

INTERNATIONAL MERCY RESEARCH CONFERENCE

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**“FIRE CAST ON THE EARTH – KINDLING”:
BEING MERCY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

HISTORY OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY OF IRELAND

in terms of the

MINISTRY OF SPIRITUALITY

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Introductory Clarification:

In dealing with the development of the Ministry of Spirituality of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland there is a point of clarification that needs to be addressed at the outset, that is, the distinction between the 'Spirituality of Ministry' and the 'Ministry of Spirituality.'

The basic, predominant spirituality which each of us brings to ministry, that which motivates us at the very core of our being, enriches the diverse expressions of Mercy ministries in which we are engaged, and in this way all of them may be said to be 'spiritual.' On the other hand there is the specific ministry of spirituality which, in an intentional way, puts the focus on learning about God; fostering a relationship with God; and finding meaning in our live experiences in accordance with this relationship. It is the latter that will be dealt with in this paper.

The paper hopes to look briefly at the Ministry of Spirituality, offered by the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland through the years, under four headings:

1. The life time of Catherine McAuley and her early associates;
2. The long period of mainly institutionalised ministry;
3. Post Vatican II diversification;
4. Present day more collaborative style of the ministry.

1. Catherine and her Early Associates

On being asked by Fr. Gerald Doyle what the requisites were for acceptance of candidates into her new Institute Catherine replied, 'Besides an ardent desire to be united to God and to serve the poor she must have'¹ Whatever other gifts or talents these young women possessed they were deemed secondary to these two fundamental desires. Catherine, herself, undertook the formation of new members, and while they had a well-balanced life between prayer, work and recreation, she put a lot of energy into the spiritual formation of the young Sisters. She read to them from spiritual books on a daily basis;² tediously transcribed from the few spiritual books available;³ and encouraged those who were able to translate religious works from other languages, especially French.⁴ She guided them through their retreats prior to reception and profession,⁵ and prepared them in every way to transmit these spiritual values in their future ministries.

One has only to take up Catherine's original Rule⁶ to see the importance she placed on the Ministry of Spirituality. It is threaded through the three chapters on ministry: *Of the schools; On Visitation of the Sick; Of the Admission of Poor Women;* and gives her followers explicit instruction on how they are to implement this aspect of their care of 'the poor, sick and ignorant.' It is summed up in her words, '*the good of souls is what the sisters shall have principally in mind.*'⁷

Catherine's early life experiences were the springboard for her future ministry. Among these was the inadequacy she felt of her knowledge of Catholic Doctrine when confronted by the taunts of visitors to the Armstrong and Callaghan households. Obviously she was determined to ensure that such ignorance of faith would not continue in the new age of *Catholic Emancipation*, won for the Irish people by Daniel O'Connell in 1829. It is interesting to note that in the chapter, *Of the Schools*, there is not one mention of the secular curriculum, not even '*the Three's Rs*,' but Catherine goes into great detail about religious instruction, preparation for the sacraments, and devotional practices to be encouraged.⁸

¹ Sullivan, Mary C. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley – 1818-1841*, Four Courts Press ; the Catholic University of America Press, p. 77 (Letter to Rev. Gerald Doyle, Sept.5th. 1836)

² Degan, Sr. M. Bertrand, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, Browne and Nolan Ltd., Dublin, 1958, pp.137,138

³ Letter of Mary Clare Moore, Bermondsey, August 23, 1844.

⁴ Muldrey, Sister Mary Hermenia, *Abounding in Mercy – Mother Austin Carroll*, Habersham, New Orleans, 1988, pp. 123 and 371

⁵ *Retreat Instructions*

⁶ *The Rule and constitutions of the Religious called Sisters of Mercy* Browne and Nolan Ltd., Nassau Street, Dublin, pp. 4-16,

⁷ *Ibid.* p.11

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 5-6

It was in order to bring spiritual solace to the patients of Sir Patrick Dunn's Hospital that Anna Maria Doyle urged Catherine to approach Archbishop Murray for permission to undertake visitation of Catholic patients in the hospital.⁹ It was the same desire, that people would be comforted in their last days and prepared for a happy death, which encouraged the early Sisters of Mercy to respond to the request to work in the Townsend Street Depot during the cholera epidemic of 1832.¹⁰ Of course the sisters also ministered to the physical needs of those afflicted with the disease, but it was the spiritual dimension of the sisters' care that distinguished the Townsend Depot from other improvised hospitals in the city.

