



The first session concluded in the room where Catherine died. This conclusion was very moving. This room was the only room in the house where the floor boards were not replaced due to rot in 1994.

### **Saturday Day Two – Session Two: Foundation and Heritage Morning Session**

Session Two: This session began with prayer in the Chapel. All participants had a candle which was lit each morning representing the spirit of Catherine being with us. This session continued with information about the Foundation of the Mercy Order leading up to the present day.



Mercy Day (September 24<sup>th</sup>) celebrated in the Chapel on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

## Foundation to present Day

Foundations were soon established in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Perth and Auckland, where the sisters worked with both the immigrant and native people, educating and helping the needy. They also began to work with orphans and visit prisoners. Sister Cecilia Maher, one of nine sisters who first ventured to Aotearoa New Zealand offered a glimpse of the early Mercy spirit in a letter before she left for “down under” in 1850:

“Though separated entirely, our hearts will all be united, and after this dream of life, we shall, please God, meet from Pittsburgh, Ireland, New Zealand... we shall be together in Heaven.”

The 1850's also saw initial foundations laid for work in South America, where extremes of difficulty in political and religious circumstance initially restrained the growth the plight of the poor demanded. From these beginnings the Sisters of Mercy expanded to Central America, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and Africa. As the twentieth century unfolded, they were one of the largest congregations of religious women in the world. Today the global Mercy presence includes twelve thousand sisters who, together with their Associates and co-workers, are continuing the work of Catherine McAuley in 46 countries.

## Heritage Room

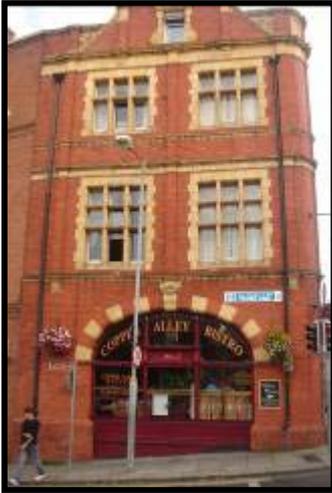
The Heritage Room has display cases holding treasures belonging to Catherine and her companions. There are large panels in the room highlighting the story of Catherine in reference to her religious influences that told stories of the foundations. There were also display cases holding the books and drawings from Sr Clare Augustine Moore, Catherine's personal belongings and displays of the dress worn by the sisters. In the heritage room is the bronze bust of Catherine which is now believe to be the most likely description of what Catherine looked like. Richard O'Leary confirms the likeness which was passed down to him through the generations.



Richard O'Leary is the great, great grandson of Willie Mc Auley, Catherine's nephew who emigrated to Australia. To put this relationship in another way – Willie was the grandfather of Richard's grandmother.

### Session Three (Afternoon) Walking with Catherine

This session focused on where Catherine lived and socialized in Dublin. As a group this part of the program took us on a walk where Catherine's father own land in Dublin as a builder, where she lived after her father died, where she went to Church, places where she live after her mother's death before finally moving in with the Callaghan's at Coolock house. At certain junctions in Dublin we stopped on a corner street and said a prayer together. This session provided a deeper insight into Catherine's life before moving into Coolock house.



2.



**Figure 1** Photos 1-3 left to right shows land owned by James McAuley in Dublin. In photo 3, is a lane way where Catherine and her family would have walked many times before her father's death.

Catherine McAuley father James earned a comfortable living through the building trade, and provided well for his two daughters and his son. His compassionate spirit and charitable work for poor in Dublin set an example for Catherine that remained with her throughout her life. Above are photos of properties that were owned by James McAuley on and near the Liffey River.

