

Mercy kindling fire that Christ came to cast

Ngā mihi atawhai - greetings to all in mercy! As another Mercy Day looms, many of us in Mercy ministries around the world will be preparing for the anniversary of the date which marks the opening of Catherine McAuley's House of Mercy in Dublin 185 years ago. Worth noting is that the venture begins without a formal ceremony. Even before the house is finished, Catherine's young friend Anna Maria Doyle and the founder's 15-year-old cousin Catherine Byrn move in, on what happens to be the feast of our Lady of Mercy, September 24. The rest, as they say, is history.

The house opens, not with a ceremony, but with the works of mercy being done. Two hundred poor children were enrolled on opening day; by year's end, the school roll had reached 500, and a network of other deeds of mercy had taken shape. Catherine herself didn't move into Baggot Street until later the following year; she was living in her late sister's home, caring in one way or another for nine or ten children.

And then there was Mrs Harper, old and poor and mentally ill. Rather than consign her to an asylum, Catherine had taken her home to Coolock House and nursed her for four or five years until her death. Not as pleasant as coddling sweet children, writes biographer Mary Sullivan. From the 'perversity of madness, she conceived an absolute hatred for Catherine, and her language in speaking of her was generally virulent and contemptuous.'

We're indebted to nephew Willie for recalling his glee when his aunt, attempting to get clean clothes on Mrs Harper, 'had great trouble to procure a large pocket which the old lady wore and which, when got, was brought into the kitchen and its contents, consisting of tame mice and bread crumbs, emptied onto the floor to the delight of the cats.' These days, as we're often having to think of special care for those with dementia, we need to remember that Catherine was here before us.

There was, too, from around this time the sharp recollection which never left her of a young woman in service, whose virtue was in danger, presumably from the sexual

In Catherine's steps

E Te Atua Kaiwetewete:

God, you come to liberate and free,
you show your power in the letting-be of being.
Let your wairua be the breathe we draw
whenever Mercy joins us.
Stretch our minds,
to see where your love waits to go,
and fire our hearts
with impulses that match your own.
May nothing we do or decide
curb the outreach of your embrace.
As we remember the anniversary
of Catherine's first House of Mercy,
renew in each of us her commitment
to all who wait to be set free,
in mercy's name. Amen.

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Imaging Mercy Today



SISTER of Mercy Salome Ioane, with a group of Mercy Young Adults in Auckland, preparing for their commissioning on Mercy Day later this month.

advances of the young master of the house. She came to Coolock looking for help and a place to live. Catherine sought assistance from established houses of refuge but encountered rigid admission procedures against which she would be dead set for the rest of her life. The admission committees were often convened only once or twice a month. The waiting proved calamitous for the girl, and Catherine never forgot the painful lesson which this incident taught her.

There are some strands that draw this reflection together. 'The poor need our help today, not next week,' must be one of them. There's the sense that, in some real way, the works of mercy form the business of our lives, and that being poor and vulnerable may involve not just shortage of cash, but the lack of whatever keeps people from being free to make the changes they'd like to see in their own lives or of those who are close to them.

Mercy is also about being ready to go wherever we're asked, and staying only as long as the invitation lasts. And there's the sense, which Catherine herself seemed to have absorbed deeply, of being a work in progress. One in which God is the true driver, and a journey on which we take short, careful steps rather than giant strides, resolving to 'be good today but better tomorrow', so that in the end we are what God is calling us to become.

Our thoughts are especially with the Mercy Young Adults who will be commissioned at a Mercy Day celebration in Auckland this month. May they be affirmed in their generous desire to be women of mercy; and may they find in one or other of our ministries the opportunity to follow where their young hearts would lead them. For, as Catherine knew so well, it's when mercy is done that the fire which Christ came to cast is kindled.

- Dennis Horton