Young women who were invited to Baggot Street 'as to their home' were not only to be given skills to fit them for future employment, but they also became practiced in prayer and meditation, were prepared for the sacraments and guarded against the dangers that surrounded them.¹¹

Foundations

Conditions of deprivation which were so prevalent in Dublin in the early 1830s were reflected throughout the whole of Ireland and it wasn't long before the services of Sisters of Mercy were sought from their Dublin Convent. The pattern for the new foundations was based on life as lived at Baggot St. Each house became autonomous and the appointed superior took responsibility for the formation of novices who came in great numbers. She also was responsible for establishing schools, arranging for visitation of the sick poor and in most cases setting up a House of Mercy and/or Orphanage.

Educating the young in the schools, visiting the sick in their homes and in hospital, requesting permission to instruct inmates of workhouses and gaols took a lot of dedication and courage especially in the period prior to, during and after the 'Great Starvation' (1836-1847).

There was a lot of controversy among the most of the bishops about the Education System, set up in 1831, but Archbishop Murray (Dublin) and Bishop Murphy (Cork) were in favour of giving it a chance to prove itself, so Catherine McAuley applied to be affiliated with the new Board in 1834. Among the reasons she gave for doing so was that:

⁹ Derry Manuscript, as quoted in *It Commenced with Two* by Bonaventure Brennan rsm, published by the Sisters of Mercy, Northern Province, 2001, p.22

¹⁰ *Ibid* p.38

¹¹ Degnan, Sr. M.Bertrand, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, Browne and Nolan Ltd., Dublin, 1958, p.59

There was an important apostolic challenge for her in a system which she felt could be permeated with Gospel values by her involvement with it.¹²

It was not until November 14, 1939 that Baggot Street was accepted into the National School plan,¹³ by then several foundations had been made and schools were placed under the authority of the Board of Education. While religious education could be taught for only one half hour a day the Sisters made the most of this time and within a few months of arriving in a new area the fruit of their instruction was evident. In Tullamore the first formal reception of the Sacrament of First Holy Communion since the Penal Days was held with great pomp. After Mass the children came in procession to the convent where they were entertained to breakfast.¹⁴ Two years later;

More than 930 children received the Sacrament of Confirmation from the hands of the Lord Bishop Dr.Cantwell, who was delighted and gratified at the answers of the children, showing how well they had been prepared by the Sisters.¹⁵

It was the same in all foundations but the inspectors kept a close eye that no deviation from the rules was permitted. One school visitor reports:

Commissioners require that the prayer called the 'Hail Mary' be recited but once during the ordinary school hours and only at the time notified, or set apart for religious instruction. On similar grounds they object to the repetition of the 'Angelus' at 12 O'clock and direct that it shall only be repeated under the limitations specified....¹⁶

Several outbreaks of cholera devastated Ireland in the mid to late 1830s and the sisters of Mercy were on hand at every crisis, nursing the victims and bringing them spiritual comfort. Some bishops thought that the Sisters were foolhardy to endanger their own lives in this way but the only thought the visiting Sisters had was to bring relief, comfort and support to the sick and dying.

Workhouses, which gave preference to 'the aged, the infirm, the defective and children,'¹⁷ sprang up throughout the country in the early 1840s. With so many poor people crammed into

¹² O'Tuathaugh, G., *Ireland Before the Famine, 1798-1848* (Dublin1972) p. 103ff. where distrust of the new system is discussed.

