

The Death and Burial of Catherine McAuley (1778-1841):  
Her Convent and Tomb as a Place of Pilgrimage

Catherine McAuley's Death:

In the evening of Thursday, November 11, 1841, Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy, died of tuberculosis at the Convent of Mercy on Baggot Street, Dublin—the first of twelve convents she had established in the preceding decade. She was surrounded by members of the Baggot Street, Booterstown, and Limerick communities, some of whom have left written eye-witness reports. Mary Elizabeth Moore (1806-1868), superior of the convent in Limerick, wrote ten days after Catherine McAuley's death to the superior of the Mercy convent in Tullamore (founded in 1836):

She died the Death of the Just. Cautious as she was from bringing herself into notice unnecessarily in Health she was still more so in sickness, waiting on herself even in her last agony, preserving to the last moment the same peace and serenity of mind which so eminently distinguished her through Life . . . . her first and last injunction to all was to preserve union and peace amongst each other . . . .

. . . . About five in the evening she asked for the candle to be placed in her hand. We commenced the last prayers . . . . When we thought the senses must be going and that it might be well to rouse attention by praying a little louder, she said: No occasion, my darling, to speak so loud, I hear distinctly. In this way she continued till 10 minutes before 8 when she calmly breathed her last sigh.

I did not think it possible for Human Nature to have such self-possession at the awful moment of Death but she had an extraordinary mind in Life and Death. (Letter to Mary Ann Doyle, 21 November 1841)

Mary Vincent Whitty (1819-1892), a young sister who had professed her vows at Baggot Street on August 19, 1841, and who cared for Catherine during her last days, wrote on November 12:

We said Matins [in the evening, as was customary] & some one sent for me & I had the consolation, for it is a pleasing though melancholy consolation, to read the last prayers for her, close her eyes & that mouth, from which I have received such instruction. May God grant us all grace to remember & practice it. Mother de Pazzi, Mother Elizabeth, Srs. Magdalen, de Sales, Lucy, Martha & I were in the room—you can not think how calmly & quietly she drew her last breath—I am sure she is now an advocate for us all in heaven . . . .

. . . . yesterday . . . . she said to me, if you give yourself entirely to God—all you have to serve Him—every power of your mind & heart—you will have a consolation you will not know where it comes from . . . . indeed she looked the picture of entire abandonment of herself and all that belonged to her into the hands of God. (Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 12 November 1841)

Mary Teresa White (1809-1888) had lived with Catherine McAuley at Baggot Street from May 1833 until the founding in Galway in May 1840. She traveled all day Thursday, hoping to see her friend before she died, but arrived too late. Forty years later she wrote:

I saw her in death, and was one of those who placed her in her coffin. I was mother superior in Galway at the time, and came to Dublin hoping to see and speak to her for the last time; but she had departed four hours before I arrived, and I never felt such grief before or since. (Qtd. in Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy* 1: 49-50)

Similarly, Dr. Michael Blake (1775-1860), bishop of Dromore and Catherine McAuley's longtime friend and counselor, wrote of her two days after her death:

A more zealous, a more prudent, a more useful, a more disinterested, a more successful benefactress of human nature, I believe, never existed in Ireland since the days of St. Bridget . . . . Her course was long enough to render her name immortal in the remembrance of the virtuous and truly religious . . . . we cannot but lament her departure . . . . But God's holy will be done at all times. To Him we are indebted for all she did. From Him she received the spirit that animated her pure soul . . . .

Your letter reached me this morning just when I was going to the Altar. On seeing the black seal, I hastily opened it. My heart was instantly filled with grief, but I used it, I hope, in making me offer with more fervour the divine Sacrifice of propitiation for the happy repose of the dear departed friend whom I ever esteemed and revered and whose memory I shall ever esteem and reverence until the last moment of my life. (Letter to Mary Elizabeth Moore, 13 November 1841)

The Consecration of the Convent Cemetery at Baggot Street, Dublin:

Dr. Daniel Murray, archbishop of Dublin, had visited Catherine McAuley at Baggot Street on November 6, the Saturday before her death. However, a week later he was too ill to consecrate the convent garden as a cemetery, as he had proposed. (Previously sisters who died at Baggot Street were buried in the vaults of St. Teresa's, the Carmelite church on Clarendon Street, Dublin.) So, according to Mary Vincent Whitty, Dr. Murray asked Dr. William Kinsella, bishop of Ossory, to consecrate the ground on Sunday, November 14. On Saturday, November 13, Mary Vincent wrote: "She is to be put in the coffin to-night and brought to the choir where she will remain until Monday—preparations are making for the consecration—is it not a great comfort that she is to be left with us" (Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 13 November 1841).

