

THE CHARISM OF CATHERINE MCAULEY

At Easter in 1841, just a few months before her death, Catherine McAuley was engaged as busily as ever in preparations at Baggot Street for the profession and reception of young women who were joining the sisters of mercy. In the midst of such activity she made time to pen “a few hurried lines” to Elizabeth Moore, rejoicing in the reality that

*All are good and happy. The blessing of unity still dwells amongst us
– and oh what a blessing – it should make all things pass into
nothing. All laugh and play together, not one cold stiff soul
appears....This is the Spirit of the order indeed – the true Spirit of
Mercy.¹*

If Catherine were standing in this auditorium with us this morning, I sense she might well repeat these words, as she witnessed the greetings, the welcome and the spirit of mercy that already animates our gathering! Today, I have been asked to explore with you those aspects of Catherine's story and spirituality which are the source of our unity as mercy women and men, be we involved in education in Herbarton, Westmead, Lilydale, Grafton, Yarrapos (Papua New Guinea) or nearer home in Perth.

We name this source of unity as **the charism**, and recently a friend sent me a video clip of an event which she thought might help to warm a chilly Melbourne morning! As I watched the story at the Antwerp railway

station unfold, it spoke to me of charisma, and I would like to commence this presentation by sharing it with you. Some of you may have already seen this on Youtube, but I suggest we watch this today asking ourselves 'what does this say to us about charisma?'

Viewing of video clip *2

This video clip encapsulates so many aspects of my understanding of charisma:

it holds a story, an energy, a dynamic which becomes real and actual only when it is believed, acted upon and shared

it invites different levels of participation as one is 'caught' into it,

it is a gift to be recognized and set free

it is certainly not an organization to be controlled

it is (as Joan Chittister says) mercury not clay

And in the story of the woman we celebrate at this conference, Catherine McAuley, charisma is, above all, a living passion for a particular dimension of the Gospel³

So, if we *start at the very beginning* of our Mercy story, we meet a woman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Dublin, whose life experiences and reflections had given her a deep personal understanding of the loving kindness of her God. In Chapter 3, Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy, Catherine states that **Mercy** (is) the

principal path pointed out by Jesus Christ to those who are desirous of following Him. ⁴

In her formative years, Catherine felt the pain of dislocation, poverty and religious struggle in her own life, and it was in these very experiences that she came to know the tenderness of the God of Mercy, expressed through the many kindnesses and providential goodness of relatives and friends. *"Where would we be if we had not first received mercy ourselves?"*⁵ was one of her oft-repeated challenges to the first group of young lay women who came to help her care for the poor and needy at the House of Mercy in Baggot Street. Surrounded by the daily distress of those on the Dublin streets, Catherine recognized her call to make a deep space for others in her heart, especially for the most needy. She understood the WHY of her endeavours very clearly, so that when she found kindred spirits in those who approached her to assist in her work, she felt eager to explore with them the WHAT and the HOW of bringing mercy to those in need.

Catherine was a woman of daring vision and courage, immense practicality, heartfelt compassion, humour and exceptional hospitality, and, within and beyond all these qualities, we know her as a woman of deep faith, who readily recognized a most marked **providential guidance** in her life. As she travelled throughout Ireland and further afield to make new foundations, Catherine reflected in one of her letters : *We have one solid comfort in all this tripping about: our hearts can always be in the same place, centred in God for whom alone we go forward or stay back*⁶

In response to an enquiry from a priest about the qualities necessary for a woman wishing to join the sisters of mercy, Catherine responded simply that all one needed was “*an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor.*”⁷ This is the heartbeat of what it means for each of us, religious and lay, to walk the path of Mercy, to carry forward the charism of Mercy, as so many of you do in your schools. While in every age and in each place we strive to interpret this call in terms of the times and situations in which we find ourselves, we are challenged to hold in careful balance our lives of prayer and our lives of service.

