Formed and Reformed (Paper 1 of 6)

BY MARY REYNOLDS RSM

MARY Reynolds RSM has had extensive involvement in secondary education in Ireland both as a teacher and as a counsellor. She served on the council of the previous congregation leadership in Ireland, and recently, was appointed Executive Director of Mercy International Association. The six papers[1] which follow are the substance of a retreat which Mary gave to many sisters throughout the Australian Institute in mid 2009.

WHEN Catherine was born on September 29, 1778 into a comfortably wealthy home, many Catholics of the day would have considered her one of the privileged few amongst them. Her father's family, of course, would have shared the lot of all Catholics who had suffered the tyranny of the Penal Laws. The McAuleys originally lived in Calry (Moate) in Co. Westmeath, where for generations they had ruled as Lords of Calry. However, one of the consequences of the Penal Laws was that the landed gentry faced the choice of conforming to Protestantism or seeing their estates broken up by inheritance laws which stipulated that Catholic estates were to be divided equally between all a landowner's sons.

Unable to eek out a living on pitifully small plots of land, some of the family were driven west, others found their way to the continental armies and others again to the papal service. It is not clear when James McAuley came to Dublin, but he availed of one concession in the Penal Laws that allowed Catholics to engage in trade and in non-professional activities.

As he grew towards manhood, a ready market for the skilled workmanship of Catholic artisans enabled James to move gradually towards prosperity as a self-made man. His steady rise is chronicled in leases signed from 1756 until 1783. On the first, he signed himself 'carpenter'. Later, he signed 'builder', then grazier (cattle owner) and finally 'gentleman'. This last indicates a person of wealth and property whose lands and investments work for him. Extant deeds and bonds connect him with properties in Spanns Lane, Copper Alley and Merchant's Quay, and in 1777, one year before Catherine's birth, with Stormanstown House.

Catherine's mother, Elinor, had also come from a similar background. Her father was a colleague of James McAuley. However, her commitment to their Catholic heritage differed greatly. James faithfully practiced his religion and tried to support other Catholics in poorer circumstances. To this end, he gathered poor Catholic children into his home in Stormanstown House on Sundays and holidays. Here he treated them with kindness, understanding and respect. Not only did he instruct them in their faith; he concerned himself with their pressing needs as well.

Those Sunday intrusions were somewhat of an embarrassment to Elinor. She was almost 30 years younger than James and religion counted little for her. She has been described as young, attractive and vain, a lady of excellent principles but of little piety. She objected to her husband befriending the poor and instructing their children in his house. She preferred to identify with the wealthy Catholics who tended to become Anglo-Irish in their social customs, attitudes and sympathies.

Because of her father's attitudes and behaviours, Catherine was not so insulated from the suffering of Ireland's poor or fed on false assumptions concerning them, as others in her privileged position might have been. But if Catherine had learned the beginnings of Christian faith and leadership, and a sensitivity and practical outreach to the poor from her father, she also received much from her dearly loved and beautiful young mother, who was gentle, fastidious and charming. Her mother's influence and training contributed much to Catherine's great refinement of manner, her graciousness, her independent mind and her personal charm, all of which endeared her to others throughout her life.

Catherine's secure life was shattered before she was five years of age. One can only imagine the tears that were shed following her father's death as the loss of his loving presence took hold of her. I have often wondered if the 'Psalter of Jesus' which she copied in large childish print when she was only eight years of age, and repeated frequently going through the house, might have been a way of holding on to memories of her father, even auditory ones as she prayed the very words that she first heard him pray. The loss of her father at 60 years of age was followed almost immediately by the loss of home. Elinor, now only 30, was left a widow with three young children, James just a baby. A year after his death, Elinor moved with her three children to live with cousins in Glasnevin Road. During this period, Stormanstown House, the home of so many memories of her beloved family, was sold. After this, they

moved to 52 Queen Street where they shared a house with Mrs St George, a non-Catholic friend of Elinor. It was here that Catherine lived all her teenage years.

