

# GOD REVEALED IN TINY TREASURES

**An undoubted highlight of a visit to Scandinavia last month was a display at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, most famous for housing such treasures as Rembrandt's huge painting of *The Night Watch*. Much smaller but every bit as impressive were more than 60 exhibits in a collection called *Small Wonders*, a series of sacred images carved in boxwood in the early years of the 16th century.**

Some of the beads are as small as a walnut and known as 'prayer nuts'; other examples include rosaries, skulls, coffins and tiny altar pieces. All are extraordinarily intricate and detailed. They are generally believed to have come from the studio of Adam Dircksz, located in Holland, probably in Delft.

Months, perhaps years in the making, the tiny treasures offer access to a sacred world not reached by travel, but through the eyes of prayer and a sense of wonder.

Minute Latin inscriptions quote the bible, hymns associated with certain feast days, and Good Friday prayers about the 'sweet wood' of the cross.

It takes careful inspection to read the stories that unfold here. There are men on horseback wielding spears, dogs and camels and chained monkeys, women fainting, saints enduring, devils tormenting and angels singing. Among the highlights is a complete rosary, thought to have been made for Henry VIII of England and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, before his efforts to dissolve the marriage and break from the Catholic Church, including a ban on the use of rosaries.

The pieces are not without a touch of humour. One is a little figure sitting in front of a depiction of Christ before Pilate and wearing glasses, as if the micro-carver is subtly inviting us to a closer inspection of his tiny works. More than one bead is inscribed, 'Let us raise our heart by hand to God of the heavens' – as if by cradling these tiny objects, our minds and hearts can be lifted to another world.



*Prayer bead, with the crucifixion and Jesus carrying his cross.  
Photo from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.*

## ***He Inoi: Prayer***

### ***God in small things***

*If you are asked to lead this prayer or are able to share this reflection with someone else, begin by choosing from among your taonga or favourite treasures something that speaks to you of God's presence.*

*Begin by responding to these simple questions:*

*How did you come by this object? How long have you had it? What feelings does it evoke in you as you hold it? In what ways does it make you think of God and of God's place in your life?*

*Pause for a moment of silent reflection, and then invite whoever has been listening to make a response to what you have shared.*

*May God of small wonders be praised!*

As I explored this extraordinary exhibition, I thought of Catherine McAuley and her ability to keep the awareness of God in the forefront of her mind, despite her busyness and distance from home. 'We have one solid comfort amidst this little tripping about,' she wrote towards the end of her life. 'Our hearts can always be in the same place, centred in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back.' Her reflective spirit was practised to a high degree, born of constant fidelity to the God who called her. 'Prayer is a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian, but its growth depends entirely on the care we take to nourish it.'

In a month that by long tradition celebrates Catholic devotion to the rosary, we have the chance to capture something of the inner reflectiveness of Mercy's founder, and to find the presence of God, no matter how small or earth-bound the objects that catch our attention.

**– Dennis Horton**

# MERCY'S EDUCATIONAL GOALS AIM AT TRANSFORMATION

No one knew better than Catherine McAuley what a difference education can make to changing human lives and offering hope to people who have little chance of better prospects. It is worth recalling that the Ireland of her day was marked by huge social problems and inequalities. A widespread failure of the potato crop had led to a rural migration into urban areas already suffering from unemployment and poverty. This was an Ireland, too, marked by the marginalisation of women and oppression of Catholics.

Catherine opened her House of Mercy in 1827 partly as a school for young women, where they could learn skills to earn a living and begin to provide for themselves. More than 200 young girls were enrolled in the first year.

As one of her biographers notes, Catherine knew from her ministry in Dublin's streets "that permanent improvement for its slum dwellers could only come through provision of education." Her focus was reflective of the needs of her times, when educational chances for women and girls were few.

As early as 1825, she travelled with a colleague to France, to see for herself how other religious Congregations were teaching poor children from slum areas. Soon after her own Congregation was formed in 1831, the Sisters of Mercy began to run pension schools, charging a modest tuition fee from the children of middle-class families which could not afford to send them to full fee-paying schools. Funds from the pension schools helped to provide education for poor children.

Against this background, it is not hard to see why the Sisters of Mercy have recognised Quality Education, Goal 4 of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals as one of eight most closely aligned to their own mission. From the time they were founded, Catherine's Sisters shared her understanding of education as transformative – making a difference to people's lives and empowering them to pursue their hopes and dreams for themselves and their families.

The key indicators targeted by the UN through this goal over the next 15 years include the aim that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education, and that they are prepared for school by having access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education.



The targets also include a commitment to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. There is also a call to substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

The targets seek to eliminate gender disparities in education

and to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including those with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

There is a commitment through these targets to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge they need to promote sustainable development, including human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence, global citizenship and an appreciation of cultural diversity and care for the environment.

Mercy education seeks to empower its students to develop their potential as human beings, equipping them to make choices that will help to transform their world through lives of service to others. It encourages young women especially to believe that no field of human endeavour is beyond their reach and that women can do whatever their hearts and minds decide. Catherine McAuley hoped to prepare children for their place in this world, "without unfitting them for heaven." It is a goal that continues to be pursued in Mercy schools and colleges around the world.