The story of Catherine McAuley's life is familiar to many of you: her early childhood was characterized by family love, the death of her parents left her dependent on the care of relatives and protestant friends, her twenty years with the Callaghans at Coolock (a suburb of Dublin), where she served as house manager and companion to Mrs Callaghan, enabled her to learn new skills and to grow in her dream to do something to better the lives of the poor and neglected. The significance of her Coolock years can never be underestimated - years when she had the opportunity to deepen her understanding and practice of her fledgling faith; years when she observed and learned the skills of personnel and business management; and, above all, years when her mercy heart expanded as she daily encountered the poor and needy and was enabled, through the generosity of the Callaghans, to offer them a **practical response**. As Mary Reynolds rsm reminds us: *Anything that advanced human dignity*

was worthy of Catherine's attention, and so the scope of her ministry and the span of those to whom she ministered was amazingly wide and varied⁸, both here at Coolock and later in each foundation. If Catherine were alive today in this 21st century, it is conjectured that *instead of the cries of the poor children of Dublin haunting her dreams*, this wide and varied scope of her ministry would span the cries of our suffering world . *She would no doubt have turned her energy to global interrelationships of rich and poor, knowing that as long as in any country the poor, the sick, the uneducated are oppressed or marginalised, the light of the Gospel is dimmed, and peace and justice in the world remain elusive ideals.*⁹ Certainly the charism of Mercy is being spread globally in many countries today (**show map**), and staff and students in our Mercy colleges support projects in these countries with great generosity and enthusiasm .

Endowed by Mr. Callaghan with a generous inheritance, Catherine set about building a house for poor servant girls and homeless women in Baggot Street, Dublin, in 1827. Her choice of this rather distinguished area of Dublin, where wealth abounded, was quite deliberate as she had very clear convictions that the rich had responsibility to support those less fortunate. She was soon to learn that not everyone adhered to her belief! Archbishop Murray encouraged her to write a letter to the residents of Baggot Street requesting financial assistance for the house of mercy. Rather than offering assistance, many respondents were very critical, sending missives that were often quite abusive and sarcastic in tone. Even

one of the clergy, Rev Matthias Kelly, expressed his displeasure, commenting that he *had no great idea that the unlearned sex could do any thing but mischief by trying to assist the clergy.*¹⁰

But criticism, misunderstanding and opposition did not daunt Catherine McAuley. She had a dream and she dared to be different. In these early years of foundation and in the expansion of later years, Catherine was impelled by **her daring vision**, to do *some lasting good for the poor*, to offer them the possibility of a new chance, determined that what needed to be done would be done, by some means or other. Time and again she 'defied the odds' - in finding shelter for the homeless girl from Kildare, in building a laundry at Baggot Street, in finding ways to accept young women into the congregation who did not meet the Bishops' requirement of a dowry, in outwitting the followers of the Crotty schism in Birr, in finding a leader to make the foundation at Galway at a time when, in her own words, she felt she had reached *a Stop, a full Stop - feet and hands are numerous enough, but the heads are nearly gone*¹¹.

It is little wonder that such a spirit attracted other like-minded laywomen, who were moved to do something practical to ease the suffering of the poor by offering them care and education. Within a few years, it was evident that, in line with the ecclesial and social culture of her times, the long-term future of these works of mercy would depend on her willingness to found a new religious congregation. As she wrote in a letter to Mary

Elizabeth Moore, *we who began were ready to do whatever was recommended*,¹² Given the assurance of church authorities that her new congregation would be free of enclosure so that she could work with the poor on the streets, Catherine and two other women entered the Presentation sisters' novitiate to prepare to make their vows as Sisters of Mercy on December 12, 1831.

Whilst she had little opportunity to study Scripture, Catherine's life resonated strongly with the biblical scholar's description of mercy as *an inner feeling of sympathy or love that shows itself outwardly in action*.¹³ Throughout her life, she generously responded to the needs of the poor and uneducated in ways that were **practical, innovative and highly professional**. Indeed, Catherine saw competence and compassion as two sides of the same coin. *"To teach well,"* she wrote, *"kindness and patience, though indispensable, will not suffice without a solid foundation and a judicious method. Education and accomplishments of the highest order are very desirable."*⁹ Right from the outset, Catherine recognized her need to research the best methods of educational practice and to work collaboratively with educational partners. In 1827, she and a companion, Miss Fanny Tighe, travelled to France to become acquainted with the methods and practice in the education of children in the slums, as she believed the poverty and conditions of the pupils there would be closely akin to those of the children on the streets of Ireland. Her ideal was to empower the poor by providing them with necessary opportunities.