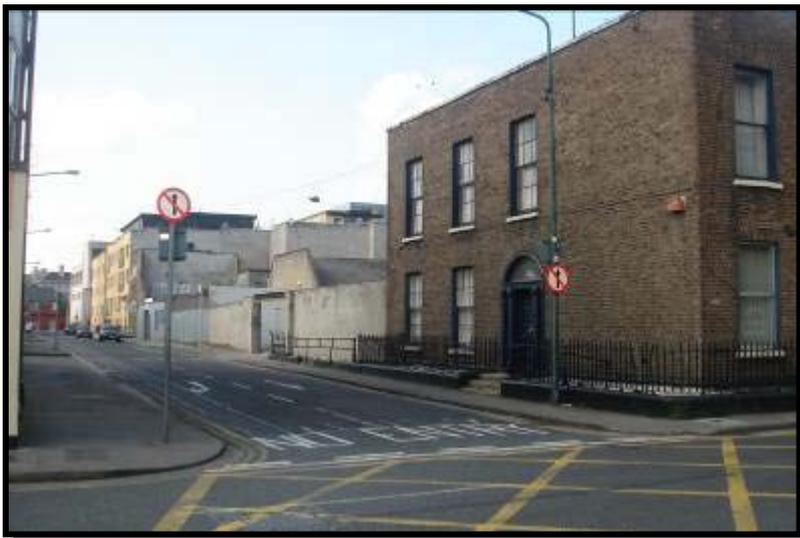


**Figure 2** This Church is where the McAuley's practised their faith. The church is called the Adam and Eve because it was a pub. Catholics would meet at the Adam and Eve pub which had a door way through to a make shift Catholic Church.

**Figure 3 The Liffey River. Catherine and her family moved across to the other side of the river to live after her father died.**



His death in 1783 began a long period of instability for his survivors; his wife Elinor was not as financially astute as her husband and the family gradually declined into a state of poverty, becoming dependent on the goodness of relatives. Elinor was deeply affected by her husband's death: she stopped practising her faith, and when she died in 1798, she faced death consumed by fear and anxiety which had a profound affect on Catherine.



**Figure 4 Catherine's family moved to the other side of the Liffey River to live until 1798 when her Mother died. Records indicate that Catherine lived here through her teenage years on Queen Street.**

Catherine, along with her brother James and sister Mary, lived with William Armstrong and his Family; there, under the strong influence of the Armstrong's Protestant faith, Mary and James stopped practising their Catholic faith, yet Catherine held steadfastly to it despite the limitations of her religious education and regular questioning and ridicule. Catherine moved in with the Conway family sleeping on the floor, until she moved temporarily in with the Armstrong family. The Amrstrong family were very good friends of the Callaghan family. When they returned from Indian Catherine moved in with them.



**Figure 5** This is the residence of the Conway Family where Catherine as a young teenager lived. This was only for a short time. The green door is the entry.

In 1803 Catherine took up residence with Catherine and William Callaghan, friends of the Armstrong's recently returned from India. Catherine was to be the companion of Mrs. Callaghan, who was in poor health, at their estate Coolock House. This was to be a twenty year sojourn, a time of learning and deepening conviction. Here the tender power of mercy began to more clearly shape Catherine's life. She now had the opportunity to study and practice her faith freely. She could attend services and was instructed by local clergy in the tenets of her faith. Respecting the Callaghan's' wishes not to display religious artifacts in their home,



**Figure 6** Mary Street where Catherine first lived with the Callaghans before moving to Coolock House

Catherine found the sign of the cross kneeling before the intersecting panels of her bedroom door and the interlacing branches of trees. Inspired by the memory of her father, Catherine began catechetical instruction among the servants in the Callaghan home, and later taught needlework in the poor school in Abbey Street, opening a small shop to sell the pupils wares.



Figure 8 Mr Callaghan



Figure 7 Catherine McAuley's bedroom. Where the light stand is -was a doorway into Mrs Callaghan's room. Catherine had direct access to Mrs Callaghan's bedroom during her time of illness. Catherine would read the bible to her every night.



Figure 9 This room is now a chapel where the sisters pray daily.



Figure 10 The beautiful stair way. Note the bell used to call Catherine or the servants when needed

As William Callaghan's health began to fail, he asked Catherine what use she might make of an inheritance, to which she responded that she would provide protection and education for servant girls. As Mr. Callaghan prepared for death, Catherine became concerned for his spiritual well-being. Eventually he consented to having a priest visit him on occasion, and as a result he converted to Catholicism the day before his death - November 10, 1822. Catherine was fortunate to inherit approximately \$1,000,000.00 by today's reckoning.



**Figure 11 Coolock House which Catherine inherited**

Catherine prepared herself for the years ahead by studying educational methods in France and Ireland, also becoming an instructor at St. Mary's Poor School in Dublin. She continued to oversee the management of Coolock House while awaiting its sale.

Her sister Mary died in 1827, and her husband two years later, leaving Catherine the guardian of their five children bringing the number in her adoptive family to at least seven. The house on Baggot Street became ready for occupancy on September 24, 1827. By coincidence or act of providence it was also the date of the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, and thus they claimed an identity and a spirit for their building and its works, naming it the House of Mercy. Over the next three years the House of Mercy and its works flourished: the first year saw two hundred girls enrolled in the school; to the ministry of education were added the visitation of the sick and poor, and the refuge for young women. Many volunteers, inspired by Catherine's work and spirit, joined their energies to hers.

