

THE AMBITIOUS PHILANTHROPIST

Catherine McAuley and her influence in
Nineteenth-Century Ireland

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Abstract

This thesis examines the life and work of Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) in light of the scholarship on Catholic female philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland by Caitriona Clear, Maria Luddy and Mary Peckham Magray. Catherine's use of her inherited wealth to meet the needs of the poor was in some ways typical of the Catholic philanthropy of her time, but this thesis argues that it was atypical in other respects. This is particularly evident in the way she resisted forming a religious congregation, in her relatively non-sectarian outlook, and in her efforts to create systemic change rather than simply providing charity. To demonstrate this, the thesis considers the Protestant and Catholic influences that shaped Catherine's values and charitable activity, the distinctive ways in which Catherine used her inherited wealth, and the ways in which she negotiated with clerical attempts to assist and control her philanthropic work. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the social impact of the first Sisters of Mercy, the opportunities their congregation provided for leadership, and Catherine McAuley's overall influence on social reform in nineteenth-century Ireland.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The reading prescribed for the feast day of Our Lady of Mercy in the Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 2, and tells the story of Jesus turning ordinary water into wine, at a wedding in Cana. The life of Catherine McAuley has inspired me for many years for a similar reason for out of the ordinary actions of her life, God was able to achieve extraordinary things.

Between 2017 and 2019, I was fortunate to work in the House of Mercy that Catherine built in Dublin. During this time, I heard several presenters share their interpretations of her story, read numerous accounts of Catherine's life and experiences, and had access to an extensive collection of texts on Catherine and the early Sisters of Mercy, all of which contributed to a rich learning experience. At age forty-four, Catherine received a significant inheritance, which enabled her to extend her existing philanthropic practices and establish a place of refuge and education for women and children. Clerical pressure led to the subsequent establishment of the Sisters of Mercy, changing the trajectory of Catherine's life. Over the past one hundred and ninety years, Catherine and the Sisters of Mercy have impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. This thesis has allowed me to explore what makes the actions of this ordinary woman so extraordinary.

I acknowledge, with gratitude: Dr. Nicholas Thompson, the supervisor of this thesis, for his insight and critique; Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand for allowing me to undertake full-time study; Sr. Judith Leydon, RSM, and Sr. Mary Reynolds, RSM, for their proofing expertise; the foresight of those who kept Catherine McAuley's letters and documents safe as well as those who have analysed, edited, and published them for the inspiration of others; and the philanthropic generosity of Catherine McAuley, who gave life to the charism of mercy.

Glossary

M.	Mary
MIA	Mercy International Association
RSM	Religious Sister of Mercy
Rule	The Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy

For clarity and consistency, Catherine McAuley will be referred to as Catherine, Elinor McAuley as Elinor, James McGauley as McGauley, William Callaghan as Callaghan, and Catherine Callaghan will be named in full each time. Father Edward Armstrong will also be named in full to distinguish him from William Armstrong.

Depending on how they are first named in the text, the birth name or religious name for the Sisters of Mercy will be used consistently.

To distinguish the Sisters of Mercy with the surname Moore, they will be styled with both their religious name and surname each time they appear in the text.

Introduction

“The perfection of a religious soul depends, not so much on doing extraordinary actions, as on doing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions and exercises of every day.”

Chapter 5, Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy¹

This thesis will explore both the ordinary and extraordinary actions in Catherine’s life, situating them in the Irish context. The scholarship of Caitriona Clear (1988), Maria Luddy (1995) and Mary Peckham Magray (1998) provides an analysis of the social impact of the philanthropic religious founders of nineteenth-century Ireland. These texts will be utilised to highlight the difficulties philanthropic women faced, within Church and society, and to situate Catherine’s contribution.

In her book, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Caitriona Clear asks whether religious women were “standard-bearers for social reform or timid defenders of the status quo?”² Clear responds to this question by carefully detailing the numbers and geographical distribution of the different congregations established in the nineteenth century, before identifying the cultural and social significance of a convent to an Irish town. She emphasises ways that the clergy controlled the convents, demonstrating the lack of autonomy that the religious women were able to exercise.³ Despite the leaning toward the view that religious women lacked the visible autonomy to be standard-bearers for social reform, Clear identifies that the small struggles, “the personal victories of effort over circumstances, the resourcefulness, imagination and everydaysisterhood,” never made it onto paper and they were not “pet puppets of patriarchy.”⁴ This thesis will provide examples from Catherine’s life, detailing some of these struggles to demonstrate that Catherine was a standard-bearer for social reform, even if external pressures limited the extent of this reform.

¹ Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy in Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 300.

² Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 100.

³ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 166.

⁴ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 166.

In *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Maria Luddy describes how Catholic women, like Catherine, utilised their wealth to establish religious organisations that provided relief to the poor.⁵ Luddy argues that the establishment of convents had a long-term consequence of reducing the number of opportunities for laywomen to be involved in charitable acts, since these became the proper role of the nuns. She takes the view that the religious orders maintained the status quo, and presents the sisters as acquiescing to clergy demands. In contrast, Luddy identifies a small number of Protestant or Nonconformist philanthropic women who did engage in social activism that led to social change. However, she does not believe that social activism was an output of the Catholic orders. This thesis will detail examples from the stories of Catherine McAuley and the early Sisters of Mercy that support Luddy's view that laywomen were not as likely to be involved in charitable acts after the formation of the women's religious orders. However, it will also provide examples showing that the Sisters of Mercy did engage in social activism that led to social reform.

Mary Peckham Magray, in *The Transforming Power of the Nuns*, identifies a significant form of religious activism in which a small number of Catholic women were engaged in the early nineteenth-century through the establishment of new religious orders.⁶ Magray describes the social impact of these female leaders, the Protestant backgrounds that many of them came from, the way they utilised their wealth, and how their success over time brought them into conflict with the Catholic hierarchy. This thesis will identify Catherine McAuley as one of these significant leaders, first outlining her Protestant-influenced background in chapter one. Chapter two will explore the way Catherine used the wealth that she inherited, as well as the influence of the Society of Friends on her philanthropy. In chapter three the interactions Catherine had with the Catholic clergy will be discussed. Chapter four will detail the social impact that Catherine and the early Sisters of Mercy had on early nineteenth-century Ireland before exploring, in chapter five, the impact of the decision to establish a congregation, and the leadership opportunities that emerged for women who became Sisters of Mercy.