Catherine's life here must have been a mixture of joy and sorrow. While there are no records to prove it, we believe she made her Confirmation while living in Queen Street. We can imagine the joy that must have been for her but what a sadness that the faith she had so admired in her father was not reflected in this house. None of the relatives or friends who visited the house had the firm, gentlemanly stance towards Catholicism that he had had. She must have longed to share this sense of loss with her mother but saw her drawn more and more to the company of her sophisticated friends, the majority of whom were Anglo-Irish and Protestant. The tensions and perplexities that this must have engendered in Catherine surely turned to utter sadness when Elinor gave up the practice of her religion all together.

Religion apart, this period of Catherine's life afforded her an entrée into the world of polite society. She was schooled in the courtesies and graces of this society. Perhaps it was here that she developed her love of music and dance, her joy in celebrations, her appreciation of fashionable clothes, her talents in craft, like lace making and needlework, her genius as a letter writer. But sensitive as she was, she must have worried deeply as she saw the results of her mother's extravagance and love of pleasure.

One piece of property after another of her father's estate had to be sold to meet new needs, so that finally the family was homeless and penniless. However, the greatest tragedy of all befell the family when Elinor, in her mid forties became terminally ill. Catherine's sadness at the imminent death of her mother was further compounded by seeing the terrible remorse her mother was suffering over her failures in regard to her family, both spiritually and materially. In the face of this Catherine felt helpless, unable as she was to comfort her with words of faith in which she herself was not yet skilled. So profound was the effect on her of mother's remorse-filled death that she carried all throughout her life both a fear of death and an extraordinary devotion to comforting the dying. It was only as she entered her own journey into death that she realised how peaceful it could be, and the various accounts of her death testify to this.[2]

After her mother's death, a further separation faced Catherine. Her younger sister, Mary, and her brother, James, went to live with their Protestant relatives, the Armstrongs, while Catherine opted to go to her uncle, Dr Owen Conway, whose family were practising Catholics. One of the joys of this short period of her life was the friendship she forged with her cousin Anne. We can imagine the deep sharing enjoyed by those two soul friends and the thrill that Catherine must have felt as Anne and her friends included her in their corporal works of mercy – visiting the poor, tending the sick and teaching children.

Who could blame Catherine if she railed at the unfairness of life when for a second time she experienced a plunge into poverty? For a while after the drastic reversal of Dr Conway's fortunes, mainly the result of gambling, Catherine continued to live with Anne and her family, and no doubt, helped them to cope on dark days when even the furniture in the home was being sold in order to pay the debts. The hardships of hunger, cold, humiliation and other privations that became their lot of this destitute household would have been a trial for anyone, but for those trained as refined and delicate ladies it could have been devastating. Yet, instead of inflaming bitterness or resentment in Catherine, it seemed instead to have elicited an extraordinary empathy and a lifelong bond with those in whose misfortune and bankruptcy she shared.

In later years when Anne died leaving the four young Byrn children motherless, Catherine took on the role and duty of a mother in their regard. She was never to forget the particular pain of those who had known better times being reduced to poverty and it created in her a great sensitivity to those who might have suffered in a similar way. Years later she remarked of two young women who called to Baggot Street: "I am sure I spoke yesterday with two who were hungry, tho' of nice appearance. Their dejected faces have been before me ever since. I was afraid of hurting their feelings by offering them food and I had no money".[3] Likewise, she counselled her novices that "we should have compassion for those who have seen better days, and are ashamed to make known to us their indigence. We should assist them privately".[4]

In order to reduce the burden on the Conways, Catherine accepted the invitation of the Armstrongs to join their family at 34 Mary Street. Only her concerns for the Conways would have prompted such a choice. She was being separated from her beloved cousin Anne, she would know the humiliation of being a poor relation dependant on others and, most especially, she would be joining a household in which she would be surrounded by Protestant society hostile to Catholicism.

