



***“It is a SPECIAL FAVOUR of God to be made SERVANTS  
of his suffering poor” (“Sayings”)***

That was the deep conviction, mission and joy of Venerable Catherine McAuley. So strong was her awareness of this call-blessing that she had to be re-assured by Archbishop Murray before making her profession in George’s Hill that she and her companions would be able to continue their ministry out on the streets. It was an imperative for her, an articulation of ‘charism’ - Mercy charism, a compelling urge of pure love to push the boundaries and go wherever need called.

The term ‘service’ is common in our vocabulary. It has many connotations, some wonderful and some painful. Sadly, it can still refer to oppression, menial tasks, second-class citizenship, and even perfunctory activity. Power and humiliation often accompany it. Such ‘service’ at best is without dignity or hope, and at worst is close to negation and even slavery. ‘And Jesus wept’ at his city’s hard heart.

Mercy service is delivered by people of good will and compassion, who set out to bring healing, liberation, enablement and inclusion wherever possible. Catherine McAuley was one such person, imbued with the Spirit of Jesus whose touch made the ‘blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the poor get good news’. Of himself Jesus said “The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve, and give his life for the ransom of many” – self-donation and sacrificial exchange are the primary elements of ‘mercy’ service. Catherine said it her way -“all I ever wanted was to serve God and his poor ones”. She gave her all as ‘ransom’ from poverty and sickness for many, providentially opening Baggot St on the feast of Our Lady of Ransom!

Mercy service eliminates the dichotomy between ‘master and servant’. In the ‘Washing of the Feet’ scene at the last Supper, Jesus, the Lord and Master, acts as the menial servant. With towel and basin he effectively turned the tables as he made himself the servant, and the disciples (or anyone in need) his masters. They were tired and dusty, yet he took their feet in his hands performing a very personal and comforting task. He tells them to do likewise, indicating that the role of master and servant in God’s realm must always be interchangeable. Wherever need calls, then that need, whether from within the human family or from our earth-home, becomes our master, and we are drawn to serve in humility and compassion, personally and immediately. In her final moments, conscious of the immediate grief and uncertainty she would leave behind, Catherine suggested a ‘good cup of tea’ be provided to comfort the Sisters after she was gone. Over the tea they would talk, weep, tell stories, build their communal relationships and prepare for the future. Not unlike Jesus at the last Supper, she wanted to tend to their very basic and mournful pain. That ‘human touch’ so characteristic of Catherine, would always be a shining quality in any Mercy service. From the choosing of the ‘seven deacons’ in the Acts, to the visit of

Pope Francis to Lampedusa we know that the ‘widow and the orphan’ are always God’s special concern and may not be set aside in the midst of other pressing activities.

In this *Year of Consecrated Life* we take encouragement from Catherine’s status as Venerable. Through this honour we are assured that her life of ‘service’ is of the very ‘stuff’ of holiness. She was filled with “an ardent desire to be united with God and serve his suffering poor”. The dominant element of that holiness is her selfless commitment to the ‘least’ of God’s people in 19<sup>th</sup> century Dublin, Ireland and England. She ‘wept’ at the neglect of poor children, the plight of vulnerable young women, and the distress of the sick. All her resources, opportunities and decisions were about serving them, in small ways and large, breaking new ground, making life better for them. She would rather be ‘cold and hungry’ than that the poor in Birr or Limerick, in Dublin, Cork or London would be deprived of any consolation she could give. She was at one with a tender God who revealed his nature to Moses – “I have seen their affliction ...and I mean to deliver them” – and at one with Jesus who said ‘you did it to me’ whenever another was helped.

The call to service is always heard in the context of time and place. Mercy Sisters have provided a wide range of creative and prophetic services for almost two hundred years. We have crossed ethnic, cultural, economic, religious, political and ecological boundaries. With readiness and yearning, in time of war and disaster, in places of poverty and neglect, Sisters and co-workers have served immigrants, prisoners, those trafficked, and many others, whether at the sophisticated frontiers of human development or among the ‘poor ones’ discarded along the way. This ‘service’ has been transforming as Sisters with a ‘nose for pain’ set out with an urgent sense of purpose to restore dignity and well-being. Mercy service is the concrete, visible outflow from a heart shaped by the kindness of our inclusive God. Such service is missionary, is evangelical, is prophetic and is at the core of Christianity and especially of Consecrated life. It brings together the capacities of individuals and communities to enhance the quality of all life in our human and ecological existence. It is truly a privilege to be enabling God’s salvation – healing, growth, inclusion - be fulfilled.

However, we have also learned to our deep regret that culture can be extraordinarily blinding, and that our service can be marred by a lack of reflection and critique as to its quality. Just as earlier centuries accepted slavery, so our own blindness to the hurtful ‘lay sister’ pattern within, and our failure at times to adequately protect vulnerable women and children in our care, were devastating lessons in recent times. In these instances our service was found wanting – not truly imbued with compassion for the weakest – and so our ‘mea culpa’ will be an accompanying thread of humility in the years ahead.

Yet, Catherine’s ‘special favour’ is still the characteristic of practical Mercy service: ‘the poor need help today not next week’. Catherine saw no other meaning to her life or that of her companions. She devised and built new possibilities for those disadvantaged around her and motivated others to be involved. As if to ensure no ‘religious fervour’ should ever close off direct service to the ‘poor, sick and uneducated’ she established it as essential to our core identity by the adoption of a ‘fourth vow’. In spite of strong monastic influences over the succeeding decades this vow remained in place, warding off enclosure. After Vatican 2 the very nature of apostolic religious life was deemed to include concrete service as described in *Perfectae Caritatis*, and to be inherent in the profession of the evangelical counsels. Today, the ‘fourth vow’ is still explicit in many revised Mercy Constitutions and implied in others.

Mercy service tomorrow will differ from that of yesterday. The massive flocks of destitute migrants, the wasteful pollution of our earth, the crisis of homelessness, and other deep scars, will draw forth new and surprising ways of re-enacting God's mercy in our midst, in collaboration with others. Even in our diminished state we can express this 'special favour', this 'ardent desire' to serve the 'least of our brethren' in small ways. The insistent inner bell of Mercy charism will not to be muffled, but with loud ringing will move us afresh, in the words of Pope Francis, to 'wake up the world' to the repeated cry of God's beloved poor and the new cry of our suffering earth.

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