On Sunday, November 14, Mary Vincent again wrote to her former mistress of novices, now temporarily with the foundation in Birmingham, England: "Doctor Kinsella has consecrated the ground & gave us a nice little exhortation after it—I cannot tell you what he said for indeed I can only think of our dear dear Parent for she was truly such to each of us" (Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 14 November 1841). A month later, in a letter to the superior of the Mercy convent in Charleville, founded in 1836, Mary Elizabeth Moore said of the cemetery at Baggot Street: "Their own cemetery [was] consecrated the day before interment and they have the consolation of having her remains" (Letter to Mary Angela Dunne, 10 December 1841). In

her “Memoir of the Foundress,” Mary Clare Augustine Moore (1808-1880) also notes the consecration: “The Right Revd. Dr. Kinsella, B[ishop] of Ossory, consecrated the burial ground in which her body was the first laid.”

#### The Burial of Catherine McAuley’s Body:

On the morning of November 15, 1841, the Solemn Office of the Dead was sung in the Baggot Street chapel, followed by the Requiem High Mass, and the burial of Catherine McAuley’s body. The next day Mary Vincent Whitty wrote:

I’ve heard there were 62 priests at the Office—Doctor Brown[e] & Doctor Healy [*sic*]—there were two rows of seats at each side the choir & all were full. We were on the gallery & followed the coffin with our white cloaks on & lighted tapers to the garden or cemetery now. The singing was delightful. Mr. O’Hanlon sang High Mass . . . (Letter to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 16 November 1841)

Mary Vincent refers to Dr. George Joseph Plunket Browne, bishop of Galway; Dr. Francis Haly, bishop of Kildare and Leighlin (where the Carlow convent was founded in 1837); and the Revd. Redmond O’Hanlon, ODC, prior of the Carmelite community at St. Teresa’s church, Dublin, and Dr. Murray’s deputy as ecclesiastical superior of the Baggot Street convent.

On Monday, December 13, the Morning Register (Dublin), in reporting on the burial of Catherine McAuley, noted that Dr. John Ryan, bishop of Limerick, presided. He had brought Mary Elizabeth Moore to Dublin to be with Catherine McAuley during her last days, and would presumably have been present at the funeral and burial. However, the Freeman’s Journal (Dublin) for November 16, 1841 says that “His Grace, the Archbishop of Cashel [Most Revd. Michael Slattery] was present, and the Right Revd. Dr. Healy [Haly], Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin presided.” (Other statements in the Freeman’s Journal account are incorrect, so perhaps this one is as well.)

In her account of the funeral and burial, given in the Bermondsey [London] Annals for 1868, Mary Clare Moore (1814-1874)—then the superior of the convent in Bermondsey, but in November 1841 temporarily residing in the Cork convent—records that these events were also attended by Dr. John Murphy, bishop of Cork, and Dr. Michael Blake, bishop of Dromore. She further notes that Catherine McAuley “had often said . . . that she should like to be buried in the same way as poor people, in the earth, without the expense attending interment in Vaults, and Divine Providence ordained that she should be the first laid in that chosen spot . . . only the small cross erected for the consecration marks the resting place of her whose name is in benediction in every part of the world” (Bermondsey Annals, 1868). (By 1868 numerous convents of Sisters of Mercy had been founded in Ireland, England, Scotland, Newfoundland, the United States, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand.) The author of the Limerick Manuscript—Mary Vincent Harnett (1811-1865), a contemporary of Catherine McAuley at Baggot Street and later in Limerick (founded in 1838)—also notes that “a small wooden cross was placed at the head of the grave to mark the spot, with an inscription inviting all to pray for the repose of her soul: ‘May she rest in peace.’”

Mary de Pazzi Delany (1802-1872) was Catherine McAuley's Assistant at Baggot Street, and her successor as Reverend Mother (1841-1844). In 1864 she wrote to the Bermondsey convent, expressing regret that, because "rumours were afloat that we would not be allowed [by the civic authorities] to have a burial ground where buildings were so much in the neighborhood," only the one cross remained on Catherine McAuley's grave, despite Mary de Pazzi's determination to have "the best monument to be had placed over her" (Bermondsey Annals, 1868). However, in 1868 Mary de Pazzi was able to write: "I told you my request to our Rev. Mother on my last Feast [October 16] was for some simple shrine to distinguish the place of our revered Foundress' interment. I am happy to hear it is in hands and I hope will soon be erected. It is to represent our Blessed Lady as Mother of Mercy, praying for and blessing her children" (Letter to Mary Clare Moore, 21 October 1868).

The statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the white cross remained over Catherine McAuley's grave until they were replaced in 1910 by a small memorial chapel which still stands over the spot. A long engraved sheet of marble lies over the burial place itself. The engraving around three edges of the marble reads: "To the revered memory of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley Foundress of the Religious Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy Born September 29 1787 [*sic*: 1778] Professed Dec<sup>r</sup> the 12<sup>th</sup> 1831 Appointed Mother Superior Dec<sup>r</sup> 13 1831 Died Nov<sup>r</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 1841 Aged 54 [*sic*: 63] 1 month 13 days."

In 1994 when the restoration of the Convent of Mercy on Baggot Street was completed, a plaque was placed on the wall inside the chapel at the head of the grave. Closely paraphrasing words from the "Suscipe," a prayer Catherine McAuley had composed, the plaque reads: "My God, I am thine for time and eternity Catherine McAuley 1778-1841." This prayer looks down upon the mortal remains of the Founder of the Sisters of Mercy and invites all who enter the door of the memorial chapel to remember the holy life of Catherine McAuley and to be encouraged and inspired by her simplicity and good example.

A Place of Pilgrimage: The Convent and Room in which Catherine McAuley Died:

The foregoing accounts demonstrate that from the day of her death, and indeed from long before that day, Catherine McAuley, contrary to her own very humble estimate of herself, had a reputation for sanctity (*fama sanctitatis*)—not just among Sisters of Mercy, but among clergy and bishops, as well as the poor of Ireland whom she sheltered, fed, clothed, visited, and taught. Pope John Paul II's declaration on April 9, 1990 that Venerable Catherine practiced in a heroic degree the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity towards God and neighbor and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude confirmed in a formal and authoritative decree what the Reverend Myles Gaffney, dean of Maynooth, expressed in the 1840s:

Few left the world in 1841 that can, with more confidence than the revered Foundress of the Order of Mercy, expect to hear on the last accounting day the following words from the lips of our Divine Redeemer: "Come, you blessed of my Father; I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you covered me, sick and you visited me. As much as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." (Bermondsey Annals)

When the convent on Baggot Street was repaired and slightly renovated in 1994, it was re-dedicated as Mercy International Centre. At that time a new community of Sisters of Mercy from throughout the world was appointed to continue the hospitality to pilgrims the convent had provided for over 150 years. Seven Sisters of Mercy now live there and together with three Associates staff the Centre as a place of pilgrimage and prayer which welcomes Sisters of Mercy, their Associates, families, co-workers, and friends. Well over three thousand people have come to Baggot Street since 1994—for six- or eight-day retreats, for three-day retreats (“Walking and Praying with Catherine McAuley”), for celebrations of the Eucharist, for days of recollection, and for shorter visits to the chapel, Catherine’s Room, the Heritage Room, and Catherine’s grave. The refectory of the convent remains, in structure and simplicity, much as it was in Catherine McAuley’s day, and here pilgrims receive “a good cup of tea”—in fidelity to Catherine’s sensitivity, and to her dying wish for the sisters.

Pilgrims come for prayer, for inspiration, for encouragement, for renewal of their spirits. While there is at Baggot Street no undue cult related to the person of Catherine McAuley (no halos, no crowns, no public liturgies in her honor, no presumption that she is a canonized saint), still, in the privacy of their hearts and in small private groups, pilgrims remember and thank God for her goodness, turn to her for help, reflect on the humility and charity of her life, read her words, and pray to God that they may become as merciful as she was, and so follow Jesus Christ. More and more those who come to Mercy International Centre speak familiarly of “Catherine” as a companion and helper in their efforts to live a truly Christian life.

Outside the front door of the Centre pilgrims are welcomed by a life-sized statue of Catherine McAuley welcoming a poor Dublin woman and her baby to the House of Mercy (the name of the building before the founding of the congregation in 1831). Pilgrims as well as the woman and child are welcomed by the statue’s outstretched open hand. The work of Irish sculptor Michael Burke, the statue was given to the Centre in 1994 by the Allied Irish Bank.

In the Heritage Room in the basement of the Centre, pilgrims see, among other objects, Catherine McAuley’s handwritten manuscript of the first Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy, the three original keys to the convent doors, Catherine’s Last Will and Testament, and her silver ring of religious profession engraved with her mottoes: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* and *Fiat Voluntas Tua*. For special retreats and occasions the ring is removed from its glass cabinet, and pilgrims are permitted to handle it or put it on a finger.