¹³ P.R.O. Register of Schools, Co. Dublin, vols 1 and 2, 1835-43, dealing with Roll 2018, the official number of Baggot Street School

¹⁴ Tullamore Annals 1836

¹⁵ Tullamore Annals 1838

¹⁶ Education Archives Dublin, Ed. 24, Folio 169

¹⁷ Brady, John, *Riocht na Midhe, Social Welfare in Meath*, Periodical published by Meath Chronicle, p. 60

one space the presence of the Sister of Mercy was sorely needed but not always welcomed. Nevertheless when permission was sought, 'to give instruction to all classes there, and to visit and console the sick in the hospital adjoining,'¹⁸ it was granted.

By 1855 the 'beneficial results the pauper inmates (of the workhouses) derived from visits of the Sisters of Mercy in carrying out their works of charity,'¹⁹ caused them to be *invited* and *welcomed* by the Board of Guardians. One of the medical officers, Dr. Elliot, paid them this glowing tribute:

*No doubt there is something wonderful in your religion. It astonished me to see ladies, of such social position and refined education such as you are, so devoted to the sick poor and to witness the calm resignation the poor people and the spirit of faith with which they leave the world. I can see nothing like it in Protestantism.*²⁰

In these early years the Sisters also attended to the spiritual needs of prisoners even when the parish priest thought it 'inexpedient' for them to seek permission to visit the gaol on a regular basis.

*They always got permission to visit convicts in order to instruct them and prepare them for death, which often occurred during these troubled times, they were always consoled by the eagerness with which these poor outcasts received their instructions and prepared themselves to meet their Eternal Judge, and there has never been one instance of one of these poor culprits dying unrepentant in Tullamore gaol.*²¹

The foundation made to Birr was a special challenge. 'The Catholic population took sides in a long-running and bitter disagreement between a curate and his parish and bishop,'²² Fr. Theobald Matthew preached in Birr in 1840 and, sensing 'the bitterness that lingered on after fifteen years of dissension,'²³ recommended to the parish priest, Fr. Spain, that 'the establishment of a community of Sisters of Mercy would prove an effective means of counteracting the sad effects of the schism.'²⁴ The Sisters of Mercy had little or no experience in this kind of healing ministry, but they were willing to go to Birr, depending as usual on 'Divine Providence.' Their presence bore fruit, as moving gently and prayerfully among the people,

¹⁸ Tullamore annals 1841

¹⁹ O'Brien, Sister Pius, *The Sisters of Mercy of Kilrush and Kilkee*, Published by the congregation of the sister of Mercy, 1997, Clare Champion Printers., p.48

²⁰ Ibid. p.49

²¹ Tullamore Annals, 1845

²² O'Brien, op. cit. p. 9

²³ Ibid. p.12

²⁴ Ibid. p.13

spreading peace wherever they went, reconciliation was eventually achieved. We are reminded of Catherine's own words: *'there are some things the poor prize more than gold, though they cost the donor nothing: the kind word, the gentle compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows.'*²⁵

²⁵ *Familiar Instructions*, p.138

2. Long Period of Mainly Institutionalised Ministry

The next phase of the life of the Sisters of Mercy was to be the longest when, like most apostolic institutes, things became stabilised, institutionalised and 'respectable.'

Sisters of Mercy were now being *sought* for a growing number of both primary and secondary schools throughout the country. With the passing of the Intermediate Act (Ireland) of 1878 government-sponsored secondary schools replaced the Pension School system, and guaranteed that children were under the spiritual influence of the Sisters of Mercy long into their teens.

From 1860 the Baggot Street Sisters had conducted a private Training College. This was replaced, in 1903, by a larger college at Carysfort Park, Blackrock, Dublin. In 1898 the Mary Immaculate Training College was opened in Limerick. Lectures in Sacred Scripture, Moral and Dogmatic Theology and Liturgy were included in the curriculum. The extent of the influence of these colleges on the Christian formation of young teachers, and the subsequent impact of this training on thousands upon thousands of Catholic children is inestimable.

Catholic Voluntary Hospitals:

The Sisters of Mercy opened the Mercy Hospital in Cork in 1857, the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Dublin in 1861, and the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in Belfast in 1883.²⁶ In 1861 the congregation took charge of the nursing at Jervis Street Hospital, Dublin.²⁷ One can only imagine the difference this made for Catholic patients who now could receive spiritual comfort from the Sisters on daily basis, especially in the case of seriously ill patients.

