A House of Mercy begins … A Resource for Mercy Day

**Theme: “A House of Mercy begins … and continues today”**

**Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country**

*We gather today as people of Mercy, acknowledging the original custodians of the lands on which we are each situated.*

*We acknowledge and give thanks for the approximately 500 First Nations of this island, their people and their culture, their care for the land, plants, animals and waterways. We pay our respects to elders past and present..*

*May we be strengthened in our resolve to walk with them and all First Nations peoples on the journey towards reconciliation and healing.*

**Introduction to our theme: “A House of Mercy begins … and continues today”**

Every year, around this time of the feast day of Our Lady of Mercy on September 24, as members of the Mercy family around the world, we take time to reflect upon and celebrate the rich heritage handed down through our founders. The first House of Mercy commenced at Baggot Street in Dublin on this day in 1827. In 2021, on September 24, Mercy Ministry Companions was established as a Ministerial Public Juridic Person, so we celebrate this day for a number of reasons.

In her book ‘***The Path of Mercy’***, Mary Sullivan rsm provides her readers with a glimpse of why the day we call ‘Mercy Day’ is so significant for us.

Catherine McAuley, a laywoman who had not yet founded the Sisters of Mercy, received a substantial inheritance after the death of the Quaker couple, Catherine and William Callahan, for whom she had cared at Coolock House for nearly 20 years. William Callahan, who died on November 10, 1822, had left a bequest of approximately 25,000 pounds (approx. $AUS 5.6 million today). Catherine was well aware of the needs of young women and children amid the poverty of Dublin at the time. She wanted to use the money from the bequest to build a house where women and children in need could be safe and learn skills which would enable them to earn an income. Mary Sullivan writes:

“*On June 22, 1824, [Catherine] leased for one hundred and fifty years from George Augustus Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, a plot of land, 100 feet by 175 feet, on the corner of Baggot Street and Herbert Street, in southwestern Dublin near the Grand Canal circling the south of the city, at an annual rent of 60 pounds. The land … was in a fashionable area of wealthy homes, two long streets east and west of the magnificent Georgian rowhouses surrounding Merrion Square.*” (p. 55) Looking back, we know that Catherine wanted the poor to be visible to the wealthy and for safe employment in the homes of the wealthy to be possible for the young women in her care.

It might bring a smile to our faces today to read that, in the lease, Catherine had to promise that:

“*… she would not use the land for ‘a tavern, Ale-house, Soap-boiler, Chandler, Baker, Butcher, Distiller, Sugar Baker, Brewer, Druggist, Apothecary, Tanner, Skinner, Lime-burner, Hatter, Silversmith, Coppersmith, Pewterer, Blacksmith or any other offensive or noisy trade whatsoever – a set of possibilities amusingly far from her intentions. Fortunately, a ‘Place of service for very poor people’ was not on the list*.” (pp. 55-56)

Catherine’s plan was “*to build a large house that would serve as a shelter for homeless servant girls and young women, a school for poor female children and a residence for any lay women who wished to join her in these endeavours, as well as in visiting the sick and dying poor*.” (p. 56)

She oversaw the planning and the construction of the house on Baggot Street in Dublin while still living at Coolock. As we can imagine, the construction of this new building drew great interest. Anna Maria Doyle, was keen to assist Catherine in this work. Eventually, a date was set for the various works of mercy on Baggot Street to commence. Mary Sullivan writes:

“*Events moved rapidly. Anna Maria wished Catherine to set a date, soon, so she did. She picked September 24, 1827. They later realized they had chosen the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, and together agreed to place the infant establishment under the patronage of the Mother of God… it would be a ‘House of Mercy’. Later, when its works of mercy were more fully operational, they would ask Archbishop Daniel Murray for permission to use the name publicly*.” (p. 64)

The numbers of women seeking to work alongside Catherine grew rapidly. Eventually, Catherine came to the realization that for the work to continue, she would need to give it stability by establishing a new religious Congregation. She and Anna Maria Doyle went to the Presentation Sisters’ Convent in Georges Hill, Dublin, to undertake their training and the Sisters of Mercy were founded on December 12, 1831, a little over four years since the first House of Mercy has been established. As Catherine said “*it commenced with two, Sr Doyle and I*”. She also stated to her Sisters that the works of mercy were “*the business of our lives*”.

The Congregation continued to grow and eventually expanded to many countries. In 1846, Ursula Frayne and her companions arrived in Fremantle, bringing the work of the Sisters of Mercy to Australia. Since then, many women and men of mercy have worked alongside the Sisters establishing places, spaces and houses of Mercy in Australia and across the world. Their work continues today in (insert name of your organization or ministry)!

The link below, from the Mercyworld website, provides a snapshot of Catherine’s life. The fifth button shows a photo of the original House of Mercy.

<https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/introducing-catherine/>

You can take a virtual tour of the house, now *Mercy International Centre*, by clicking on the link below:

<https://www.mercyworld.org/our-centre/>

***Pope Francis*** **speaking during the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016**

During the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016, Pope Francis spoke often about God’s mercy to us and affirmed our call, as people of good will, to show mercy to others. He reminded those gathered in St Peter’s Square in Rome at a Jubilee audience on June 30, 2016, that “*the works of mercy are not theoretical ideas, but concrete testimonies. They oblige us to roll up our sleeves to alleviate suffering.*”

**For reflection**: What connections can you see between Catherine’s vision for the original House of Mercy and your work? Who are the people who inspire you to ‘roll up your sleeves’ in the service of others?

[If the gathering is F2F, some time for sharing with the person beside you can be included].

**Song: Circle of Mercy (Youtube clip of children from schools in Townsville, QLD)**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29dL0LaKVCo**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29dL0LaKVCo)

**Refrain:** All are welcome in the circle of mercy, all are welcome in the circle, the circle of love.

**We pray together on our Mercy feast day**

The founders of our organizations have left us a legacy, a rich tapestry with examples of how we might respond as Jesus did to the Gospel call to love God and to love our neighbour. On this Mercy Day, we pray especially for everyone connected to our Mercy ministry, that we may continue to ‘roll up our sleeves’ and be a face of mercy and compassion for the people with whom we work.

1. For those whose vision and leadership continue to bring life to our organization, especially in the difficult times.

***Response: We give thanks.***

1. For those who bring comfort, practical assistance and shelter to people in need.

***Response: We give thanks***

1. For those who care for and visit people who are ill, living with disability, in prison or grieving the loss of family or loved ones.

***Response: We give thanks.***

1. For those who care for our vulnerable earth and for those who offer daily gestures of kindness and compassion to all who are suffering.

***Response: We give thanks.***

1. For those who educate and encourage others and develop the skills, knowledge and confidence of vulnerable adults and young people.

***Response: We give thanks***

1. For those who take the time to listen to the sorrows of others, especially those who are ill or in physical, mental or emotional distress.

**Response: *We give thanks***

**So we pray together**

In the words of Mary Sullivan rsm, a Sister of Mercy of the Americas, who died in March of this year, we pray:

“*If we wish to sow the seeds of real hope in our world, I think Catherine McAuley would say: This is the way we must do it – one person at a time; one answering of the figurative doorbell, one opening of the figurative door, one embrace of the stranger, one welcoming of the other, one sharing of our bread and milk – one person at a time*.”

Let us take Catherine’s example to heart and may we have the courage and confidence to respond as she did, to the needs of the people around us, Amen.

**Prepared by Annette Schneider rsm**