Catherine's position in the Armstrong family was very difficult. She loved and admired her relatives and Protestant friends, and so much did she desire to be one in sentiment and practice with them, and to promote harmony in the home, that she even studied the teaching of their faith. Yet she found herself unable to turn from the

religion of her father in which she had been baptised and confirmed and she took steps to improve her knowledge of her own faith.

The prejudice, ridicule and scorn directed at her religion must have been most distressing for Catherine but her response was one of sensitivity and respect, withholding any outward or visible practice of her faith. We can only guess at what cost to herself it was to remain resolute under attack without aggressiveness, to endure deep hurt without bitterness, and to hold in affection those who opposed and criticised what she loved. During the four years Catherine spent with the Armstrongs she endeared herself to them by her goodness and by her lively, fun-loving disposition.

By 1803, Mary was engaged to marry Dr William Macauley, a strict Presbyterian, and James, now also a Protestant, was at Dublin University studying medicine preparatory to joining the army as a medical officer. How did Catherine view her own future? As she glided through the drawing rooms and ball rooms of her Protestant friends, did she wonder if it would be her good fortune to meet someone of her own faith with whom to share her life, or did she, as some authors suggest, make a resolution not to marry, but to remain in single life because she felt God was calling her to devote her life to others?

But for now another choice presented. The Callaghans, distant cousins of her mother, had returned from a 20-year sojourn in India. Charmed by her grace and abilities, this childless couple asked Catherine to be a daughter to them and to join them first in their quarters at the Apothecaries' Hall, where Mr Callaghan was an emeritus professor of pharmacology, and then in their new stately home in Coolock, in the countryside. She was 25 years of age and this was her seventh home.

The 'adoption' added yet another experience to Catherine's life which was already chequered by transitions from wealth to poverty, to orphanhood, to being homeless, to reliance on other people's charity and dependency on those who provided for her. Her period in Coolock was certainly the gestation time of the great dream that one day would bloom as 'Mercy'. Yet she must have considered this new turn in her life with a certain amount of trepidation: she was going yet again into a non-Catholic environment; she was moving from the 'buzz' of city centre to the quiet of the countryside; she was separating somewhat from the company of her brother and sister and close young friends into that of an elderly couple and their household.

But those very things became the building bricks of her future. William Callaghan took seriously his responsibility as a Christian gentleman to give ten per cent of his income to charity and he involved Catherine in the management of how this was done. That gave her the opportunity to follow the promptings of her heart, assisting the poor, both on the Coolock estate and in the nearby village. She soon came to the conclusion that the poor needed more than alms, they needed to be given skills and power to help themselves, support to lift themselves out of their poverty and servitude; they needed to be given dignity and a belief in their own self worth. Soon Catherine was practically addressing those very issues.

Catherine gradually took over the management of the household at Coolock from Mrs Callaghan who was a very sick woman. This brought her into contact with the young servant girls and their friends who were also servants. She began to take a special interest in them and, as they were Catholics, she liked to slip away quietly with them when she could to pray with them. Soon they were pouring out their troubles to her. Many of them were girls from the country, come to Dublin in search of work. Some of them were the daughters of country people who had been forced off their small holdings by the Penal Laws – girls who had known better days. They told her of their many friends who were being paid only a pittance in the houses of the gentry and even of others who were unemployed and homeless. Many of those, unable to provide for the bare necessities of food and shelter, were forced into prostitution just to survive. For the moment, Catherine could do little more than offer advice and encouragement, but her powerlessness to address their sad plight haunted her and strengthened her resolve to find a way.

If Mr Callaghan afforded Catherine the opportunity to give expression to her concern for those in need, Mrs Callaghan was responsible for opening up for her the richness of the Word of God. As a Quaker, Mrs Callaghan read and prayed the Scriptures daily. When she became too frail to read because of a painful eye disease, Catherine used to read those Scriptures to her, a rare opportunity in those days when the Bible was a closed book to most Catholics. Over the years those sacred readings penetrated Catherine's mind and heart inspiring in her a Gospel response to her world, and feeding the life of prayer she lived in secret.