Training Schools for nurses became attached to these hospitals in the following decade,²⁸ thus extending the sphere of influence in the training of Catholic nurses.

Not long after this Sisters of Mercy were welcomed on staffs of the Workhouse Hospital and also invited to undertake management positions in these institutions. As a result conditions for spiritual as well as physical well being improved:

Incessant labour for months brought order and cleanliness to the sick poor; the chapel was cleaned and adorned; the inmates attended daily Mass and Rosary in the evening. All the solaces which only religion can bring were brought into their daily lives.... At this

²⁶ O'Connor, John, *The Workhouses of Ireland – The Fate of Ireland's Poor*, Anvil Books Dublin, 1995, p. 267

²⁷ Kelly, Patricia, rsm, *From Workhouse to Hospital – the role of Irish Workhouses in Medical Relief to 1921*; M.A. Thesis in Modern History, Colaiste Ollscoil Gaillmh (University college Galway) p. 64

²⁸ Kelly, op.cit. p.64

*time devotion to the Eucharistic Hour was spreading and nowhere was it adopted with more spirit than at the Mater as the hospital was called.*²⁹

The Irish Republic

With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 the ethos of Catholic schools and hospitals was further enhanced. Departments of Education and of Health had new standards and the values espoused by the Catholic Church were enshrined in the new government's documents. In primary schools the time allotted to religious instruction remained at one half hour per day but the whole ambience of the school changed. All the old customs of the early Sisters of Mercy were now able to be freely practised: prayer before and after class; Angelus recited at midday; the Hail Mary recited silently when the clock struck the hour; processions in honour of Our Blessed Lady during the month of May; devotion to the Sacred Heart; aspirations, etc. The local bishop was permitted to appoint a priest as Catechist cum Inspector. In secondary schools religious education included the study of Scripture, Church History, Apologetics etc. and an annual examination was set by the diocese. The 'Bishop's Prize' for excellence was a coveted honour.

In the hospitals regular prayers, especially the daily Rosary, were recited in the wards. Visitation of patients in hospitals by the sisters and clergy of all denominations was encouraged. Ministry to the spiritual needs of the patients brooked no interference. Special emphasis was placed on care of the dying especially the administration of the Sacrament of Extreme Unction (as it was then called). Wards were placed under the special patronage of a variety of saints and religious images such as the crucifix, pictures and statues lined the corridors – all creating an uplifting ambience for patient and visitor alike.

The 1950s and 60s were marked by a remarkable increase in vocations to religious life and the number of Sisters of Mercy reached an all-time high. This was providential, as the same period saw a growth of new Catholic parishes in the United States needing sisters to help staff the local Parochial Schools. Some pastors turned to Ireland when religious in the United States could not keep up with the demand. Numerous groups of Sisters of Mercy in Ireland responded to the call, anxious to ensure that children in the United States had the same opportunities for education in the Faith as their Irish counterparts. The Irish Sisters of Mercy benefited from this new experience of working side by side with lay colleagues and being part of the general life of the parish.

²⁹ O'Brien, Sister Pius, *The Sisters of Mercy of Birr and Nenagh*, Published by the Sisters of Mercy, Diocese of Killaloe. Clare Champion Printers, Ennis, 1994, p.86

Visitation of the sick poor and distressed at home and abroad continued, bringing consolation and spiritual richness to the house-bound and those in hospitals and nursing homes.

In this era of stabilisation sodalities such as the 'Holy Angels' and 'Children of Mary' flourished under the guidance of some Sisters of Mercy, as did the junior branch of the 'Pioneer Total Abstinence Association,' and the Irish Catholic Nurses' Guild which aims at promoting Catholic ethos and values in our hospitals.

During this time Ministry of Spirituality on a more personal basis was confined to the instruction of converts. This was done discreetly in the convent parlour by certain of our sisters who had a special charism for it; and parents brought their new-born children to the convent to have the Sisters consecrate them to the Sacred Heart and dedicate them to our Lady. Prayers for these occasions were included in the 'Little Companion of the Sisters of Mercy.'

