

A Ceremony of Mercy Remembrance

Opening Prayer and Welcome Song

Leader: We gather to remember and honour the lives of our Sisters in Mercy, especially those who have died in the past year. We gather to reflect on the life of Catherine McAuley, woman of mercy, the anniversary of whose death falls on November 11th.

We gather in gratitude and loss, fondness and hope, and stand with our departed companions and all our loved ones under the cloak of God's mercy, a cloak which embraces and brings all of us into the shelter and warmth of the Trinity.

Welcome Song:

(Suggestions: *Be Thou My Vision*, *Lead Kindly Light*, *The Cloud's Veil*, *God Be With You Till We Meet Again*, *Abide With Me*, *Welcome Home...*)

Part 1: Remembering Our Companions

Scripture Reading: 1John 5:11-13

Reader:

This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son; anyone who has the Son has life...I have written all this to you so you who believe in the name of the Son of God may be sure that you have eternal life.

This is the Word of God.

R: Thanks be to God.

Leader: We stand on this earth not alone but surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" whose lives give us inspiration and courage. They have gone before us into the realm of God's light, and form that great company of the Communion of Saints.

We remember our companions in Mercy who have died in the past year.

The Naming

Leader: In naming our companions who have died, we bring and place a symbol of each one.

(the symbol might be a candle, a flower, a photo, or card with the name of each person)

We read the names reverently aloud.



Litany of Mercy Remembrance



Leader:

We remember with love and with gratitude
these our companions in Mercy who have died this year.

Response: we remember them.

They shared our calling to Mercy -

R: we remember them.

They were colleagues in ministry-

R: we remember them.

They were companions in community-

R: we remember them.

They were mentors and wisdom figures-

R: we remember them.

They were homemakers and nurturers-

R: we remember them.

They were friends of the soul-

R: we remember them.

They were eccentrics and extroverts-

R: we remember them.

They were introverts and innovators-

R: we remember them.

They were traditionalists and pioneers-

R: we remember them.

Leader: These, our companions whom we have named:

They were leaders in significant roles-

Response: we honour them.

They were leaders in unheralded ways-

R: we honour them.

They were stalwart workers in the faith-

R: we honour them.

They were creative dreamers-

R: we honour them.

They took spirit-led risks-

R: we honour them.

They trod unique and meaningful paths-

R: we honour them.

They were reliable keepers of the status quo-

R: we honour them.

They pointed us to other realities-

R: we honour them.

They kept our feet on the ground-

R: we honour them.

Leader: We remember those who sometimes found life difficult-

R: they learnt and lived Mercy.

We remember those who sometimes made life difficult-

R: they learnt and lived Mercy.

We remember those whose genius was kindness-

R: they learnt and lived Mercy.

We remember those whose gift was hospitality-

R: they learnt and lived Mercy.

We remember those whose knack was friendship-

R: they learnt and lived Mercy.

These our companions,
taught us about suffering-

R. these our companions

educated us in happiness-

R. these our companions

revealed to us the meaning of fidelity-

R. these our companions

showed us the power of forgiveness-

R. these our companions

encouraged and reassured us-

R. these our companions

challenged and cautioned us-

R. these our companions

gave us joy and laughter-

R. these our companions

shared our tears and sorrow-

R. these our companions

invited us to wisdom-

R. these our companions

bore illness valiantly-

R. these our companions

witnessed to the mercy of God-

R. these our companions.

Through the light and the dark-

R: they believed in the promises of Christ.

through plenty and drought-

R: they believed in the promises of Christ.

through loss and favour-

R: they believed in the promises of Christ.

Leader:

Creator God, You were their guide and stability,

Jesus was their pledge and purpose,

The Spirit was their friend and fire.

We miss them; we celebrate and honour the uniqueness of each one.

We thank you for their life and their gifts to us and to the people they served.

In the midst of our loss, we rejoice;

in our sadness, we celebrate,

because we believe in their new life with You, the Trinity of Love.

R: Amen.



Part 2: The Life and Death of Catherine McAuley

Leader: We move now to reflect on the woman of mercy to whom we are all connected by the mysterious and infinitely gracious designs of God: Catherine McAuley.

Reading: A Reflection

Reader: The document that is Catherine McAuley's Last Will and Testament is straightforward in its plain legal prose, but it holds a resonance for each of us in the final section. Catherine McAuley bequeathed her estate not only to respected friends and her companion Sisters but also to the *Survivors* of them. That's you, and you and me. We are the Survivors, the descendants, of the first Sisters of Mercy of Baggot St Dublin. Her estate is not primarily about a building or goods and chattels; our inheritance is the subtle gift of spirit, the precious God-directed endowment of charism. Let us pause in awe at our identity as Survivors, inheritors.

Catherine McAuley died on the evening of Thursday, November 11th, 1841 in a room with two long windows overlooking Baggot St. Visitors had been attending all day. Both they and Catherine were faced with the hard task of farewelling- there was no ambiguity at this bedside. Catherine's illness was terminal. It was dark by about 5.00pm and the cold of the winter was setting in. In the room though, the peat fire was burning, candles cast warmth and light, and familiar bodies kept watch and tended to the dying figure.