Catherine did not promote the status quo, a stance that often came with a high personal cost. However, this thesis will demonstrate how she worked within the expectations and constraints

⁵ Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶ Mary Peckham Magray, *The Transforming Power of the Nuns: Women, Religion, and Cultural Change in Ireland, 1750-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

of the Church and society, particularly the pervasive class structure and the belief that there was a deserving poor (and by extension an undeserving poor). The extant letters of Catherine, the reminiscences of the early sisters, and later biographies will be explored to demonstrate this position.

What appears to me to be the most significant element missing from the perspectives of Luddy, Clear, and Magray is an acknowledgement of how the charitable focus of the work of the women, who began as lay volunteers, changed over time. When Catherine McAuley established the House of Mercy in 1827, the focus was on providing shelter and education, with women of different religious affiliations sharing in the work. What emerged (especially because of pressure from the clergy striving to develop a foothold and identity for the post-penal law Catholic Church) was the focus on religious development, and the expectation that this was the primary role of the sisters. Due to low numbers of clergy, the strengthening church increasingly relied on religious women to instruct the Catholics (who were mostly poor) to receive the sacraments. They were able to provide education that was accessible to the poor, including religious instruction. Even the sisters' ministry to the sick was focused on ensuring the dying were in a state of grace as they approached death. Externally, the religious women appeared to be responding to the demands of the clergy and, at their request, they did undertake many of the tasks that helped shape the Church. Nevertheless, the sisters continued to respond practically to the needs they came across as they embarked on the religious instruction. The women called to leadership within the Sisters of Mercy facilitated the transformative action, unusual in the male-dominated nineteenth-century society. For this reason, this thesis will demonstrate that maintenance of the status quo and transformative action can be seen as two parts of a whole.

In summary, this thesis will explore aspects of Catherine McAuley's life, arguing that McAuley was a significant transformer of Irish and Catholic society. This analysis will show that, as well as taking direction from the clergy, Catherine was a "self-assured, assertive and ambitious woman" who drove and inspired social change, and was, therefore, an important shaper of the bourgeois Post-Tridentine Catholic culture that emerged in nineteenth-century Ireland.⁷

⁷ Magray, *Transforming Power*, preface.

Chapter 1 - Catherine's Background

The Social, Political, and Cultural Context

Caitriona Clear claims that nineteenth-century religious women were powerful, occupying a prestigious position in society,⁸ and Mary Peckham Magray attributes the impact of these powerful women to “the social and cultural significance of the women themselves.”⁹ Many of the founders of religious orders, and the first women who joined them, came from wealthy families and had been influenced by Protestants. They held a degree of social power through their existing philanthropic activities. The background and experiences of these women helped them become “self-assured, assertive, and ambitious women.”¹⁰

This chapter will outline the social, political, and cultural context into which Catherine McAuley was born, and experienced, before becoming a religious foundress. Extracts from various biographies will demonstrate that these first forty years of her life were significantly impacted by individual Protestants; by the Protestant environment that shaped Ireland at the time; by the changing place of Catholicism; by the philanthropic actions of both Catholics and Protestants; and through her experience of living in situations of wealth, and of poverty. This part of her life allowed Catherine to develop a sense of personal autonomy, a social elegance, a strong Catholic faith, an ecumenical outlook, and a philanthropic heart. Combined with a substantial inheritance, these attributes enabled her to be a powerful influencer of her time.

Situating Catherine's Birth

As a result of significant conflict between Dublin Catholics and Protestants in the late eighteenth century, several baptism registers were destroyed. The baptismal record for Catherine has never been located and may well be one that was lost. Therefore, her birth year is not certain. The date most frequently proposed is 29 September 1778. On 6 October 1778, Catherine's father, James McGauley, signed the Oath of Allegiance to secure the same rights as Protestants.¹¹ This signing was just one week after Catherine's alleged birth date and adds

⁸ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, xix.

⁹ Magray, *Transforming Power*, vii.

¹⁰ Magray, *Transforming Power*, viii.

¹¹ James McGauley spelt his name with a G, but it is believed that Catherine's mother, Elinor, dropped the G after his death.

strength to the preference for this date as McGauley had new motivation; taking the oath would legalise his assets and business initiatives, and safeguard his family's future.¹²

James McGauley

James McGauley's birth can be situated early in the eighteenth century as he was listed as a builder's apprentice for St. Mary's chapel in Liffey Street, built in 1729.¹³ McGauley possibly experienced the full effects of the penal laws and the ongoing persecution of Catholics. The *Act to prevent the further growth of Popery* of 1703 had caused great hardship to the Catholics in Ireland. According to the nineteenth-century historian William Lecky (1838-1903), this "notorious" Act effectively prevented Catholics from participating in civil life, sought to "reduce the Catholics to a condition of the most extreme and brutal ignorance," and ensured they could not possess land.¹⁴ In these challenging times, accessing education would have been difficult for McGauley, the practice of his faith would have been secret, and the penal laws would have restricted his business prospects.

The accession of George II to the English throne in 1727 brought an easing of the enforcement of the penal laws and greater tolerance for Irish Catholics. Despite the challenges Catholics faced in McGauley's life, the meagre information available suggests that he may have found ways to circumvent the laws of the time, exploit the easing of the penal laws, and find success. M. Bertrand Degnan describes him as a gentleman, "an architect - in other words, a contractor for new buildings, a builder himself, and a real-estate dealer."¹⁵

McGauley had several properties registered to him at different times. In her most recent biography of Catherine, Mary C. Sullivan identifies a house belonging to McGauley in Stormanstown and properties on Copper Alley, on both sides of Fishamble Street, on Merchants Quay, on Nicholas Street, on Span's Lane, and St. James's Street.¹⁶ These

¹² Degnan dismisses the second most frequently proposed date of birth, 1787, as James McGauley had died by then, and his will was proved on 2 August 1783. See M. Bertrand Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands: Life of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1957), Footnote 7, 350.

