



Religious Communities serving in Diocese of Metuchen

Part 1: Sisters of Mercy

Irish heiress used faith, wealth to found the Sisters of Mercy

By Mercy Sister Francesca Holly

“God can change and form and re-form any of his creatures to fit them for the purposes he designs.”

These words of Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, reflect the life of the woman from Dublin, Ireland, whose order of vowed women is considered the largest group of English speaking religious in the world.

Catherine was born in 1778 into an Ireland that was heavily controlled by Protestant England, which persecuted Catholics for their religion and lifestyle. More than 3,500 taverns, bars and drinking houses tempted Catholics to forget their poverty, servitude, and lack of meaningful employment, keeping them powerless in their own country.

Before the English took over, Catherine’s father had been a wealthy lord. Even after the British took over, James McAuley always saw to the religious education of all his household, including his little daughter. From her mother, Catherine inherited culture and refinement. Although she was only six when her beloved father died, she never forgot the beginnings of her faith learned at her father’s knee. Catherine kept in her heart the legacy of her father’s Catholic instructions for the servants and poor of his household and their neighborhood.

The rest of her youth was spent with relatives who forbade the study of religion and treated the family as poor relations. Catherine learned her faith in secret and continued to grow in knowledge of Catholicism.

At the age of 25, having turned down many prospects of matrimony, she moved

into the home of the Callahans, a wealthy and elderly couple. She ran the household and provided companionship for Mrs. Callahan.

Her kindness and dedication caused them to think of her as the daughter they never had and allowed her to attend church and receive instruction from the parish priests. Upon the death of the Callahans and after getting to know the problems of the poor in Dublin, she inherited the wealth of the couple for whom she had worked for almost 20 years.

Now independent at the age of 44, Catherine McAuley was a wealthy heiress able to pursue her dream of helping the poor women and youngsters of Dublin. She would now be able to see that they could learn to support themselves and better their lives. The leading Catholic Church men became her directors calling her “the sainted Miss McAuley,” and aiding her in the dream of building her house on Baggot Street in Dublin to aid the poor.

Other wealthy young Catholic women came to help her as she began a school for poor children and a place where poor young women could live and study. The quick growth of the home and the young ladies living there caused the Church leaders to suggest that she form an order of religious sisters. So, although Catherine did not choose to become a sister, through the Church leaders of her time she agreed to found the order of The Sisters of Mercy. She wanted them to be able to leave the convent, which was unusual for the time. In some places her sisters are known as “The Walking Nuns.” At the age of 52, she was willing to adopt new ideas and share them with all those who wanted them. God was the source and goal of all she ac-

complished “for the poor, sick, and uneducated.” These words are still a part of the vows of the Sisters of Mercy worldwide.

In 10 years, Mother Catherine McAuley had accepted 150 young women who wished to join the group and work in 14 different foundations in Dublin and England for the glory of God, destitute women, orphans and the education of the poor.

Catherine died in 1841 and within the next two years small groups of Mercy sisters left Ireland to establish foundations in the east and west coasts of the United States, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and Argentina.

In 1990, Pope John Paul declared her venerable and placed her on the path

toward possible sainthood.

For many years, Sisters of Mercy staffed 16 schools in the Diocese of Metuchen.

In the Diocese of Metuchen, the Sisters of Mercy serve at Sacred Heart Parish, South Plainfield; Immaculate Conception School, Spotswood; Mount St. Mary House of Prayer, Watchung; McAuley Hall Health Care Center, Watchung; Mount St. Mary Academy, Watchung; Raritan Bay Catholic Preparatory School (Sacred Heart), South Amboy; St. John Neumann Pastoral Center, Piscataway; St. James Parish, Woodbridge; Catholic Charities, Phillipsburg; and Warren Haven Nursing Home, Oxford.



Mercy Sister Francesca Holly

“God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.” — Cardinal John Newman

From my earliest years in Catholic school in New York City, I felt the kindness and saw the beauty of the quiet women who taught me. Upon moving to New Jersey, I continued to be fascinated by these pleasant, holy women who were always there and always moving in quiet and peaceful surroundings. I helped in the first grade as a sort of teacher aide at lunch and just loved the 25 youngsters — all of them — in my charge. I knew then I was going to be a sister.

I had decided that I wanted to go to a boarding school in New York after attending a summer camp for Catholic girls. My dear father saw four years of weekend travel to the city ahead of him

and asked the principal if the Sisters of Mercy in New Jersey had a boarding academy. So one day, my Dad and I traveled to Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung. At that time, they had residents from seventh grade through senior year. The first sister I met there was in the dormitory putting curlers in a boarder’s hair. That sister and I were friends for 64 years. She passed away only this past year.

This was a marvelous introduction to the sisterhood for me. We had not only holy women but the smartest women teaching. They knew everything from sewing and cooking to science, languages, acting and singing. And they were always there from Mass and prayers in the morning to sitting outside our rooms at night to tell us adventures they had, books they read, operas they had seen and life they had lived.

This was a most wonderful preparation for me. Now, 57 years later, with degrees in English Literature and Theology, having taught in elementary school, high school and adult education, I am still learning what God wants to teach me. I have worked in college administration. I have experienced many good times, made wonderful friends, and have returned to the place where it all began. Older and slower I can say with the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, “Will we all meet in Heaven? Oh, what a joy, even to think of it!”

Reflection by a Sister of Mercy

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