3. Post Vatican II Diversification

Vat. II called religious to take a closer look at

1. the Gospel;
2. the spirit of the foundress, and
3. The signs of the times.

The Charismatic Movement, which swept the world after Vatican II, brought many of us a new way of praying with Scripture and Devotion to the Holy Spirit. It also brought Sisters of Mercy a greater freedom to move out and share prayer with others. Talking about one's prayer life and hearing the experiences of others was found to be enriching for all involved.

Care of young adults was manifested through programmes such as JIL (Jesus Invites us to Love); and SEARCH, which brought young people together in a relaxed setting to deepen their relationship with God and one another. Adult teams included lay people (lay and religious) and clergy – Sisters of Mercy were enthusiastic about this new method of highlighting God's love.

'Parish Renewal' was another collaborative approach to ministry which Sisters of Mercy became involved in at this time. Small groups of clergy, religious and lay members of the community came together to share their response to God's call in their lives, thus creating a greater understanding of the various vocations within the Church and the need for mutual support.

Up until now retreats were preached to the whole community, but now individually-directed retreats were on offer, an appreciation of which soon paved the way for Sisters of Mercy themselves becoming trained as spiritual directors and retreat givers.

Irish Spirituality in all its richness, especially that of ‘finding God in all things,’ was revitalized – some aspects of the Irish Spiritual Tradition are reflected in our own Mercy Spirituality. Perhaps it was a refocusing on the Irish missionary outreach that inspired our response to the needs of developing countries in the 1970s. With it came a new understanding of mission – we were not called ‘to *bring* the Word of God’ to distant lands, but to *find* God present there and, by living among the people, help them, and ourselves, interpret the events of our lives in the light of the Gospel.

Gradually, too, we were being alerted to our responsibility for ‘care of the earth’ and the conservation of its riches for future generations. This in turn introduced a Spirituality of the Cosmos emphasising the inter-relatedness of all of God’s creation.

During this period two things happened simultaneously that had bearing on our ministries, including the Ministry of Spirituality: a decline in religious vocations and the urgent call of emerging needs. This necessitated a move from some institutional ministries in order to address issues which no one else seemed to be attending to. It also required retraining and sabbaticals to equip us for this.

Vatican II had recommended that:

*Throughout their lives religious should labour earnestly to perfect their spiritual, doctrinal, and professional development. As far as possible, superiors should provide them with the opportunity, the resources and the time to do this.*³⁰

As far as the Ministry of Spirituality was concerned – Regina Mundi (Rome) and Milltown Park Institute (Dublin) became favourite places for more indepth study of Theology and Scripture. St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth opened up to lay theological students (1966); in the same year Mater Dei Institute for the training of Catechists for Post Primary Schools was established - later this programme was extended to include training of School Chaplains (formerly a prerogative of the clergy). Mount Oliver Institute of Religious Education opened in 1969 providing retraining for catechists for both primary and secondary teachers, and also put a strong emphasis on Adult Religious Education. Some Sisters attended Corpus Christi Institute in England for their up-dating in catechetics. Religious Education became a more specialised subject. A great number of Sisters of Mercy availed of these courses in order to become more professional in their approach to the Ministry of Spirituality. With regard to spiritual care of hospital patients a

³⁰ *Perfectae Caritatis*, n. 18

new course CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) was offered for training of Hospital Chaplains. This, too, was open to laity and Sisters of Mercy were among the first recruits. The Irish School of Ecumenics, at both its Dublin and Belfast campuses, offered opportunities for those wishing to advance the process of *Peace and Reconciliation*.

An increasing number of sisters were invited by their bishops to become Diocesan Catechetical Advisers at both primary and secondary levels. Diocesan Pastoral Centres were placed under the directorship of Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of Mercy began to appear on the staff of some major seminaries as professors of Theology and Scripture.

Another innovation was the introduction of the 'Parish Sister.' This is one of the ways where collaboration between clergy, the parish sister and parishioners is most effective. Pre-baptism and pre-marriage courses are a genuine expression of Adult Faith Development linked with significant moments in their lives, and those of their children. Sisters have been able to provide Eucharistic Services when necessary, and Visitation is enriched by being free to bring Holy Communion to the sick and house-bound.