¹³ Bishop Donnelly's 1905 text, *A Short History of Some Dublin Parish*, identifies that the Liffey Street Chapel pulpit went to Baggot Street as there were people who remembered that her father had completed the woodwork on it quoted in Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, Footnote 1, 353.

¹⁴ William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, 5 vols., vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), 144-50.

¹⁵ Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, 3-4.

¹⁶ Mary C. Sullivan, *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 18, footnote 6.

properties included a brewery, a tavern, stables, and domestic residences, and were all located in the area where public buildings were under construction. One example is the Royal Exchange, completed in 1779, a gargantuan neo-classical building only a short distance from 10 Fishamble Street. In James McGauley's property portfolio, the house in Fishamble Street is believed to have been one Catherine lived in as a child.

By the time McGauley signed the Oath of Allegiance in 1778, he described his occupation as a grazier. From 1767 to 1777. *Wilson's Dublin Directory*, which lists merchants and traders in Dublin, gives no record for a James McGauley.¹⁷ This annual publication was important in Dublin society, and McGauley's absence from it is puzzling. One possible solution may come from Patrick Fagan, who notes that "it has to be said that engaging in trade or manufacture at all would be considered *infra dig* by any family, catholic or protestant, with pretension to nobility or gentility."¹⁸ Writing from the vantage point of the late nineteenth century, William Lecky claimed that the middle-class "probably did more than any other class to sustain that race of extravagance which ran through all ranks above the level of the cottier."¹⁹ Lecky makes specific reference to the graziers, noting that "our farmers and graziers are turned gentlemen and come to fairs in their coaches to buy and sell cattle."²⁰ Perhaps by the end of his life, McGauley identified himself as a grazier, as this was perceived to be a more respectable occupation than a merchant.

Therefore, Catherine was born into comfortable circumstances, into an Ireland that was starting to allow Catholics similar rights to Protestants, and to a gentleman who had developed a comprehensive business portfolio and managed to maintain his faith during years of varying levels of religious persecution. The growing success of the Catholics, the relaxing of the penal laws that allowed for land acquisition, and even the increased availability of jobs as the restrictions on employing Catholics were removed, contributed to greater confidence, both for individuals and Catholics in general. Additionally, the voices of the advocates of emancipation, especially the support of many Protestants, including William Pitt the Younger

¹⁷ William Wilson printed a directory each year of the merchants and traders in Dublin. One for 1777 is available at: https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0125111274/ECCO?u=auckland_ecco&sid=ECCO&xid=e9621589

¹⁸ Patrick Fagan, *Catholics in a Protestant Country: the Papist Constituency in Eighteenth-Century Dublin* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 163.

¹⁹ Lecky, *History of Ireland*, 1, 296.

²⁰ Lecky, *History of Ireland*, 1, 296.

(Prime Minister of Britain from 1783-1801 and again from 1804-1806), encouraged Catholics to claim an equal status with Protestants.

As indicated previously, McGauley had a tavern, and such places, according to Higgins, were highly significant in developing the politicisation of the middle-class. He explains, “Catholic men certainly participated in the cut and thrust of tavern and coffeehouse life. Accounts of trade, war, parliament, volunteer parades, the affairs of European monarchs, and disputes with Britain would have appealed to literate Catholic merchants, tradesmen, and apprentices.”²¹ Thus it is conceivable that McGauley would have been part of these conversations and politically astute.

The poor of Ireland were predominantly Catholic, with limited access to relief. The 1665 legislation that allowed Church of Ireland parishes to impose a levy on all residents within the parish boundary for the needs of the poor resulted in an uneven distribution of charity to those who were Protestant, as the parish wardens were responsible for the distribution of funds amassed.²² However, Luddy notes a growing belief that women had a responsibility to help the deprived of society and that their voluntary effort was part of their Christian duty.²³ This resulted in the establishment of organised structures that included tuition and the distribution of food parcels from the larger houses and the opening of asylums for orphans. Laymen were also engaged in voluntary philanthropy with one of McGauley’s actions demonstrating a level of religious confidence in manifesting his Christian duty to help the deprived. M. Vincent Harnett (who compiled *The Limerick Manuscript* that included her own experiences of Catherine, those of Elizabeth Moore and information from other manuscripts) wrote that “on Sundays and festivals he was wont to collect about him the poor boys and girls of his neighbourhood for the purpose of instructing them in his own homely and impressive manner in the great truths and duties of religion.”²⁴ This was a risky undertaking, as education in the Catholic faith was still forbidden by the Act, and engaging in such practices would make McGauley vulnerable to prosecution. Nevertheless, in undertaking this task with the deprived

²¹ Padhraig Higgins, James S. Donnelly, and Thomas Archdeacon, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism, and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 37.

²² *Charity and Social Welfare: The Dynamics of Religious Reform in Northern Europe, 1780-1920*, ed. Leen Van Molle, vol. 4 (Leuven University Press, 2017), 157.

²³ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 2.

²⁴ Mary Vincent Harnett, “The Limerick Manuscript c.1845-1861,” in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 139.

of the local area, McGauley set an example for his young daughter, one that would remain with her for the rest of her life.

McGauley died in July 1783, before Catherine had reached her fifth birthday. Sullivan notes that Catherine's faint memories of her father "are clustered around his religious instructions and charities to poor children," actions she then imitated throughout her life.²⁵

Elinor McGauley/McAuley

Elinor Conway was the only daughter of McGauley's business associate, John Conway. Early biographers suggest she was considerably younger than her husband. Despite records not being available, Roland Burke Savage, a Jesuit whose biography of Catherine was published in 1949, estimated that Elinor was twenty-two and James was fifty-five when they married.²⁶ Savage described Elinor as "somewhat spoiled, however, by too easy circumstances and influenced by the growing liberal and worldly outlook that had already begun to infect many of the better-off Dublin Catholics, she was shallow in character and lacked that firm hold on her faith that marked Catholics of the previous generation."²⁷ While not a complimentary description of Elinor, Savage seems to be describing the impact of the Enlightenment, and possibly the French Revolution, which had fuelled an atmosphere of independent thought. Elinor may also have been influenced by the changing attitudes of the bourgeois Catholics, and the various interactions with Protestant relations and friends. Moreover, as Savage comments, the age difference between Catherine's parents points to a generational difference in their attitudes towards Catholicism.²⁸ Elinor could be described as one who was open to the new ideas emerging from the Continent and even took some agency in exploring the liberal fashions of the times.