What does Catherine's life teach us about death and dying? How does it resonate with our experience?

Here was a woman who met death early, losing her parents before she reached adulthood; she knew the consequences of death in practical and emotional terms from an early age. She lived in a society where disease was rife and threat of infection prevalent. The average life expectancy was forty years, so her death at sixty-three was remarkable.

For long years at Coolock, Catherine was on call to the chronically ill Mrs Callaghan, sleeping just outside the older woman's room within earshot should she be needed in the night. Catherine honed her patience and gentleness in her care for Mrs Callaghan. Her reading of the Scripture to Mrs Callaghan inscribed the Word on her own heart. Years later she would issue advice about care of an invalid in a letter to one of the Sisters. It has practical advice about rest and exercise and nourishment but its most memorable line is "great tenderness of all things." That is Catherine's profound credo of care.

The early years at Baggot St saw a litany of lives cut short and the attendant grief that shadowed Catherine: these were young people, some of them kindred of Catherine, taken by diseases endemic to the time, notably tuberculosis. She knew the truth of what John O'Donohue calls "a presence who walks the road of life with you." That presence is Death.

It is on record that Catherine had a dread and acute anxiety about death. Her faith assured her of the peaceful aftermath of death; it was the process of getting there that was fraught. Yet when her own time came, with her "friend the cough" leading her on inexorably to the end of mortal life, she was graced with a remarkable calm and acceptance.

In the Celtic tradition the practice of "soul-leading" sees her loved ones, notably the Anam Cara, the soul friend, attend the dying person to pray and keep watch and invoke good spirits to the scene, to enable safe passage of the soul to eternity. In her final days and hours Catherine was encompassed by a warm and potent force field of love, the cross of Christ in her hands.

In his book *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue reflects on death. Whilst acknowledging that death drastically alters the reality for the grieved who remain, he writes: "The Celtic tradition had a refined sense of the miracle of death...for the Celts, the eternal world was so close to the natural world that death was not seen as a terribly destructive or threatening event. When you enter the eternal world, you are going home to where no shadow, pain or darkness can ever touch you again." The phrase "miracle of death" invites our attention, surely. Have you ever thought of death as a miracle?

O'Donohue also writes of the Celtic tradition and its "great hospitality" to death, and the fact that the dead are not far away from us. They are in a different realm, but close by. As Christians we are called to witness to the "miracle of death". This does not deny natural grief and loss. It is not so simple these days when the industries of health care and funeral services have in some ways sanitized the experience of death, muffling the reality of physical loss. One of the facts reported from primary sources about Catherine's death by Mary Sullivan is that the youngest present had the privilege, for such was it deemed, of closing Catherine's eyes and mouth after her death. That was an intimate and sacred act, signifying the end of the body's purpose.

It seems that deathbeds rouse the best and worst of human emotions, as those attending struggle to accept the transition of the person from this life to the next and the residue of other griefs comes back to us. Perhaps there is the slightest hint of petty human frailty in the sad fact that no-one summoned her dear friend Frances Warde, sixty miles away in Carlow, to farewell Catherine, despite Catherine asking after her.

Catherine herself set the scene for what would follow after her death: she knew the weary and lamenting community would need to gather not just for the now proverbial "good cup of tea," but to reminisce and console one another in the late evening when silence was the usual custom. It is they who would then need care and comfort, not her. In accord with her wishes she was buried simply, in the earth "like the poor." Her body had finished its work; her spirit was set free to continue its work in a new and marvellous way.



Leader: Catherine McAuley of Dublin:

We acknowledge your humanity.

Response: You made mercy for us.

We name your lived vulnerability.

R: You made mercy for us.

We praise your holy nobility.

R: You made mercy for us.

We rely on your enduring spirit.

R: You made mercy for us.

Concluding Prayer

We are a people called to believe in the life beyond this life, and we have as our great witness the One who was both fully human and fully divine.

Jesus, you said, 'I am the Good Shepherd.'

R: We believe you.

Jesus, you said, 'I am the True Vine.'

R: We believe you.

Jesus, you said, 'I am the Bread of Life.'

R: We believe you.

Jesus, you said, 'I am the Light of the World.'

R: We believe you.

Jesus, you said, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.'

R: We believe you.

Leader: Jesus, we believe you, and we believe in you.

R: Help our unbelief.

L: Jesus, our hope is in you.

R: Increase our faith.

L: Jesus, we believe you want only our good.

R: Lead us to ever deeper trust in your love.

Blessing:

God of life and death, bless us all with the clear eyes of truth, the steady hands of trust and the firm feet to continue our journey of faith. We believe that we shall all be gathered into the Mercy of God for eternity, reunited with our loved ones, present with You and one another in a new way, where the Love of God is the atmosphere and the Mercy of God the ground.

All: Amen.

Concluding Song: *The Suscipe.*



The tender mercy of our God has given us one another.