Her correspondence to her sisters between 1836 and 1841, as each new foundation was established, reveals Catherine instructing them to always work collaboratively with the National Education Board and urging them to share her creativity in developing the Pension schools. These were truly wonderful Mercy innovations! Catherine established pension schools to educate young children of better-off, middle class parents for whom the fees demanded by the pay schools were prohibitive. The pension was nominal and, for those who could not afford it, Catherine wiped the debt. She certainly had the ability to imagine life differently! Catherine wanted to assist the emancipation of women through education and she was convinced that *no work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women; since whatever station they are destined to fill, their example and their advice will always have a great influence*¹⁴.

Catherine's **personality and her innate kindness** certainly shaped her educational philosophy: *Be ever ready to praise, to encourage, to stimulate, but slow to censure and still more slow to condemn. As more and more young women were attracted to assist her, either as religious or lay partners, Catherine imbued in them a sense of generosity and daring in the service of the poor. Catherine had known destitution in her life and knew the value of the **immediacy of help**. She had a particular ability to address urgent need in a practical and loving way, while at the same time addressing the systemic issues that underpinned those needs. On*

numerous occasions Catherine found herself broken hearted, as when she was unable to assist a servant girl who came to Coolock seeking shelter. She decried bureaucracy in such matters and determined to identify the real problem and to act upon it. I have a sense that one of Catherine's favourite questions must have been '**what if...?**' as she so often astutely wended her way around so many obstacles to find a lasting and compassionate solution for the poor!

Understandably, there were times when the zeal of the young women assisting her was sorely tested, as they found themselves ministering in places of squalor and deprivation. It was then that Catherine showed great leadership as she offered encouragement and advice, sometimes through verse. Refined educated women of her day would often use versification as a vehicle of communication, a literary form somewhat different from the Facebooks and Twitters of our day! To Elizabeth Moore, a young Superior at Limerick, Catherine wrote

Don't let crosses vex or tease
 Try to meet *all* with peace and ease
 Notice the faults of every day
 But often in a playful way

And when you seriously complain
 Let it be known to give you pain
 Attend to one thing —at a time
 You've 15 hours from 6 to 9

Be mild and sweet in all your ways
 Now and again—bestow some praise

Avoid all solemn declaration
All serious, close investigation.

Turn what you can into a jest
And with few words dismiss the rest
Keep patience ever at your side
You'll want it for a constant guide.

Show fond affection every day
And above all — devoutly pray
That God may bless the charge He's given
And make of you — their guide to heaven *10

Well, might she be speaking to Mercy leaders and educators today!

Catherine could also be quite **challenging and direct** whenever she felt her sisters were faltering in their courage and spirit. On one such occasion she expressed her disappointment that she had such *creep mouses (working) in such a cause*, *11 Speaking of the community at Naas, who were hesitant to extend their foundation, she wrote: *Naas is like the little chicken that belongs to the clutch called creepy crawly. I wish it would make a start.**12

It is clear that Catherine was a **very courageous woman** and, when her sisters or the poor were unjustly treated or neglected, she could speak and act with strength and determination! As she once reminded Mary Ann Doyle, *Do not fear offending anyone. Speak as your mind directs and always act with more courage when the "mammon of unrighteousness" is in question.**13

Catherine was a **woman of the church** and Mercies throughout the years have always valued this aspect of her charism as they have made significant contributions to local parishes and dioceses. Catherine had a

great respect for the clergy and frequently turned to them for counsel and support. She considered Fr Maher a *well proven friend whose interest (and advice) was most consoling because it is genuine*.¹⁴ Yet when misunderstandings arose with Dr. Meyler, who refused to provide a regular chaplain for her House of Mercy, or when Father Sheridan, the Parish Priest of Kingston, wrongly passed to her all debts for a school he had built, Catherine's sense of justice was sorely tested. Her letters at these times capture deep anguish in her heart, not simply for the strained relations with those who had characteristically offered her support and friendship, but even more especially for the poor whose daily care and education were now being diminished by bureaucratic or ecclesiastical whims. The strong tone of this correspondence reflects a woman with a deep sense of justice and certainly makes for interesting reading! Yet her capacity to remain faithful to her commitment to work for and within the structures of the church, even when she experienced injustice in some quarters, offers us a salutary example today when we experience this tension in our lives.