Elinor was widowed when she had three children under the age of five. The properties her husband had acquired were gradually liquidated to support the family. Elinor moved her family to Queen's Street, near the centre of Dublin, where she shared a house with Mrs. St.

²⁵ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 19.

²⁶ Roland Burke Savage, *Catherine McAuley, The First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd., 1949), 6. Savage does not explain how he estimates this date, but he was able to determine McGauley's approximate age from when he is listed as working on the Liffey St Church. Elinor's age can also be approximated from her brother's age which is recorded.

²⁷ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 6.

²⁸ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 7.

George, a Protestant woman who included Elinor in her Protestant social circles. Degnan claims that Elinor approved of charity through proper channels and in proper places. However, she had condemned her husband's method of gathering the neighbourhood children for instruction.²⁹ That Elinor approved of charity is not surprising, as it was fashionable for Protestant women to be involved in charitable activities and something that the bourgeois Catholic women might want to imitate.

One element that was evident in the Protestant charitable activities (and by imitation likely in the Catholic ones also) was an emphasis on determining the eligibility and suitability of the recipient for charitable assistance. For example, the *Association for the Relief of Distressed Protestants* had a series of questions to determine eligibility, including "is the applicant in the habit of daily family prayer and reading the Holy Scriptures?" Furthermore, "is the applicant of clearly sober and industrious habit?" turning charitable giving "into a weapon for social control" that "was used to impose patterns of behaviour and discipline from a different class."³⁰ As a prevailing attitude of the time, it is likely that Catherine was influenced by her mother and Mrs. St. George, in relation to this attitude toward the eligibility of the poor who were in need of assistance.

There is no indication that Elinor undertook any form of employment, and by the time she died, on 21 October 1798, Degnan indicates that the family were reliant on her brother Owen Conway for support.³¹ Although Elinor did not dismiss her Catholic faith altogether, and the children received Eucharist and were confirmed in the Catholic Church, she was not as outwardly attentive to her faith as her husband had been.

The Conway Family

The different biographical sources offer conflicting accounts of Catherine's life around the time of her mother's death. What is consistent is that Catherine lived with the family of her uncle, Owen Conway, for some time after her mother died. The Conways practised the Catholic faith and gave Catherine the experience of living in a strong Catholic home.

²⁹ Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, 4.

³⁰ Martin Maguire, "The Church of Ireland and the Problem of the Protestant Working-Class of Dublin, 1870-1930," in *As By Law Established The Church of Ireland Since the Reformation*, ed. Kenneth Milne James McGuire, Alan Ford (Dublin: Lilliput, 1995), 6.

³¹ Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, 21.

Unfortunately, the financial situation of the Conway family turned, and they were left destitute. At times, the only meal for the household was a little bread in the evenings.³² Gaining first-hand experience of living in penury had a significant impact on Catherine, one writer attributing a later comment of Catherine's that "she took her rest more contentedly on the boards than when surrounded by luxuries" to her experiences at this time.³³

However content Catherine may have been, she was yet another mouth to feed in the Conway household in these difficult times. Fortunately, she had another option and left the Conways to live with the Armstrongs, who were distant Protestant relatives. William Armstrong was Deputy Governor of the Apothecaries Hall in the early 1800s, and it was through his connections that Catherine met William and Catherine Callaghan.

William Callaghan

William Callaghan had worked in India for several years before returning to Dublin around 1786, undertaking work as an apothecary. In 1791 the Irish parliament passed an Act that allowed for the regulation of all who prepared and sold drugs and the establishment of the Apothecaries' Hall.³⁴ This Act effectively raised the status of the apothecaries from tradespeople to professionals and therefore placed Callaghan in the middle to upper level of society.³⁵

During the 1798 uprising in Dublin and the subsequent unrest, there was an increase in fighting situated close to the Callaghan home in Mary Street.³⁶ The hostility prompted Callaghan to purchase Coolock House on the outskirts of Dublin.³⁷ Coolock House was an extensive estate with outbuildings and servants. Catherine was invited to move in with the

³² Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 26.

³³ M. Clare Moore, "The Annals of the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy, Bermondsey 1841 (The Bermondsey Manuscript)," in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts, 1995), 100.

³⁴ Susan Mullaney, "The 1791 Irish Apothecary's Act: The First Nationwide Regulation of Apothecaries in the British Isles," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 25 (2010): 186,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41430816>. One statute in this Act required that the members had been living and practising in Dublin for the previous seven years, which may explain why Callaghan did not join until 1793

³⁵ Mullaney, "1791 Apothecary's Act."

³⁶ For a detailed description of Catherine's time at Coolock House, see Chapter 2 in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*.

³⁷ As she was raised within the Society of Friends, it is likely that Catherine Callaghan held a pacifist stance and would have wanted to avoid the fighting. The Friends meetings in 1798 were explicit about not taking sides in the uprisings, destroying any arms they may have, and avoiding conflict.

couple to help manage the house and act as a caregiver for Catherine Callaghan, who did not keep good health. Catherine became the child that William and Catherine Callaghan never had and proved herself an effective administrator of the affairs of the house. There are accounts of frequent dinner parties at Coolock, including in attendance Catherine's Protestant relations, who were also in the medical profession.³⁸

Although accurate census data for the time is not available, some survey data enables an estimate that twenty percent of the Irish population in 1800 was Protestant and eighty percent was Catholic.³⁹ Callaghan was part of this twenty percent and was a member of the Church of Ireland, even if his attendance at Sunday services was sporadic.⁴⁰ Membership of the Church of Ireland after the Act of Union was an expression of respectability. Additionally, because religion was a key factor in the political conflict, affiliation was an outward sign of political beliefs.⁴¹ Irene Whelan notes that in the latter part of the eighteenth-century, there was a "general sense among polite society that religious enthusiasm was neither useful or socially respectable."⁴² However, the early nineteenth-century saw a change: the political and social upheaval of the French Revolution had drawn attention to Christianity's utility as the binding agent of a stable social order.⁴³ The Act of Union and calls for Catholic emancipation were increasing social tensions, and in response a more serious and engaged Protestantism emerged.

