



Mercy Global Action: Compassionate Heart

Stephanie Langley, Jemima Welsh, Rebecca Goodyear (Brisbane)

Background

2021 marks the 160th Anniversary of All Hallows' School in Brisbane and notably also the anniversary of Mercy Education in Queensland. This presentation highlights how influential women in our local history have shaped generations of young women to flourish through educating with a focus on compassion. The three women written to in these presentations include **Mother Vincent Whitty** – foundress of All Hallows' School, **Florence O'Reilly**- major benefactor of the School and **Sr Mary Ronan** who was instrumental in developing the Mercy Action program at the school.

Dear Mother Vincent Whitty,

It is an honour to be writing to you- albeit quite surreal.

I think the challenge lies beyond my realm of expertise to really capture the impact that you have had on generations of young women over the years, in this simple short letter. Yet, in saying that, I will try my best to portray to you how far the All Hallows' School community has come – continuing your legacy which began 160 years ago in 1861. As a former All Hallows' student, I can speak to you about what your legacy has meant to me from both a student and educator perspective, because as a result of my schooling here, I have chosen to dedicate my life to the Education of young people in the Catholic and Mercy faith Tradition.

Mother Vincent Whitty, for me personally, an indication of your strength as a woman stemmed from an early experience you had, when first leaving Ireland. I simply cannot imagine what it must have been like for you and the Sisters who journeyed with you, to set off on the monumental voyage from Ireland to Australia. It was a journey that took months to complete, sailing on the *Donald McKay*. As I read your letter dated *9 December 1860* where you describe to be on the *Donald McKay*, setting voyage, it is unfathomable to me that when you again write five months later, on *22 March 1861* you have only just arrived in Melbourne, Australia. Today, we are afforded the luxury of travelling from Brisbane to Ireland in 24 hours (believe it or not!). There is one element of your story arriving in Australia I suppose we can relate to today, and perhaps it is apt that I am writing to you in 2021, as we are currently in the grips of dealing with the first global pandemic in over 100 years. In March of 1861 you wrote to the Reverend Mother of Baggot Street from "The Quarantine Station" in Melbourne, where you were required to remain for approximately a fortnight (which was then was extended to a month!). "Quarantine" in all its form is an experience we are faced with these 160 years later here in Australia by crossing seas and state borders, as a result of keeping the COVID-19 virus at bay. When you first arrived here in Brisbane, Queensland in 1861 with your sisters, you became familiar with a section of land known as Duncan's Hill. That area is still sacred to us today as it is the site our beloved Convent now lies, the original building of which we have kept intact over

these past 160 years. We still see reminders of you each way we turn here, including our iconic Magnolia Tree. The one you write to Sr Mary Francis as being visible out of your reception room on 2nd December 1875. You described a situation unfolding in front of you of a Goat, tearing on the leaves of that Magnolia and you describe in your letter that if it lives – it will go on to be **“a great tree”**. Well, I can see it from where I am writing to you now, so perhaps you were right there.

All Hallows’ School today proudly continues the legacy of Catherine McAuley and yourself as an early Sister of Mercy. For generations we have been blessed with the knowledge, wisdom and stories of the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane Congregation who also continue your legacy. We know Mother McAuley was very close to you personally and you held great love and esteem for her. You have passed that on to the generation of Mercy women today. As a school steeped in her Mercy Tradition our students are educated to be women who lead for justice and act with Mercy.

You may be interested to know that now in 2021, women’s place in society has improved somewhat...yet we still have a long way to go. The work generations of Sisters did in establishing All Hallows’ was fundamental in continuing Catherine McAuley’s legacy and educating girls to have a compassionate heart. In fact, on one of our key statues, we have one Mother McAuley’s quotes **“No work of charity can be more productive of good to society or more conducive to happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women”**. This quote is placed under a statute of her, offering her shawl to the poor clothed in her worn boots to represent the tireless work she did for those on the margins.

Oh Mother Vincent Whitty, I wish you could see our girls today. As a student body, they are fierce in their pursuit for Justice. Only today, I heard two of our students call on a sea of their peers to speak out about the treatment of women in society and to make it known that they will not stand for violence against women. The cheers of response from the audience must tell you that they stand united in this, still, all these years later, as you and your Sisters did. It gave me goose bumps and a tear in my eye hearing them speak and participate in the March4Justice, you and your beloved Reverend Mother would be so very proud of them.

Over the years our All Hallows’ community has aimed to emulate the work of Catherine McAuley when she first set up the Sisters of Mercy- that of, “Mercy being more than charity” and challenging those in privilege to walk with those on the margins. Crucial to the education of our students is participation in what we call our “Mercy Action” program. Each student is given the opportunity to participate in outreach work that restores human dignity and connection to people who may not be as fortunate as them. This morning, my experience at “Eddie’s Van” which we work in conjunction with the Christian brother school down the road showed this. It goes without saying that the legacy of education you set up at our school is one of great privilege for our students, yet it is the aim of our school to educate that “with privilege, comes great responsibility”.