There were other elements of Quaker spirituality and practice that must have influenced Catherine too. Notable among those was an acceptance of the dignity and equality of women with regard to organising their own meetings and expressing their own insights in response to the promptings of the Spirit. They were very committed to responding to local needs and issues and held a healthy

balance between respect for the freedom of every person to discuss issues, while allowing for the authority of the one elected to make the final decision. Quakers, too, fostered great unity of spirit by circulation of letters and through the practice of making frequent personal visits among their Quaker friends.

The remove of Coolock from the noise of the city and her sense of exclusion from the belief system of the Callaghans and their friends, led Catherine to discover solitude filled with God. Forbidden to use any religious images, she trained herself early to see the reflection of God's presence in nature and in artefacts. It was not difficult for her to make the cross beams of the door the cross before which she prayed nor to create a sacred space under the shade of the great oak on the lawn of Coolock House. Her shopping expeditions to the city provided an opportunity to meet learned and holy priests who directed her reading of the Scriptures and provided her with religious instruction which swept away all her doubts and prejudices and ignorance.

Catherine's years in Coolock had been truly a hidden life of preparation for her public one. By the time she became heiress to the entire Callaghan estate, she was a skilled administrator, her character was resolutely formed, and her personality deepened and enriched. She was intimately aware of and concerned about the situation and needs of the poor of Dublin, she was confident in her faith, and mature in her relationship with God. Indeed, her constant witness to Gospel values since she joined the Callaghan family had led first to the conversion of Mrs Callaghan and a few years later to that of Mr Callaghan.

By his will in 1822, William Callaghan left Catherine a substantial fortune of £25,000. Such a fortune made it possible for Catherine to dedicate herself to the passion of her life – ministry among the poor. As yet, Catherine had not the remotest idea of becoming a religious. Because of her long association with Protestants with their prejudices about religious life, as well as her own distaste of some of the formalities in the practices within the religious orders of her day, she was not attracted to it. However, the main objection was that religious life in its then cloistered or semi-cloistered form would inhibit her wide-ranging activities on behalf of the poor.

Catherine's project at Baggot Street began to take shape but in so doing attracted the criticism of some, not least among them the Parish Priest of Westland Row: "This gentleman [writes Mary Clare Augustine Moore] had no great idea that the unlearned sex could do anything but mischief by trying to assist the clergy. Furthermore, he was prejudiced against Catherine whom he considered as parvenue".[5] He succeeded in conveying to Catherine the impression that Archbishop Murray intended handing over Baggot Street to the Sisters of Charity, but when Catherine informed the Archbishop of her acceptance of this proposal, he was astounded and he assured her that Canon Kelly had acted without authorisation. Yet he put the case clearly to her: he was pleased with the work but not entirely happy about the fact that she and her companions who were not a religious community, were beginning to look remarkably like one.

Murray eventually offered Catherine and her companions a choice: they could behave as ladies of their rank and station in terms of their dress and manner of life, or they could assume the duties and obligations of formal religious life. With his guarantee that, as a religious, she could still pursue her external apostolate and that her Institute would have a status of its own, independent of other congregations, Catherine made her choice. Mary Clare Augustine Moore notes:

> "Now, however, she was convinced that to carry on the Institute she must be a religious. This point had often been discussed with her associates who were all in favour of it, but still she shrank from deciding on it. She was no longer young, her habits were formed among Protestants, she did not like ceremony, and some of the ceremonies as used in Convents, such as kneeling to Superiors, were particularly distasteful".[6]

However, in order to safeguard the continuity and stability of her work for her beloved poor, Catherine stepped out in faith along a path she would not have chosen.

When it was eventually decided that her work could be best advanced and protected by her becoming a religious, the question of novitiate arose. Because she was 52 years of age, Dr Murray proposed to spare her the restraints of a novitiate among strangers by sending to Baggot Street two religious of the order whose rule she might choose, and there she could serve a novitiate under them. However, this met with objections and so she commenced her training in the Presentation Convent at Georges Hill.