Religious art down the years has played a distinct role in focussing attention in prayer. Now, in the tradition of the Eastern Church, *Iconography* began to attract some of our gifted artists, as a means of deepening their own spiritual lives and enriching those with whom they shared this new understanding of 'Praying with Icons.'

The most significant impact of Vatican II on religious was the call to renewal of their own lives and, for Sisters of Mercy, the resulting better understanding of our status as an Institute of Apostolic Right. With the revision of our Constitutions we had a clearer view of our place in the Church at this point in our history. Under the heading *Apostolic Life* particular apostolates were redefined against the background Catherine McAuley's original concern for the 'poor, sick and ignorant' - culminating in:

*In particular this concern is reflected
in our commitment
to the spiritual welfare of people,
through catechesis,
through sharing prayer,
and through building Christian community.³¹*

³¹ *Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland*, 1985, n. 43, p. 22-23

4. Present Day More Collaborative Approach to the Ministry of Spirituality.

In the nineteen eighties more and more Sisters of Mercy in Ireland were answering the call to become spiritual directors – some were trained overseas and others closer to home at Manresa House, Dublin. Availing of training in the art of supervision further enhanced their own spiritual development and honed their skills for this ministry.

Sisters of Mercy also became members of teams at existing Retreat Houses throughout the country. These retreats were varied from, the traditional individually-directed retreat to creative retreats; retreats centred on Irish Spirituality to those which explored a deeper understanding of the universe and our place in it; contemplative retreats and those which use art, music and movement as prayer forms – to name but a few.

In the 1980s retreats for small groups were brought to parishes in the form of ‘Sìol’ (seed) Retreat (presented by a sister and a lay person) and ‘Neighbourhood Retreats.’ The Week of Guided Prayer/ Directed Retreat in Parishes, was also introduced at this time. Based on the one-to-one Ignatian style retreat, devised by John Veltri, S.J. and adapted with his permission. The latter was introduced into Ireland by Dervilla Byrne, rsm, when she was a member of the Manresa House Team.

Since it wasn’t always feasible for some people to avail of training at recognised centres of spirituality Sisters of Mercy were involved in setting up training programmes at parish level. These were more accessible and affordable. The teams were made up of sisters and other lay people.

This partnership in the Ministry of Spirituality has grown from strength to strength. To guarantee accountability to the Faith Community supervision of Prayer Guides was introduced by adapting (with their blessing) methods of Individual and Peer Supervision drawn up by Rosemary Dougherty and Susan Jorgensen for Spiritual Directors.³² As the ministry grew the more experienced Prayer Guides were trained as Supervisors, the aim being to have each diocese, or area, become independent. Companion manuals, *Teach us to Pray* and *Let There Be Light* were prepared for Prayer Guide and Supervisors respectively.

In 1994 the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland and South Africa formed one congregation, sharing of personnel being one of its riches. Two spiritual directors from each of four provinces formed a Spirituality Commission which met regularly with Dervilla, then Congregational Leader. From

³² Salem Institute of Spirituality

this group Sisters of Mercy and their partners in the Ministry of Spirituality were provided with a Code of Ethics by 2000.³³

In recent years prayer groups are going strong in most parishes – with Sisters of Mercy as leaders or participants. This Small Christian Community experience is much valued, especially by those who for one reason or another, cannot participate fully in the Institutional Church.

Pilgrimage is so much a part of Irish Spirituality that it is not surprising that some of us find ourselves caught up in organising and leading pilgrimages to the holy places of our tradition. Our Lady's Shrine at Knock is probably the most frequented, but Lourdes, Fatima and Medugorje are also reasonably accessible from Ireland. The places associated with St. Patrick such as Lough Derg (popularly called St. Patrick's Purgatory) and the steep climb up Croagh Patrick keep us in touch with the penitential aspect for our own journey. Catherine McAuley's advice that imitation of Jesus meant 'walking the very same path He trod,' is taken literally by Sisters who organise pilgrimages to the Holy Land! In latter years Mercy International Centre holds a strong attraction for Sisters of Mercy and their associates and colleagues, especially for the experience of *Walking and Praying with Catherine*.