If I try to articulate a thank you for what you did 160 years ago, I would not be able to find enough words to do it justice. You may not have set out on the mission to Brisbane, knowing that you would impact generations of women after you, but let me assure you, you have done just that. The women who leave the green gates here go on to be women of strength, resilience, justice, compassion, and mercy. They have achieved some great things, and I have no doubt our girls will continue to go on to achieve great things, stemming from the foundations

you established for them. We have a saying that “once an All Hallows’ girl, always an All Hallows’ girl” yet really at the heart of this is knowing that we are all “Mercy Girls” and have the privilege of being so, because of you.

So thank you Mother Vincent Whitty for your courage, tenacity, bravery and vision, I hope you can remain ever proud of the work that we continue to do in your honour.

Yours in Mercy,

Steph Langley

All Hallows’ School Past Pupil (2007-2011) All Hallows’ School Teacher (2016- present)

All references in this letter are made courtesy of *Mercy Women Making History* from the pen of Mother Vincent Whitty. Published in November 2001 by The Sisters of Mercy – Brisbane Congregation

Dear Florence O’Reilly,

I have only recently come across records of your work from the 1870s. I wanted to write a letter of acknowledgement and thanks, for your quiet service that helped set the foundations for our local Mercy community here in Brisbane, Australia.

You may not have set out to create a legacy – indeed, you eschewed a religious vocation and said you were content to ‘serve God in your own humble way as well as you could’. Who could have foreseen, then, how instrumental your decisions would be to the sustainability of the Mercy tradition so many miles from your original home in England.

I have read that you travelled to Queensland when you were only 25 years old. That step alone shows an immense courage, even with the stable backing of your wealth and property ownership in the UK. Newly arrived, you were bold in striking out with a financial acumen well beyond your years, making investments in local ventures such as farmland in the Samford Valley and sugarcane in the Johnstone River District. As a woman of independent means, I imagine you encountered significant challenges in proving you could invest your own money without relying on the ‘expertise’ of men. How alike you are to Mercy foundress, Catherine McAuley!

I am most struck, however, by what you chose *to do* with those investments. It seems to me, from all I have read, that you weren’t out to make a profit for the sake of personal gain. Instead, you applied your savvy financial skills to support the development of early Mercy institutions. I gather it was not widely known that you cleared the debt on the All Hallows’ Convent and School (the first school for girls in Queensland, where I attended!) and on St Vincent’s Orphanage, or provided initial funds for the opening of Holy Cross Laundry (an early social enterprise providing employment for people living with disabilities), or donated land for the establishment of Mater Hospital, one of Brisbane’s biggest public hospitals. You did these things rather quietly, but with a conviction that suggested a deep faith and a commitment to Mercy in action. Without you, it’s possible that these institutions would not have been established – or maintained.

Now, more than 100 years later, we are seeing the emergence of ‘impact investing’ – a strategy by which investors use their funds to create tangible social and environmental impact alongside financial returns. I can see you chuckling, because of course you were doing impact investing long before we had a name for it, before it was formalised. You were a pioneer: not because

you set out to be recognised, but because you saw conscious asset management as the best way that *you* could live out your principles and serve God.

It would not surprise you to learn that ‘money’ and ‘faith’ don’t often go together, even in 2021. Despite the fact that we need money to do anything constructive at a systemic level, there seems to have been a reticence over the years to talk about money as something that can be put to use in the service of goodness. Perhaps this is because so many of our society’s financial decisions have been made by a small group of men in positions of power, who, perhaps even unintentionally, have created a world in which people’s welfare comes second to profit maximisation.

But I believe – as you surely believed – that such a reality is a construct. Money is not inherently bad; it is a neutral force that takes on the intentions with which we use it. And you saw it as a means of easing the burdens on good institutions so that they could continue to support women and those on the outskirts of society to gain valuable education, work and healthcare. You saw it as a way of *doing Mercy*.

Ultimately, I am left with the profound sense that you acted from a place of compassion. You modelled a compassionate heart by continuing to put your own reputation and resources at risk in order to quietly serve those who needed help but who weren’t in a position to ask for it. You didn’t seek anything in return from these people, but were formidable in using your position of privilege to further their goals. Surely – at any point in history – compassion has also required bravery, and you had this in spades.

Now, as I embark on a career in what is known as the ‘impact economy’, I am inspired by your brave, compassionate heart. I, too, see money as a tool for Mercy, and I hope I can be as astute, quiet and formidable as you were in helping others to do good work.

Thank you for creating a path along which so many of us now travel, and which is essential to our world’s future prosperity.

In Mercy,
Jemima Welsh

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