Due to the societal practice of entertaining at the "big houses," Catherine is likely to have interacted with many Protestants while living at Coolock House. Timothy Stunt quotes a late nineteenth-century Irish writer saying, "drawing-room meetings for prayer and study of the scriptures were then [in the 1820s] quite the rage with all serious minds."⁴⁴ Stunt also draws attention to the writings of J. J. Gurney, who was a Quaker. In one of his letters from 1827,

³⁸ Chapter on Coolock House in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*.

³⁹ An analysis of available census data is provided in Appendix B in S. J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982), 281-83.

⁴⁰ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 30.

⁴¹ Maguire, "Problem of the Protestant working-class," 1.

⁴² Irene Whelan, "The Bible Gentry," in *Protestant Millennialism, Evangelicalism, and Irish Society, 1790-2005*, ed. Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 55.

⁴³ This conversion was strongly influenced by William Wilberforce, most well-known for his efforts to end slavery, see Whelan, "The Bible Gentry," 55.

⁴⁴ T. C. F. Stunt, "Evangelical Cross-Currents in the Church of Ireland 1820-1833," in *The Churches, Ireland, and the Irish: Papers read at the 1987 Summer Meeting and the 1988 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Moore (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989), 219.

Gurney describes visiting the home of the lawyer John Henry North who lived in Merion Square, Dublin. After the dinner, he notes that “many religious persons flocked into the room,” and Dr Singer, a noted clergyman, opened his bible to preach.⁴⁵ Gurney states that the “description gives some idea of the state of society in Dublin” and imagines that “these bible readings are extensively supplanting cards and other such amusements.”⁴⁶ While a definitive answer cannot be given, it is possible that such religious activities had been part of the entertainment at the Coolock House gatherings.

Callaghan converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, a move that may have been predominantly a response to the wishes of the woman whom he saw as his adopted daughter. Savage noted that it had “grieved [Catherine] sorely to think that so kind-hearted and generous a man should be deprived of the gift of faith.”⁴⁷ His conversion was not made public, and he was interred in the Church of Ireland cemetery near Coolock House, where his wife had been buried three years prior.

Catherine Callaghan

Catherine Callaghan had been raised in the religious tradition of the Society of Friends. However, the biographer Mary Nathy O’Hara notes that a “strange cloud” hung over Catherine Callaghan’s marriage. The Society of Friends (informally called Quakers) does not recognise priesthood, and therefore any marriage performed by a priest would not be accepted, and had the effect of removing the person involved from membership; consequently, her marriage to William, who was part of the Church of Ireland, would have removed Catherine Callaghan from membership of the Society of Friends.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Catherine Callaghan did not forget the tradition of her upbringing, one example being that the Scriptures remained important to her throughout her life. It is recorded that when Catherine Callaghan’s eyesight had deteriorated, and she was unable to read them herself, Catherine read scripture passages to her daily, along with other moral and spiritual writings.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Joseph Braithwaite and Joseph Gurney, *Memoirs of Joseph John Gurney: with Selections from his Journal and Correspondence*, 4 ed. (Philadelphia: Book Association of Friends, 1854), 340-41.

⁴⁶ Braithwaite and Gurney, *Joseph John Gurney*, 341.

⁴⁷ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 39.

⁴⁸ Mary Nathy O’Hara, *Catherine McAuley: Mercy Foundress* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 3.

⁴⁹ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 145.

Catholics consistently held the Quaker sect in affection. According to Helen Hatton, “the rancour which divides Catholics and many Protestants has not existed between Catholics and the Religious Society of Friends.”⁵⁰ The non-proselytising attitude of the Society of Friends could have contributed to these amicable feelings; additionally, despite being a broadly Protestant group, the Quakers had also experienced limitations because of the penal laws, and later persecution when they chose not to pay tithes to the Church of Ireland.⁵¹

Despite religious differences, and perhaps because of a shared experience of religious discrimination, the relationship between Catherine and Catherine Callaghan was one of acceptance. Eventually, the relationship resulted in the deathbed conversion of Catherine Callaghan to Catholicism. The following chapter will detail the attitude of the Society of Friends to non-sectarian charitable work, which also became a hallmark of Catherine’s charitable work and is something that Catherine Callaghan could have fostered.

The respect for other religious traditions shown by the Society of Friends may have influenced Catherine Callaghan in allowing Catherine to attend Mass uninhibited, for Harnett records that while with the Callaghans, Catherine “continued to go to Mass and they to Church without any diminution of their mutual esteem and affection.”⁵² The regular attendance at Sunday Mass by Catholics, in general, is difficult to estimate. However, David Miller’s extensive analysis suggests that it would be between forty and sixty percent of the Catholic population in Dublin.⁵³

Like Protestants, Catholics linked their national identity with the religion that had been part of Irish culture for centuries. Constantia Maxwell argues that the persecution associated with the penal laws had only increased Catholic loyalties to their faith.⁵⁴ However, living with the Callaghans and the Armstrongs before them, Catherine did imbibe “certain Protestant prejudices, which she retained for a very long period. She did not like the idea of religious vows and disapproved of conventual observances, etc., having constantly heard them

⁵⁰ Helen Elizabeth Hatton, *The Largest Amount of Good: Quaker Relief in Ireland, 1654-1921*, ed. Inc ebrary (Kingston [Ont.]: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 3.

⁵¹ Maria Kennedy, “Irish Quaker Identities: Complex Identity in the Religious Society of Friends,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Quaker Studies* 2019, no. 2 (2019): 16.

⁵² Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 143.

⁵³ David W. Miller, “Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 1 (1975).

⁵⁴ Constantia Elizabeth Maxwell, *The Stranger in Ireland: from the Reign of Elizabeth to the Great Famine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), 128.

ridiculed and misrepresented by Protestants.”⁵⁵ These “prejudices” make her decision to form a religious congregation in 1831 even more remarkable.