In several dioceses in Ireland Sisters of Mercy have been invited to manage Pastoral Centres. In these centres the focus is mainly on on-going adult religious formation. People are also prepared as Special Ministers of the Eucharist and Ministers of the Word. The *Forward in Faith* extra- mural course from Maynooth College has been very popular and well-attended. Programmes such as Myers Briggs and the Enneagram offer participants a deeper understanding of themselves, and others, as human beings.

Perhaps the most compassionate work of these centres, and the most urgent, is the provision of bereavement support, and the training of parish groups to offer this compassionate service in their local area.

- The rise in the number of deaths by suicide, especially of young males in their late teens and early twenties, has severe traumatic effect on the loved ones' immediate family, and also extends to friends, and the wider community, who are bewildered by this growing phenomenon.
- Road-accident fatalities are another great trial. Notwithstanding increased Government strategies, and more stringent penalties for 'road rage,' and drunk-driving accidents, too many innocent people are losing their lives on our roads.

³³ *Ministry of Spirituality – Principles of Good Practice – A Liberating Source*, Published for private circulation for Sisters of Mercy and their Associates; Compiled by: Josephine O'Grady Walshe rsm, Noeleen Reilly rsm, Breda McFadden rsm, Hellen Kennedy rsm. (2000)

- Abuse of drugs results in many pre-mature deaths.
- Murder is now an everyday occurrence, the most recent form being murder-suicide where whole families are wiped out in violent, irrational, and often retaliatory actions.
- Gang warfare in some of our cities is on the increase, governed by a 'shoot to kill' policy.

There is so much scope here for the Ministry of Spirituality, where specially trained listeners can create space for the sharing of all the hurt and anguish in a safe, non-judgemental setting.

'Welcoming the stranger' is becoming more meaningful for us in Ireland as more and more foreign nationals come to live among us, either by choice or of necessity. There is a new challenge here for us (especially in light of our Mercy tradition of hospitality) to establish meaningful relationships with these stranger-friends which will enable mutual understanding of our diverse beliefs.

In this technological age media resources are part and parcel of the Ministry of Spirituality. The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy are among the Trustees of RNN (Religious News Network), one of our sisters, Marie Stuart, rsm, being Director from 1994-2004. RNN supplies over 30 local community and hospital stations reaching an estimated audience of 300,000. Topics are of a religious and social nature, including Faith/Spirituality. Local radio is also a medium for Sisters of Mercy to be involved in 'A Thought for the Day,' and retreats for special seasons of the year.

An important resource for us Sisters of Mercy is the multi-award-winning interactive CD-Rom, *Mercy and Justice Shall Meet, a Fraynetwork Production* commissioned by MIA. Looking at present social issues across the world, in the light of the Gospel and the Spirituality of Catherine McAuley, helps us, and those with whom we minister, to make connections which up until recently would be unthinkable. Print resources which inspire and inform us for ministry are the MAST Journal,³⁴ and *Presence*.³⁵

Many Irish Sisters of Mercy are members of SDI (Spiritual Directors International) and recently AISGA (All Ireland Spiritual Guidance Association) has been established here for the support of all who are engaged in the Ministry of Spirituality.

Spirituality of Catherine McAuley – Fanning the Flame:

The Bi-centennial of Catherine's birth (1978); the international gathering in Dublin of Sisters of Mercy for *Trocaire* (1981); Catherine declared Venerable (1991); the establishment of Mercy

³⁴ *Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology* – Published by the Sisters of Mercy, USA.

³⁵ *Presence- an International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, - Published by Spiritual Directors International.

International Association with its Centre in Catherine's first House of Mercy (1994); the celebration of the 175th. anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mercy (2006) all helped us, and our associates and colleagues, to touch into the spirit of our foundress in life-giving ways. Recently one such experience is, 'Going Deeper with Catherine,' a reflective retreat aimed at helping us deepen our understanding of Catherine's spirituality and appreciating our own experience of Mercy in the light of it.