For Catherine, as an older woman accustomed to independence and freedom and well versed in management of affairs, the novitiate experience had some very painful aspects. She confessed later that on the first night in George's Hill she was sorely tempted to order her carriage, drive back to the House of Mercy and call off the whole endeavour. The period of novitiate lasted 15 months, the first three being spent as a postulant under a benign and enlightened Mother M. Angela Doyle, who treated her as an older, mature woman, and gave her the training required for a foundress.

The postulancy lasted from September 8 to December 8. The three postulants, Catherine, Anna Marie Doyle and Elizabeth Hartley were duly clothed in the Presentation habit on July 9 and received their names in religion. It had been proposed that 'Teresa', 'Clare' and 'Angela' would be conferred on the new novices but Catherine insisted that they each retain their baptismal name with the prefix 'Mary'. For Anna Maria, this simply meant a reordering of her two names. The reception ceremony was public, as was customary in the Presentation order. Catherine opted to wear a rich lavender brocade, perhaps in deference to her age, but Anna Marie and Elizabeth wore white, with the usual accompaniments of lace and bright orange blossom flowers.

The novitiate was more severe than had been anticipated. Here Catherine found herself under the direction of an extremely rigorous and austere Mistress of Novices, M. Teresa Higgins. She was a woman tainted by the spirit of Jansenistic moralism and sternness and she made it her goal to chasten Catherine with all sorts of penances and humiliations and to exercise her humility, patience and charity. What a shock it must have been to Catherine to be subjected to public correction and severe penances for the most trifling faults. Once, for some slight omission, she was directed to kneel at the foot of the novitiate table with her arms extended in the form of a cross. The novice mistress was unexpectedly called away, and when she returned an hour later, she found Catherine still kneeling with arms outstretched, but trembling and on the point of collapse. How humiliated she must have felt before her relations when she was told to read for them a passage from the Imitation of Christ; how painful when she was punished for overstaying for a few minutes her allotted time in the parlour.

It must have been almost unbearable for Catherine when she was not allowed to see the President of Carlow College, where her nephews were boarding. These were now orphans. Mary, their mother, had died in August, 1827, leaving five children: Mary, James, Robert, Catherine and William, ages 16 to 5. William, Mary's husband died in January, 1829, and each of the five children chose Catherine as their legal guardian. She took the girls to Baggot Street and registered the boys as boarders in Carlow College.

The extremes in religious practice and the emphasis of law over life did not accord in any way with Catherine's spirit but she retained her cheerfulness and light-heartedness. She relished the peace and contemplative atmospheres of the convent and employed good humour and prayerful reflection to cope with her trials. In her poem "The Album", we get a glimpse of both of those responses. Denied the intellectual and spiritual stimulation of books to which she had always been accustomed, she coped with her deprivation by humorous verse and spiritual insight.

Perhaps the greatest concern of all to her was those she had left behind in Baggot Street. She was denied regular communication with her companions there and was left to worry in silence and solitude as news trickled in about the illness among them, and about the indiscreet mortifications and lack of prudence of some of these young women who now lacked guidance. How broken-hearted she must have been when the news that 19-year old Caroline Murphy had died in June, six months before she returned to Baggot Street, and that Anne O'Grady had become seriously ill.

Under pressure, Catherine developed mouth ulcers and Mary Ann Doyle tells us that during the novitiate, she suffered much from a "disease of the gums". Catherine worried too for her two novitiate companions. In August 1831, Mary Ann suffered a severe haemorrhage of the lungs, brought on by over exertion in her charge, the convent chapel. From there on, Catherine assisted her in the sacristy. Elizabeth Harley suffered greatly too, particularly as a result of working in a damp basement. Catherine felt bound to intercede on her behalf. Even to the end of their novitiate, Catherine's anxiety continued. She and her two companions were kept in uncertainty about whether they could be professed since they did not intend to join the Presentation congregation. At one stage it was even suggested that Mary Ann Doyle and Elizabeth Hartley would be allowed to take vows while Catherine would be delayed, or rejected altogether! However, their minds were set at ease when Archbishop Murray assured Catherine that should the Presentation community fail to profess her, he would do so willingly himself.[7] Eventually the three received the unanimous vote of the Chapter for their profession.