Conclusion

Catherine McAuley was shaped by her parents' beliefs, by Catholic relatives, by Protestants who cared for her, and by the society in which she was raised. She engaged in direct work with the poor in the same manner her father had modelled for her as a child. Catherine also displayed the bourgeois values of her mother through the charitable activities she established and the importance she placed on improving the morality of the poor. At her death, some people believed Catherine was a Protestant, a reflection of how she assimilated into the society of the time.⁵⁶ This was also likely due to her years of living with the Callaghans, members of the Protestant community of the time who, even if not in the elite Protestant Ascendancy, were well-known. As well as the inheritance they left her, the Protestant backgrounds of the Callaghans had an impact on Catherine McAuley's future philanthropic actions and values, with a non-sectarian outlook at the core of the work she undertook.

⁵⁵ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 105.

⁵⁶ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 34.

Chapter 2 - Catherine's Understanding and Practice of Philanthropy

Of the poor, the unprotected, those in moral danger, the sick, the imprisoned, she dreamed recurrently. They were everywhere, the young, the old, little children – hundreds, thousands of them in need. She never finished caring for them...

Written about Catherine McAuley by M. Bertrand Degnan⁵⁷

The destitute situation of the poor and needy of Dublin motivated Catherine's philanthropic actions, both as a young woman and after she had received the inheritance from the Callaghans. This chapter will also show that middle- and upper-class early nineteenth-century women were expected by society to engage in charitable actions.

This first part will describe the understanding of philanthropy in pre-famine Ireland. The substantive part of this chapter will then explore the major influences on Catherine's sense of philanthropy: in particular, the influence of the spirituality of the Society of Friends, the impact of class, and Catherine's personal experience of being the recipient of charity as well as being the benefactor. The chapter will conclude by demonstrating how effectively Catherine utilised the wealth she inherited to establish an institution that would improve the situation of some of those who were poor and needy, in a manner that was typical of both Catholic and Protestant women of her time and of her social standing.

Understanding Early Nineteenth-Century Philanthropy

Maria Luddy begins with a definition of philanthropy that is focused on the use of money to aid welfare and therefore is aligned with contemporary usage of the term. She suggests that primarily, philanthropy "was a business undertaking which required judicious use of resources, whether material or monetary, the keeping of accounts, in some instances the payment of individuals, and in many cases the maintenance of buildings."⁵⁸ This definition is easily applied to the women examined in Luddy's text, each of whom possessed significant wealth and were astute administrators of this money. The way Catherine utilised her finances to build the House of Mercy will be explored toward the end of this chapter.

⁵⁷ Degnan, *Mercy Unto Thousands*, 34.

⁵⁸ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 3.

Luddy later expands her initial definition of philanthropy to include more of the practical actions: house visitation, instituting an orphanage or school, working in prisons, refuges or workhouses, raising money, or simply giving advice.”⁵⁹ This expanded definition is similar to that of Anne Summers, who defines philanthropy in the early nineteenth century as “personal charitable dealings with the poor; and especially with the attempts made by individual women of the middle and upper classes to make contact with the poor and distressed, to visit them in their homes and bring material and spiritual comfort to bridge, as they hoped, the social and political gulfs between them.”⁶⁰ This broader understanding of philanthropy, encompassing both the use of financial resources and practical support, is also consistent with Catherine’s activity. This definition acknowledges the practical philanthropy Catherine was engaged in before receiving her inheritance on the death of William Callaghan. After his death she utilised her wealth in developing structures such as the House of Mercy and in undertaking practical actions such as the visitation of patients in hospitals.

Luddy also discerns two distinct forms of philanthropy, benevolent and reformist, linking the development of the latter to the influence of the Society of Friends and other Nonconformist women. Reformist philanthropy was distinguished by a more proactive approach to addressing some of the causes of poverty or upskilling those in need to enable them to better support themselves, an approach also in line with Catherine’s own philanthropy.⁶¹

Early Philanthropic Involvement

While hagiographical accounts of Catherine’s early life depict her engagement in charitable outreach to the poor before she lived at Coolock House, there is no substantive evidence for such actions in the primary sources. There is also little discussion in current scholarship of the general level of involvement of Catholic women in philanthropy before the establishment of apostolic religious congregations in Ireland.⁶² A likely explanation is that the poverty that pervaded most Catholic families in the 1700s left them with few resources to engage in philanthropic work. Additionally, the penal laws created a desire not to draw attention to

⁵⁹ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 214.

⁶⁰ Anne Summers, “A Home from Home - Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Fit work for women*, ed. Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1979), 33.

⁶¹ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 216-17.

⁶² Unlike monastic orders, religious women in apostolic congregations did not take a vow of enclosure and were able to leave the convent for ministry.

oneself, meaning that establishing agencies and organised relief was not typical of Catholics. Josef Altholz recognised this in the Catholics of England who had cultivated unobtrusiveness and practised the medieval pattern whereby donations to the poor were considered to be their “works of charity.”⁶³ This stance also was found among the Catholics of Ireland.

Nevertheless, Luddy’s claim that the religious sisters prevented laypeople from participating in such works suggests that laypeople were, in fact, already engaged in them. One example of this is recorded in an 1809 leaflet from the House of Refuge in Ash Street, Dublin, stating that a group of lay Catholic women had founded the refuge.⁶⁴

The Influence of the Society of Friends

As previously mentioned, Catherine Callaghan was raised in the Society of Friends. While not an active member due to her marriage, the attitudes and values of the Society of Friends continued to pervade her philanthropy. According to Savage, “Mrs Callaghan, brought up a Quaker, though no longer able to frequent the Friends’ Meetings, continued to share their kindly outlook.”⁶⁵ The Society of Friends expected members to engage in non-sectarian philanthropy, and that the outreach would address the causes of poverty.

In 1796, the National Meeting of the Society of Friends (in referring to those impacted by the political and sectarian conflict at the time) directed their members to “give food and shelter to those in need without showing partiality.”⁶⁶ This attitude was so embedded in the philanthropic efforts of the Society of Friends that, fifty years later, their extensive relief efforts during the famine continued to be shaped by non-sectarian attitudes toward those in need. Of note is that the Society of Friends, in principle, did not proselytise, and therefore, any aid given was not dependent on subscribing to their beliefs. Instead, as Hatton suggests, they drew on their own experience of being persecuted in Ireland under the penal laws and offered aid based purely on humanitarian reasons.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Catherine’s upbringing was shaped by a diversity of relationships with Catholics and Protestants. At times, Catherine

⁶³ Josef L. Altholz, “Social Catholicism in England in the Age of the Devotional Revolution,” in *Piety and Power in Ireland, 1760-1960: Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin*, ed. Stewart J. Brown, David W. Miller, and Emmet J. Larkin (Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast, 2000), 210-11.