Despite the anguish of such matters and the heavy responsibilities she carried, Catherine's **characteristic perspective was lighthearted, cheerful and positive**. She had an immense freedom of spirit and she was delighted when she found this in her sisters and helpers believing that this would help them to respect others in their uniqueness and difference. As we read her letters and watch her interaction with others, we see how she related to all with deep affection and kindness. *Our mutual respect and*

*charity (our relationships), she wrote, should be cordial; now cordial is something that revives, invigorates and warms: such should be the effect of our love for each other.*¹⁵ When preparing her sisters for the reality of working with limited resources, Catherine reminded them that *there are things the poor prize more highly than gold, tho' they cost the donor nothing. Among these are the kind word, the gentle, compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows.*¹⁶ Mindful that her God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6), Catherine was rich **in forgiveness and understanding**. She frequently reminded her sisters that *Mercy receives the ungrateful again and again, and is never weary in pardoning them*¹⁶ What a challenge this holds for all engaged in the work of education! When our patience is severely tried by the misdemeanours and foibles of our students, when the pressure from others is demanding a quick decision and action to remedy a particular situation, how does a merciful heart respond – with patience, compassion and justice?

Catherine's relationships were also marked by **humour and exceptional hospitality**. She was gifted with a cheerful disposition and she did all in her power to encourage others to be happy and light-hearted, often through her playful verse, humorous stories and a humble manner. *You must be cheerful and happy, animating all around you,* she wrote to Frances Warde;¹⁷ On another occasion, she wrote *I would like to tell you all the little cheering things that God permits to fall in our way.*¹⁸ I have often thought

how interesting (and risky) it would be to commence a staff meeting with the invitation to tell each other *all the little cheering things that God (has permitted) to fall in our way* that week! Yes, the charism of mercy has a great sense of fun! I believe this thread in our charism contributes greatly to the 'ordinariness' and 'approachability' which many people associate with Mercy women and men. And we do love to celebrate!

As Catherine McAuley lay dying in November 1841, she reminded those gathered around her bed *to tell the sisters to get a good cup of tea when I am gone and to comfort one another.*¹⁹ She, who had extended such **warm and practical hospitality** to so many throughout her life, now ensured that her dying words would enshrine this hallmark of her mercy charism in the hearts and lives of all those who would follow her path of Mercy. To welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to visit the prisons, to teach the ignorant – these are the works of mercy which Catherine describes as *the business of our lives*²⁰

As we mercy women and men attend to *the business of our lives* as educational leaders in Catholic schools, we are invited **to kindle the flame of the charism of mercy** in our time and in our situations. This challenge is powerfully caught in a sculpture that stands at the entrance to the first school founded by Ursula Frayne in Melbourne at Fitzroy. It was commissioned to mark the 150 years of Mercy on this site and is the result of the conversations and dreams of the artist and senior students at that time. Catherine stands tall, energized, firmly planted in Mercy as

depicted in the cross, the shamrock and the eucalypt, yet she has one foot off the ground ready for action! In her hand she is holding the fire of mercy, kindled by the power and passion of her heart. And she is not alone! As the young mercy students greet her each day as they enter the college, she beckons to them, engages them, and invites them to join her in making lasting efforts for the poor, in the city just beyond.

May we also be animated by the kindling fire of Catherine McAuley's charism – **her daring vision and courage, immense practicality, heartfelt compassion, humour and hospitality** - and, within and beyond all these qualities, a **woman of prayer with a total trust in the Providence of God.** Let us continue to celebrate her with joy and deep gratitude.

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Endnotes

¹ Mary C Sullivan, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841, Letter 257

² Video clip Sound of Music –Central Station Antwerp: youtube.com

³ Joan Chittister, The Fire in these Ashes p.29

⁴ Original Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, Ch.3

⁵ quoted in Mary C Sullivan, Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy , p 6

⁶ Mary C Sullivan, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841, Letter 220

⁷ *ibid*: Letter 3

⁸ Quoted in LISTEN Vol 27, No.2 p22

⁹ Joanna Regan RSM & Isabelle Keiss RSM, Tender Courage, p 135

¹⁰ Mary C Sullivan in Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p 208

¹¹ *ibid* Letter 94

¹² *ibid* Letter 110

¹³ Buttrick, Biblical Understandings, p.356

¹⁴ *ibid* Letter 71

¹⁵ Practical Sayings of Catherine McAuley, p 15

¹⁶ Mary C Sullivan in Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p 181

¹⁷ *ibid* Letter 78

¹⁸ *ibid* Letter 53

¹⁹ Mary C Sullivan in Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy, p 243

²⁰ Mary C Sullivan, The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841, page 462

