



Mercy Global Action: Compassionate Heart

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1 Kings 19:11-13 reads:

“A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind.
After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.
After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.
And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”

Elijah finds that God is there in the gentle whisper.

Amidst the winds, the earthquakes, and the fires of our world, compassion often feels like this gentle whisper. The Dalai Lama, who spends much of his life teaching on the importance of compassion, points out that today the world is inundated with advertisements and our news is centered on money. He says, “no one (is) telling or explaining the importance of warm heartedness.”¹ He has a point. The compassionate heart is not a flashy headline. It speaks softly and walks humbly. It is often hard to hear behind the many distractions, but it is there.

What does the gentle whisper of a compassionate heart sound like in our world?

A compassionate heart is one steeped in Mercy. It means treating others as their highest and best self, even when they may be acting from their lowest. This can mean acting in a way that recognizes and respects the dignity of oneself and others. It can also mean always walking through life with love and respect, regardless of the behavior of others. This might be one of the more difficult feats. It is much easier to react in kind instead of to react in kindness. An example of a compassionate heart can be found in the work of Catherine McAuley.

Catherine McAuley was driven by compassion—she strove to uphold the best treatment of all, especially those marginalized and forgotten in her community. She did all of this despite not always being treated with dignity and respect herself. Many saw her efforts as the “meddling of the ‘unlearned sex’ in the work of the clergy.”² But the gentle whisper prevailed through the harsh winds, and Catherine McAuley opened the doors of the Mercy International Centre in 1827. Her work and legacy have been meddling in the world ever since.

It is hard to think of Catherine McAuley’s compassionate heart as a gentle whisper—she seemed to have more of a courageous shout. After all, she spent her entire inheritance on constructing the

¹ “Dalai Lama’s Guide to Happiness,” YouTube, April 1, 2021, video, 4:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUEkDc_LfKQ.

² “About Catherine: Misunderstanding and Criticism,” Mercy International Association, accessed April 1, 2021. <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/introducing-catherine/>.

Mercy Center, she started a new order of Sisters, and she was one of the first Catholic women in Ireland to sign a deed of property! Yet, as daring as she was, her soft and thoughtful care for others always provided the steady backbone of her efforts. A fitting example is the famous comfortable cup of tea.

In Catherine McAuley's final hours—a time which was likely quite frightening for her—Catherine thought first of the fear and grief of her Sisters. She requested that after her death, the Sisters break their usual hour of silence and religious devotion in order to share conversation over a comfortable cup of tea.³ In a time of suffering and uncertainty, Catherine upheld a high standard of care, hospitality, and love—something that always defined her leadership. It is telling of Catherine's compassionate heart that her last words were not spent on instructions for the house or the work, but on the importance of “a good cup of tea.”⁴

Today, generations after Catherine McAuley's comforting cup of tea, her work and legacy continue to inspire many people around the world. This past February, I graduated from the Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship. The fellowship focused on women's global leadership, and brought together women from Papua New Guinea, Australia, Ireland, Peru, and the United States. The fellowship began with a conference in Cambodia, and was planned to continue in New York City for the Commission on the Status of Women and conclude at the Mercy Center in Dublin. Unfortunately, the conference in New York began in March 2020—right at the onset of the COVID lockdown.

After an early conclusion to the New York trip, the fellowship continued completely online. Despite this significant roadblock, hundreds of people from around the world attended the remote graduation ceremony. Furthermore, the first woman president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, offered the keynote address. While Robinson's words were powerful and moving, I am most in awe of the fellows in the program. In small and large ways, these women have been one of my most significant sources of inspiration to do better and be better. Their work as mentors, teachers, Sisters, and mothers is motivation to strive to serve. Their constant friendship is encouragement to always walk and speak with a compassionate heart. Compassion may not be at the forefront of global news, but I believe a compassionate heart can be found everywhere, every day.

The winds, the earthquakes, and the fires of our world do indeed render compassion a gentle and soft whisper sometimes. Yet despite the Dalai Lama's view that warm heartedness and compassion seems relatively silent in the world, he maintains an optimistic outlook. He makes sure to clarify that compassion and warm heartedness are all around us, “if we only look in the right places.”⁵ And the good news is that this is something every single person has inside: the potential for a truly compassionate heart. In the midst of global conflicts, wars, disasters, and inequalities, the spirit of Mercy is rooted in simple hospitality: a comfortable cup of tea. And yet, this tender act is a force to reckon with. In the simplest and humblest act is where true power lies, and many whispers can become a chorus.

³ Mary C Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 362.

⁴ Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley*, 362.

⁵ “Dalai Lama's Guide to Happiness,” YouTube, April 1, 2021, video, 4:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUEkDc_LfKQ.

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