In the Callaghan Room on the ground floor, which once served as a parlour and as a community room, pilgrims see the furniture and china Catherine McAuley inherited from Catherine and William Callaghan (Coolock House). Here as well as in the corridors of the convent they also see oil-painted portraits of some of Catherine’s trusted benefactors and advisers: William Callaghan, Bishop Michael Blake, Father Thomas Betagh, SJ, and Father Edward Armstrong. At the base of the spiral staircase hang the ropes attached to the original bell of the convent.

In the years immediately following Catherine McAuley’s death, the community at the convent on Baggot Street knew that the room in which she died, the clothes she wore, and many

other material objects she had used should be preserved as objects which had touched the hands of a holy woman. In particular, the room in which Catherine died was regarded with great respect and deference. Although the house was increasingly crowded and other sisters had to sleep there, the room where Catherine's deathbed had been was always treated with special remembrance and care.

Today this room, on the first floor of Mercy International Centre, is called "Catherine's Room." It is a place of prayer and reflection. In it are the bed jacket and coif she wore; her crucifix, Little Office book, and writing desk; chairs she brought to Baggot Street from Coolock House (where she served Catherine and William Callaghan for almost twenty years); the priedieu given her by her confessor Revd. Edward Armstrong, a priest of Dublin; and especially the Calvary (a large, standing crucifix) he bequeathed to her two months before his death (May 15, 1828). The atmosphere of the room is always silent and prayerful. Here pilgrims remember that on November 11, 1841, a loving and serene woman prayed earnestly for her sisters:

May God bless them—May the Holy Ghost pour down His choicest blessings—Make them truly good Religious—May they live in Union & Charity & May we all meet in a happy Eternity. (Mary Vincent Whitty to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 11 November 1841)

Here Catherine assured all those standing beside her bed:

When we give ourselves entirely into the hands of God he will so sweetly ordain all things for their greater comfort, even in this life. (Mary Vincent Whitty to Mary Cecilia Marmion, 13 November 1841)

All the material objects that Catherine McAuley is known to have once worn or touched—those now in the Heritage Room and Catherine's Room at Mercy International Centre, as well as in other convents, especially in Ireland and England (such as, small locks of her hair, her walking cloak, and her leather cincture)—are carefully preserved as potential relics, the authenticity of which the Congregation for the Causes of Saints may one day wish to determine. The reverence with which these humble objects are now privately treated indicates the reputation for sanctity that has long been attached to the life of Catherine McAuley. Moreover, and in a way that transcends these simple, material objects, there are throughout the world hundreds of Catholic institutions that have been founded by the Sisters of Mercy to perpetuate the works of mercy to which Catherine McAuley gave her life: hospitals, nursing homes, and health care clinics; schools, social service centers, and shelters for the homeless; prayer centers, retreat centers, and convents deliberately situated in economically destitute neighborhoods. The services offered, by the grace of God, to the people who have come to these places of Mercy over the last 165 years may, before God, render these institutions the most moving and enduring "relics" of Catherine McAuley's holy historical presence in this world of suffering; they may be, before God, the true vestiges of her fidelity to the neighborly charity Christ most desires: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers [or sisters] of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

## A Place of Pilgrimage: The Grave of Catherine McAuley

The earth grave in which the coffined body of Catherine McAuley was buried on November 15, 1841, is now sheltered by the small stone oratory built over the site in 1910 (Neumann, ed., *Letters*, 47). Of all the venues of pilgrimage at Mercy International Centre, Catherine's grave is the most frequented and the most profoundly revered. Here people stand, alone or in groups, in the early morning, during the day, or at twilight. Here they sense the presence of the God in whose providence Catherine McAuley had such great confidence. Here they sing hymns or pray silently or aloud in her spirit, sometimes using the words of her own "Suscipe":

My God, I am Thine for all eternity; teach me to cast my whole self into the arms of Thy Providence with the most lively unlimited confidence in Thy compassionate tender pity. Grant, O most Merciful Redeemer, that whatever Thou dost ordain or permit may always be acceptable to me; take from my heart all painful anxiety; suffer nothing to afflict me, but sin; nothing to delight me, but the hope of coming to the possession of Thee, my God, in Thy own everlasting Kingdom. Amen. (Limerick Manuscript)

In this spirit pilgrims to Catherine McAuley's grave privately ask her to intercede for them and then confidently abandon their needs to God. Sometimes they leave flowers, candles, or handwritten notes; sometimes they take photographs. Always they depart with peace and gratitude for this experience.

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