Catherine, Mary Anna and Elizabeth made their profession on December 12, 1831 in a ceremony over which Archbishop Murray presided. Dr Blake was also in attendance and, before he took the newly professed back to Baggot Street, he congratulated them on the manner in which they had spent their novitiate, what edification they had given, and said that he hoped they would infuse the same spirit in those to whom they were returning.

As we review the influences and experiences of Catherine's journey to this Foundation Day of the Sisters of Mercy, we could truly say that life's crises and transitions broke open into grace for her because she accepted the possibilities they offered. Indeed, we can marvel at the plans of God who "can bend and change and form and

re-form any of his creatures to fit them for the purpose he designs".[8] ✠

[1] As the papers were primarily for reflection, the quotations were not referenced. However, LISTEN has made every effort to locate sources, but realises that a few remain elusive. LISTEN would like to express warm thanks to Maureen McGuirk RSM (North Sydney) who generously assisted in this research task.

[2] See references in Mary C. Sullivan RSM, (ed) *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Four Courts Press Ltd., Dublin, 1995 (herein referred to as MCS1).

[3] Letter 211 in Mary C. Sullivan RSM, (ed) *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*, Four Courts Press Ltd., Dublin, 2004 (herein referred to as MCS2).

[4] Degnan, M. Bertrand RSM, *Mercy Unto Thousands: Life of Mother Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy*, Albany, New York, Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1957, p. 47 (herein referred to as Degnan).

[5] MCS1, p. 208.

[6] MCS1, p. 204.

[7] See MCS1, pp. 169-170.

[8] Sisters of Mercy, *Guide for the Sisters of Mercy*, Sisters of Mercy, London, Robson, 1885, p. 134.

To Assist in Your Reflection and Prayer (Formed and Reformed)

TAKE some time to be in touch with your own journey. You may like to imagine that Catherine sits by your side and invites you into conversation with her.

- She reminds you of how she was shaped by her early childhood, her teen years, her young adulthood and her novitiate experiences.
- She shares with you how she was affected and shaped by family fortunes and misfortunes, by poverty and plenty, by difficulties and opportunities, by supporters and opponents.
- She confides to you her struggle about the decision to become a religious and her novitiate experience.

She invites you:

- To move to your own experiences and to spend some time getting in touch with memories and feelings.
- To recall and talk with her about what has shaped you.
- To revisit your own journey into Mercy life.

Ponder the following:

> "The journey of the past 40 years has been an ongoing pilgrimage of faith, a surrendering to God and a living out of the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection that we could never have imagined when we set out. Fidelity to the vision of a renewed and revitalised religious life to serve the mission of God in our time has sustained us through difficult and confusing days. We have been re-shaped, reformed and transformed in the hands of the Potter." (Breege O'Neill RSM, Ireland)

Reflection and Integration

- Remember the people, events, etcetera that have enriched and blessed your life. Take time to allow lost memories to surface. Note how it feels to remember those now.
- Spend some time identifying what needs to be healed in you (What is your hurt, your wound, your pain?)
- Pray Psalm 136. Note how the author has recognised God's faithfulness in the many and varied events of people's lives. Then reflect on how God's enduring love is written between the lines of you life as well. Ponder these moments:
  - the happy, joyous freeing events;
  - the painful experiences of struggle;
  - the 'in-between' grey moments;
  - the energising, surprising discoveries;
  - the ongoing search for inner truth;
  - the enduring friendships.
- Journal or write your own psalm.
- Resolve to move with any promptings that have surfaced for you.