



A year of grace, despite the shadow of Omicron

By DENNIS HORTON

No 15. January 2022

New Years begin full of promise. So, it must have seemed to Catherine McAuley 190 years ago, as she prepared for the first reception ceremony at her House of Mercy in Baggot Street, when eight women entered the newly formed Congregation on January 23. No one could have foreseen how that year of 1832 would unfold.

Within weeks, an epidemic of Asiatic Cholera which had swept across Europe, would have reached the Irish capital, and Catherine would respond to a request for her sisters to staff the cholera depot set up by medical authorities in nearby Townsend Street, equipped for 50 patients but almost immediately enlarged. Catherine arranged for relays of four sisters to be relieved every three or four hours, from eight in the morning until nine at night. She remained at the depot throughout each day, comforting patients, praying with them and assuring them, despite the rumours, that none would be buried before they had died.

Dr Hart, chief physician at the depot, attributed its comparatively low death rate to the ministrations of Catherine and her sisters. Known as the ‘walking nuns’ for their willingness to go where they were most needed, they were described in this instance as the kneeling nuns ‘since often too busy to rise, they moved from bed to bed for long intervals on their knees’. By June the epidemic was under control. Sisters of Mercy remained at the Townsend Street Depot until shortly before Christmas. Remarkably none of them contracted cholera despite their long hours of work. Catherine would later recall her memories of sisters getting home after nine, ‘loosening their cinctures on the stairs and stopping, overcome with sleep.’

The first weeks of this ‘annus horribilis’ for Catherine were marked not only by the cholera outbreak but by personal grief at the loss of Elizabeth Harley who was one of the three original Sisters of Mercy, including Catherine herself, who had made their novitiate the year before, and who died at Easter in 1832 at age 24

from pulmonary tuberculosis. As she was dying, Catherine had to deal with a tirade from a wealthy neighbour, upset at the Congregation’s ‘utterly sinful’ plan to hold a bazaar to raise much-needed funds. A contemporary source notes that Catherine ‘listened with exemplary patience which she thought amply rewarded when at length her visitor presented her with £15 for the poor.’

What will 2022 bring to Mercy in our part of the world? Anticipated milestones include Vatican approval of plans to create Whānau Mercy Ministries, a new lay-led venture which will own and oversee ministries developed by Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand. Meanwhile those same ministries will address problems caused by Covid-19, including some surgeries deferred at our hospital in Dunedin, funds lost by hospice shops during months of lockdown in Auckland and new ways for our



‘I was sick, and you visited me’ – drawing by Sister of Mercy Clare Agnew, illustrating the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, 1840

community development agencies to support clients facing needs created by the pandemic. So, the work of caring for some of our most needy and vulnerable citizens continues.

The vision of Mercy remains the priority, turning mission into practical action. Catherine’s simplest and most practical lesson was that we ‘be good today but better tomorrow’, hoping to get on, ‘taking short, careful steps, not great strides.’ And her prayer, at the beginning and end of every year, was that all should be done with trust in God’s mysterious but unfailing providence. Let that be our prayer too, as despite Omicron this year of grace unfolds.