⁶⁴ Leaflet, House of Refuge, Ash Street, Dublin, c.1809 in Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: a Documentary History* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 55.

⁶⁵ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 30.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, “Quaker Identities,” 23.

⁶⁷ Hatton, *Quaker Relief*, 5.

experienced animosity and her Catholic beliefs were “ridiculed and misrepresented by Protestants.”⁶⁸ However, she still maintained positive relationships with all, demonstrating an inclusiveness that is likely to have been encouraged by the beliefs of Catherine Callaghan.

There would have been a strong expectation of charitable activity from the Callaghans as the owners of one of the large houses in the Coolock area. Biographers record that Catherine was most often the agent of this charitable outreach.⁶⁹ The outreach is likely to have included visitation to the homes of the poor. Margaret Preston writes that “philanthropists advocated visiting in order to present themselves as moral role models as well as teachers of home economy and sanitary techniques.” She goes on to note that the homes were not the only places of visitation for the wealthy women; the hospitals were also popular.⁷⁰ Catherine’s experience as the agent of Catherine Callaghan’s philanthropy gave her an opportunity to develop the skills of visitation without proselytising: she would not have wanted to promote the religious beliefs of Catherine Callaghan and could not be seen to be promoting her own religious beliefs, yet she was to be a moral role model for those she visited.

The practice of visitation was one with which Catherine Callaghan would likely have been very familiar. However, the practice highlighted class differences and, in some cases, was very much about a “lady bountiful” coming to bestow gifts on the deserving poor, who had nothing to offer in return - as Summers aptly describes it, a one-sided-affair.⁷¹ However, Summers also identifies a practice in which someone of a lower class visited on behalf of the wealthier benefactor. She notes that “those who would be ashamed to be seen by a Clergyman, a City Missionary, or a Lady Visitor, have no objection to be a little cleared and set straight in their afflictions by one like themselves ... The woman goes where the lady might not enter.”⁷² It may be this practice that Savage describes when he writes that Catherine Callaghan “readily provided Catherine with money and provisions to distribute among the needy.”⁷³ Her infirmity at the end of her life, and frailty in the years preceding, is often suggested as the reason for Catherine to undertake such charitable outreach on behalf of

⁶⁸ Moore, “Bermondsey Manuscript,” 102.

⁶⁹ Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 144.

⁷⁰ Margaret H. Preston, *Charitable Words: Women, Philanthropy, and the Language of Charity in Nineteenth-Century Dublin*, Contributions in Womens Studies, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 4.

⁷¹ Summers, “A Home from Home,” 49.

⁷² Summers, “A Home from Home,” 50.

⁷³ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 30.

Catherine Callaghan. Anna Maria Doyle⁷⁴ writes that “Mrs C. was bedridden for three years during which time Revd. Mother attended with affection.”⁷⁵ However, another possible reason is the greater acceptability of Catherine, as a Catholic herself, visiting other Catholics. Her visit would also be more acceptable as she experienced living in poverty (when living with the Conways). When William Callaghan wrote in his wife’s obituary that Catherine Callaghan “was to the poor a generous benefactor, [and] a number of poor families will be now thrown unprotected on the world, who were supported privately by her weekly donations,” he was probably indirectly acknowledging the work that Catherine McAuley undertook on Catherine Callaghan’s behalf as the administrator of those donations.⁷⁶

As already noted, The Society of Friends was recognised as least likely to direct their philanthropy to a specific denominational group throughout the nineteenth century. Preston writes that the tenets of the Society of Friends promoted equality, that they believed that everyone already had the “inner light,” and therefore, they avoided proselytising.⁷⁷ Hatton distinguishes the work of the Society of Friends as not making distinctions between those who deserved charitable assistance and those who did not, saying “need was the Quaker’s only criterion for relief grants.”⁷⁸ The attitude of assisting anyone in need that emanates from the spirituality of the Society of Friends is later reflected in the *Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley* when Catherine is quoted as having said that, ‘it is better to relieve a hundred impostors – if there be any such – than to suffer one really distressed person to be sent away empty.’⁷⁹

The philanthropy of the Society of Friends also emphasised remedying the causes of poverty. Hatton writes that the Society of Friends established microloan schemes for materials and equipment without the requirement of a guarantee (and in many cases without a real expectation that the loan would be repaid). They would provide education to farmers to improve crop yield and took care “to provide employment for women, who were in many

⁷⁴ Anna Maria Doyle was the first companion of Catherine McAuley to live at the House of Mercy and undertook her noviciate at the same time, becoming Sr M. Ann.

⁷⁵ Letter from Anna Maria Doyle to Clare Augustine Moore, 1844, quoted in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 43.

⁷⁶ Dublin Evening Post, 18 October 1819 quoted in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 40.

⁷⁷ Preston, *Charitable Words*, 101.

⁷⁸ Hatton, *Quaker Relief*, 6.

⁷⁹ St Louis Sisters of Mercy, ed., *Familiar Instructions of Rev. Mother McAuley* (St Louis: EV. E. Carreras, 1888), 136.

cases the sole support of their families, and to find purchasers for the goods they made.”⁸⁰

What is evident from these examples and other similar situations is an emphasis on providing an opportunity for ongoing improvement of one’s situation and generating social change. In time, this emphasis was also demonstrated in Catherine’s philanthropy.

The Limerick Manuscript describes one example of Catherine’s philanthropy producing change. It comes from her time living with the Callaghans. Catherine had been given the use of the gatehouse (sometimes referred to as the lodge) at Coolock House, and Harnett writes, “she collected the poor children of the neighbourhood in the lodge, which was placed at her disposal, and devoted a great portion of her time to their instruction.”⁸¹ What this instruction consisted of is not mentioned, but it can be assumed that it was religious instruction in the Catholic tradition (for the poor children of Coolock were predominantly Catholic) and practical skills such as needlework. As Harnett later writes, Catherine was eager to train them in industrious habits.⁸² From at least 1823, Catherine likewise assisted at St. Mary’s Poor School on Middle Abbey Street. Sullivan comments that Catherine’s “chief interest was that poor girls learn employable skills and reap some small benefit from their labours. She taught them sewing and other handcrafts and created a shop where their handmade clothing and other items could be sold. She also gave them religious instructions.”⁸³ Catherine’s activity at this school, similar to that at Coolock House, sought to bring about change by empowering the poor.