Mercy Associates' have been working and praying with Sisters of Mercy in many parts of Ireland, especially in areas now known as the Western Province and the South Central Province, for many years. These groups are presently finding new and more meaningful ways of relating with each other in ministry. The same is true in our South African, Kenyan and United States Provinces.

None of the individual congregations which formed the Northern Province (in the new united Congregation) had a history of 'Mercy Associates,' so a new model of collaboration between Sisters of Mercy and other compassionate people has emerged and has been developing over the past ten years.

In this model, which the Sisters in the Southern Province have also adopted, there are several distinctions from the more traditional Mercy Associate movement. We call it the 'Circle of Mercy.' (See Appendix I)

The Future

The 2006 Congregational Chapter Statement asks us, among other things, to consider, 'How will we nurture the hunger for God?' Each Provincial Chapter discerned its response (see Appendix II). These responses, culled from *Reflections on the Chapter Season – as we embrace new beginnings.... 2007*, will be our guidelines for the next six years. In this *Year of the Word*, wish us well as we embark on a new phase of our journey!

Appendix I

Some of the differences between the 'Circle of Mercy' model of Associates and the more traditional form of Mercy Associates:

- The 'Circle of Mercy' is open to Sisters of Mercy and lay women and men as *equal* members. To underscore this equality we refrain from using the term 'associate.'
- Commitment is made to each other in the local Circle of Mercy, 'to live the Gospel according to the spirit of Catherine McAuley,' rather than making commitment to the Province/Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy.
- Members formally commit themselves to Prayer, Mutual Support and Compassionate Service for one year. This commitment is renewable.
- The 'Circle of Mercy' exists alongside, and in harmony with, the Congregation and has the potential to carry the charism of Catherine McAuley independently in the future should the occasion arise.
- Local circles are small in number and reflective in nature. They may be connected with each other in neighbouring clusters, and through regular meetings held for representatives from each circle.
- Fundamental to each circle is a collaborative and flexible way of working that maximises the contribution of each person, and that gives expression to an aspect of Mercy appropriate to each group.
- A Core Group is the hub of co-ordination and inspiration.

Appendix II

How do we nurture the hunger for God? (Congregational Chapter 2006)

The responses from each of the seven Provincial Chapters (2007):

- We commit ourselves to nurture the hunger for God in ourselves, each other and the wider community as we: deepen our Spiritual Life; Open ourselves to be enriched by the experience of others in our common search for meaning as we share our own experience of God; prayer together; open our space and spiritual resources to the wider community.
- We will nurture the hunger for God by: taking Sabbath time regularly and participating in on-going formation; availing of retreats, seasonal prayer services, and media resources; journeying with others in prayer and compassion.
- Centred in the God of Mercy, we nurture the contemplative dimension of life, joining with others in the search for meaning; As we nurture the hunger for God we will: Engage in courageous conversations about our understandings of God, our spiritualities and the diversity among us both personally and in community; Create healing rituals; Avail of centres and spaces for quiet and reflection, in different parts of the Province, for Sisters and others; Expand our website to include a database in the spirituality section to provide information for those seeking meaning in life.
- We will nurture our prayer life together and maintain an ethos of mutual compassion and caring as community; Sisters are encouraged to take time and space with their own hunger for God and to be open to sharing their experience with one another, with associates and with others who are searching for meaning.
- We re-commit ourselves to the practices as recorded in the statutes and statement of Chapter 2000, page six, seven and nine; We call local communities to come to an agreement regarding communal prayer (statutes p.3);we call ourselves to make a concerted effort to use inclusive language in our prayer and liturgies.
- We acknowledge both the hunger for God and the malaise in our society. Respective of the unique and diverse ways of expressing faith, we promote faith development, pastoral renewal, inter-faith dialogue, and nurturing of spirituality.
- We recommend that the Provincial Leadership Team organise assemblies on such topics as the Constitutions, Mercy values and charism, Mercy life of Catherine McAuley, different methods of prayer, sharing our ministries; we call ourselves to personal

responsibility for our own growth in spirituality and to continue our efforts at reconciliation and conflict resolution, so that our actions and lifestyle reflect the heritage of Mercy.