



Mercy Day 2022—breaking our boundaries

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Mercy Day this year – September 24 – falls just five years short of two centuries since Catherine McAuley opened her house in Baggot Street, shedding a light for Dublin’s poor, sick and uneducated in ways that would never have been possible without the fire that burned in the heart of this remarkable woman.

She would not have thought of herself as a radical or a stirrer, though there were clergy at the time who considered her out of line, doing work that was best left to priests. The truth is that she was driven by a compassion deep within, reaching out to make a difference wherever she could to lives that were heavily burdened.

Catherine had learnt first-hand, from years she spent living and working in the Callaghan household, how vulnerable were the lives of those in service, especially young women. She knew them, not as statistics but as flesh-and-blood people, and could see how totally dependent they were on the tender compassion of others.

She had never planned to found a new religious congregation but heeded not only the advice of the bishop of her day but also the pleas of the younger women in her community who wanted the work they had begun with her to flourish. She set to with plans that were innovative and original – enabling her ‘walking sisters’ to move beyond the cloister to serve the poor, sick and uneducated. She was committed to best practice – in teaching and nursing, she sought to discern the most effective ways of working for those in need.

Breaking boundaries meant, for Catherine, responding generously to every invitation and request for help, no matter how limited her resources; ‘divide and share’ was her rule of thumb. While passionate in responding to mercy’s call, she was not an empire builder. She let new foundations get on with their work, advising them to go only where they were invited and to stay as long as they were needed. In the 10 years between her establishing the Sisters of Mercy and her death from tuberculosis in 1841, 14 separate communities were founded, 12 of them in Ireland and two in England. Within nine years of her death, Mercy had reached the antipodes, with foundations in Australia and New Zealand.

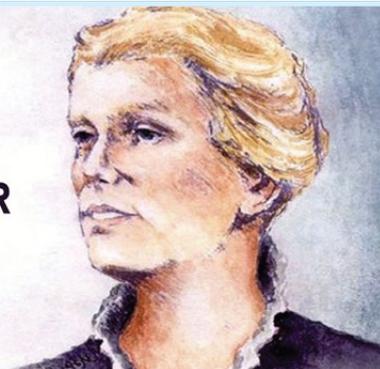
THE boundaries have continued to break. A major step was taken in 2005 when Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand, after a lengthy process of discernment, formed a new Institute from

their four historic congregations. Situated principally in New Zealand, the Congregation includes a small presence in Tonga and Samoa; it continues to pursue a bicultural journey through its relationship with Māori, with Treaty commitment seen by sisters as integral to their Christian faith.

A Mercy reflection process (MIRP), sponsored by Mercy International Association in 2015 saw sisters and partners in mission around the world join to create a Mercy global presence, exploring new ways of being and doing mercy. The process identified two critical and interconnected points of focus – the displacement of peoples and the degradation of Earth. Responding to the cries of the poor and of the Earth led MIA to a new vision statement, inviting sisters and their partners in mission to engage actively in protecting what Pope Francis has named ‘our common home’, witnessing to the sacredness of all creation.

BREAKING boundaries in the future will be explored especially through Whānau Mercy Ministries, the public juridic person being created by Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, as sisters place their incorporated ministries entirely in lay hands. This will complete a process that has unfolded over recent times, as lay people have assumed growing responsibility for staffing, managing and providing governance for these healthcare, education and community development ministries. Their share in Mercy’s ministries is a step towards the call from Vatican II for lay people to work at transforming society by the light of the gospel.

A question to ponder or discuss this Mercy Day: what boundary is waiting now for us to break? Mauri ora!



Catherine McAuley
BOUNDARY BREAKER
Mercy Day 2022

Graphic by Marie Henderson for Mercy International Association