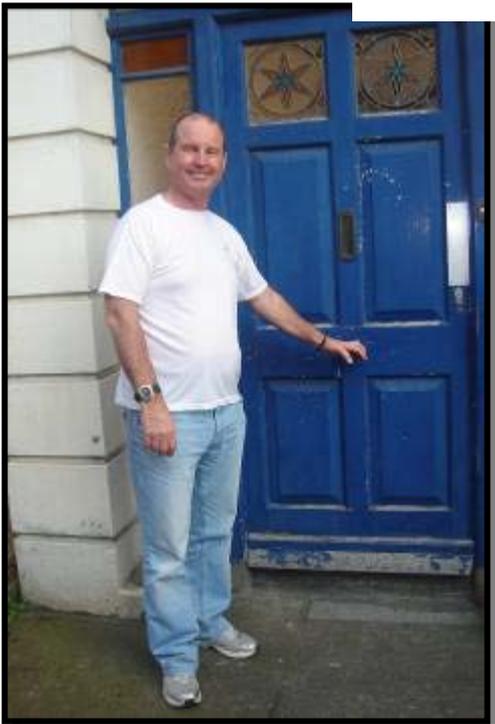


**Figure 12 Interesting that the first 200 pupils were all protestant. Even in Catherine's day she was evangelising which is what we are trying to do today.**

A core group of twelve women lived at Baggot Street in these early years, living simply and over time dressing similarly, light-heartedly calling one another "sister". The question of their status gradually became serious, and the Archbishop of Dublin and several others among Catherine's friends and advisors encouraged them to establish a religious congregation. Once satisfied that their work among the poor would remain central to their endeavours, Catherine McAuley, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley went to the Presentation Convent in Dublin to begin their noviciate. Catherine was 52 years of age.



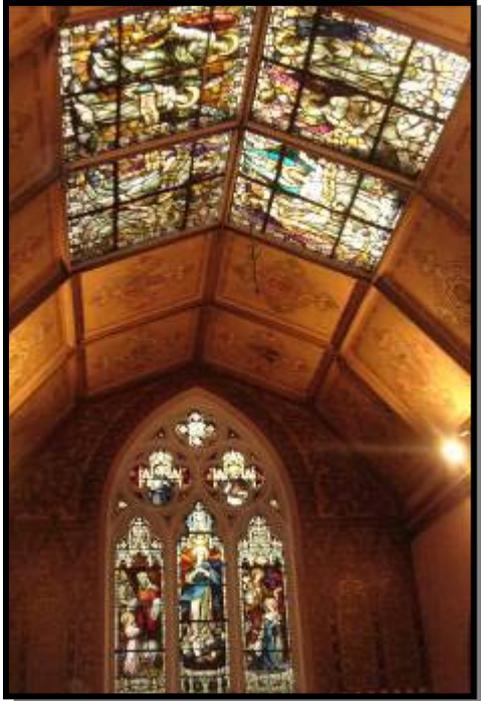
**Figure 13 Presentation Convent National School**



**Figure 14 The Church where Catherine McAuley Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley professed their vows, thus giving birth to the Sisters of Mercy**



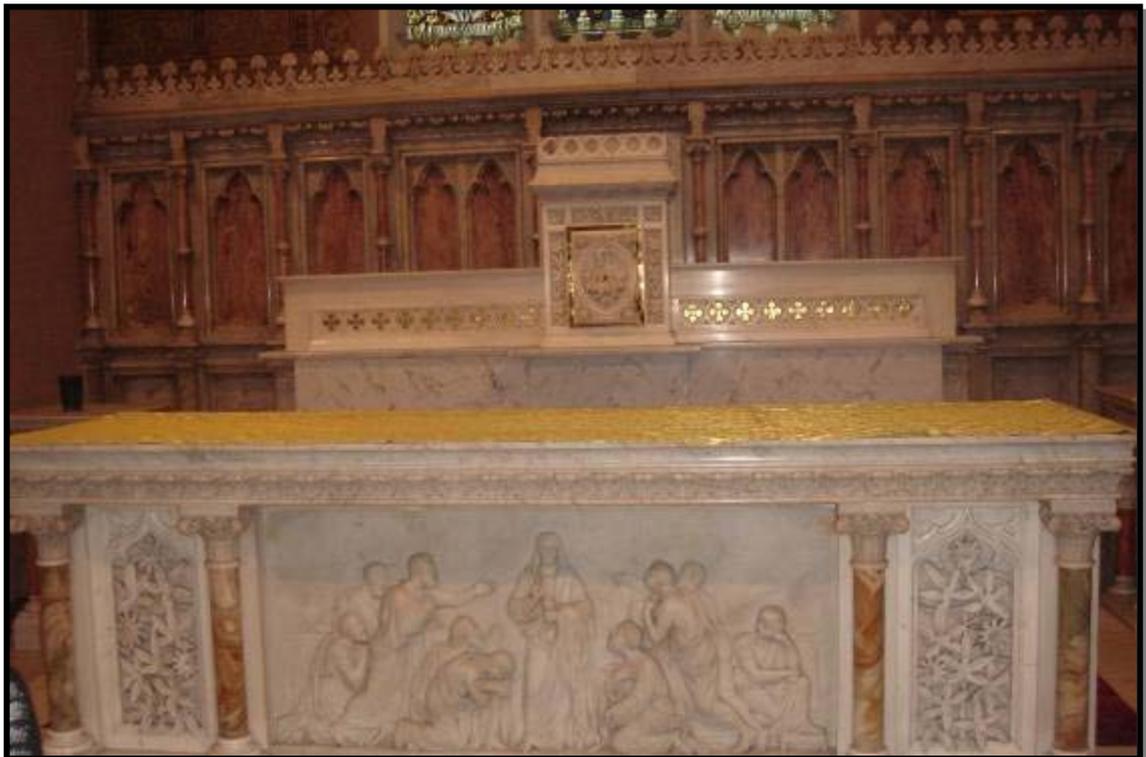
After professing her vows, Catherine stated the principal aims of the Congregation as "to educate poor girls, to lodge and maintain poor young women who are in danger...and to visit the sick and poor." What had begun as a dream now took its place, through the beneficence of William Callaghan and the urging of the Church, as the central purpose of the new Mercy Order.



**Figure 16** This is the Church ceiling where Catherine spent 15 months with the Presentation Sisters.



**Figure 15** This is the current Presentation Order Garden, where a Catherine's yellow rose bush exists today as a reminder of her journey and vision to develop a new Congregation.



**Figure 17** The alter where Catherine professed her vows.

### Day Three: Session Four Morning

The Grave Ritual: The morning began with a prayer in the Chapel where we heard the story of Catherine's last few days, leading up to the burial.

Catherine's health began to decline in 1841, and it was during her last trip to a new foundation in Birmingham that she began to make preparations for her last days, secure in the knowledge that the Holy See had granted confirmation of the Rule and her congregation was firmly established. The fear she had held of death for so long since her mother's death had blessedly faded. She died on November 11th, 1841 at Baggot Street, and was laid to rest, according to her wishes, in the ground with the poor.

Figure 18 She died on November 11th, 1841 at Baggot Street, and was laid to rest, according to her wishes, in the ground with the poor. During these times, the rich were buried above the ground in crypts. The grounds are a resting place for the other Sisters who died after Catherine.



Figure 19 The water course constantly flows. It has water representing the other Seven houses from around the world.

"Each day is a step we make towards eternity," she told her sisters, "and we shall continue thus to step from day to day until we take the last step, which will bring us into the presence of God."

The path of Mercy upon which Catherine McAuley faithfully walked, had finally led her into the presence of the God she loved and served with her whole heart.

### **Session five: Mass at Clarendon Street**

We walked into town from Baggot Street to St Therese Church where we celebrated Mass together. The walk was a constant reminder of Catherine and the Sisters Sunday ritual which was to give thanks to God.



**Figure 20** Outside on Baggot Street we begun our walk to celebrate Mass. Notice the Georgian Houses built by the British. This was a contrast to where Catherine spent her early days growing up on the other side of the Liffey River.



We gathered for Mass at Clarendon Street also because during Catherine's 13 Sisters died and where buried in crypt in the grounds of the Church. You will notice that the main entry of the Church is in a lane way. This is because no Catholic Church was to face a main road, giving a presence. Churches during this time were to be hidden from public view.

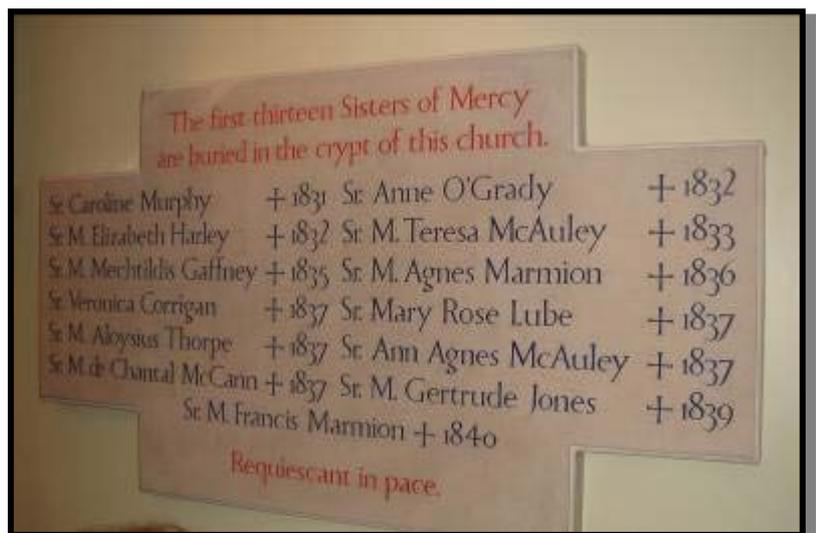
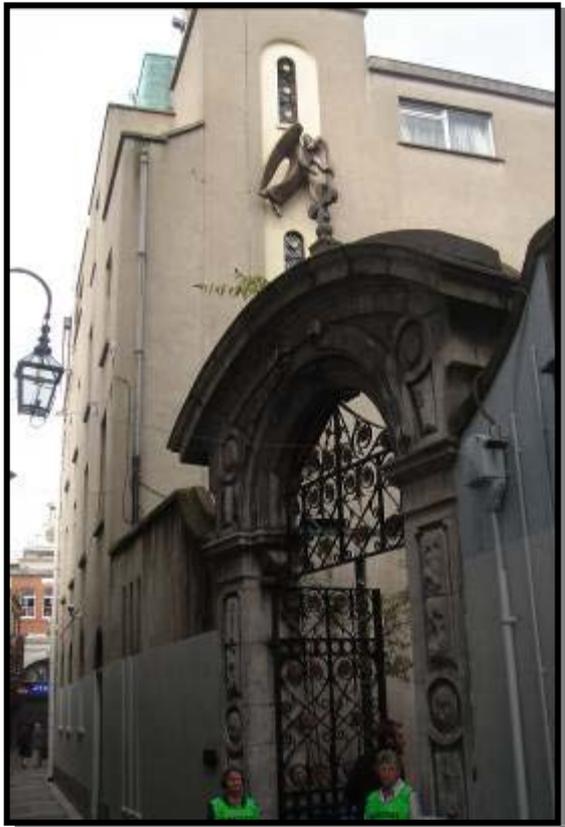


Figure 21 Thirteen Sisters died during Catherine's time.

## Session Six: Day Three Conclusion

The last session concluded with a lunch and a cuppa. Sister Collette gave thanks and reinforced the values of the Mercy Order, particularly the one of hospitality. We then moved to Catherine's room where we prayed and our candles were given to us.

As a participant the programme provided me with specialness particularly in the spirit of Catherine McAuley in the places and spaces where she lived and worked around Dublin. Living and being part of Catherine's House" for the first time spoke to me of the symbolic significance of this sacred place in the lives of many Mercy sisters who carry out her work around the world. The stories told acknowledged the dedication and commitment of one person's vision. To see her parish Church, to see where she lived and visualise how she might have lived during those times by walking the streets of Dublin. I not only appreciated seeing Coolock house and piecing together her journey to professing her vows at George's Hill. The whole educational experience has given me a new pathway in which to bring the Charism of the Mercy order with my community and colleagues, particularly those who are principals of schools whose heritage is embedded in the Mercy tradition. I feel blessed and privileged at this stage of my life to have had the opportunity to have been part of this programme.



**Figure 22** This is Catherine's room where she prayed and eventually passed away.



**Figure 23** In this room we shared a cuppa and danced. Catherine enjoyed talking and meeting with the others and dancing.

I wish to acknowledge the Sisters of Mercy at the International House in Dublin, Ireland.