Catherine’s unique philanthropic style is also demonstrated through her efforts to assist a local woman known as Mrs. Harper. Although no date is given for this interaction, Sullivan places it after the death of the Callaghans.⁸⁴ Harper was a woman who had come from a respectable situation, but, suffering from mental illness, had found herself destitute and homeless. Rather than arranging for Harper to go into an asylum, Catherine met Harper in Liffey Street by St. Mary’s Church and took her home to live at Coolock House. Harnett notes that “Miss McAuley had much to suffer from this woman, as she, with the perversity sometimes attending madness, conceived an absolute hatred of her benefactress, and

⁸⁰ Hatton, *Quaker Relief*, 7.

⁸¹ Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 144.

⁸² Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 151.

⁸³ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 54.

⁸⁴ The story is placed after the Callaghan deaths in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 54.

ordinarily used most virulent and contemptuous language towards her.”⁸⁵ However, what makes this situation distinctive is that Catherine took the woman into her home, something that was not characteristic of philanthropy at the time, either Catholic or Protestant. This was because a class difference remained between the benevolent benefactor and the recipient, and a certain distance was maintained. In the context of philanthropy that was non-sectarian, it is also noteworthy that Harper was from a Protestant background.

At a similar time, Catherine took in two orphans from the Coolock area, and two children of her cousin, Ann Conway, who had died.⁸⁶ As Catherine herself had been taken into the homes of the Conways and the Armstrongs when she was in need, she now did the same for these children in what could be described as a precursor to establishing the House of Mercy and providing shelter. Additionally, there was a societal expectation that she would take in the children of her cousin. The 1836 *Royal Commission for enquiring into the poorer classes in Ireland* recorded the testimony of those in Longford who claimed that “the support of destitute persons usually devolves, as a matter of duty, upon the nearest relatives, at least as far as children, brothers and sisters. Should they refuse their aid, they are looked upon among their own equals with the greatest abhorrence.”⁸⁷

After the death of William Callaghan, Anna Maria Doyle identifies the way of life that had become familiar to Catherine: “she kept a carriage, dressed well, went into society and sometimes gave parties at her own house; but employed the greater part of her time in works of piety and charity, especially in the instruction of poor children in the female schools of St. Mary’s Parish, Abbey St.”⁸⁸ Therefore, Catherine was not new to charitable work when she received the inheritance from the Callaghans upon the death of William Callaghan, as in the preceding years she had been engaged in charitable activities herself and had also become the proxy for Catherine Callaghan’s philanthropy.

⁸⁵ Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 151.

⁸⁶ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 63-64.

⁸⁷ Mel Cousins, “Philanthropy and Poor Relief before the Poor Law, 1801–30,” in *Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Laurence M. and Oonagh Walsh Geary (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 33.

⁸⁸ M. Ann Doyle, “The Derry Large Manuscript: Notes on the Life of Mother Catherine McAuley by one of the First Sisters of Mercy c.1848,” in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 45.

Catherine, the Philanthropist

Maria Luddy could have been describing Catherine McAuley when she claimed that “philanthropic activism was to have profound social and political consequences not only on the beneficiaries of charity, but also on the women who provided that aid.”⁸⁹ Catherine’s extensive inheritance from the Callaghans enabled her to alleviate the needs of the poor around her substantively, and to create structures that led to lasting change. Additionally, the inheritance led to the formation of the House of Mercy in 1827 and the establishment of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, drastically changing the life path that Catherine had imagined for herself. Prior to deciding to establish a religious congregation, she had held a dislike of religious life that was probably due to the influence of Protestants in her life.

Catherine had emerged from the relative affluence of her upbringing, through poverty after her mother’s death, to the comfort of living with the Callaghans, before finally inheriting a fortune at age forty-four. She had known both poverty and wealth and had experienced living in households with different religious backgrounds. These diametrically opposite experiences placed Catherine in a unique position that gave her a first-hand understanding of the daily needs of the poor and of the ability of the wealthy to offer meaningful relief. In the manner shaped by Catherine Callaghan’s Society of Friends influence, Catherine’s emphasis in her philanthropic efforts was not only on offering charity, but on providing an education that would empower those who were poor with relevant skills for employment. Catherine herself knew that fortunes could turn very quickly. However, the experience of growing up in a respectable bourgeois family, and the education she had received, gave her the skills and graces to be an effective companion for Catherine Callaghan, to be a respected member of the household, and even for the couple to see her as their own child.

When the will of William Callaghan was read, it would have come as a surprise to Catherine that she was the sole legatee of the estate. *The Limerick Manuscript* detailed a conversation between Catherine and Callaghan prior to his death when he asked, “What shall I leave you at my death, will you be satisfied with £1000?” Disturbed at the question, Catherine told him she “would not know what to do with £1000.” Callaghan apparently laughed: “You would not know what to do with £1000 . . . well, I know what you would do; you would do a great deal

⁸⁹ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 20.

of good with it at all events.”⁹⁰ Callaghan amended his will on 22 January 1822, almost a year before his death, revoking his previous will, which had split the estate with a niece and Catherine, to leave annuities, shares, dividends, stocks, properties in Greek Street, and the estate at Coolock and the effects within all to Catherine. Various biographers have estimated this to be worth between £20,000 and £30,000 at the time of the will being read.⁹¹ The comparable purchasing power of this amount in pound sterling today can be estimated at £2,795,000.⁹²

The wealth it represented is also effectively portrayed in comparing this sum with annual salaries. In 1821 the House of Commons published a ten year summary of the salaries and costs incurred at a number of Government institutions. One of the institutions listed was the Female Orphan House, Dublin, where the Matron’s salary was £68 in the first year and increased to £111 per annum by the tenth year, whereas the chaplain was paid £30 in the first year and that had raised to £150 by the tenth year. The overall wage cost for the orphan house ranged from £196 in 1812 to £532 in 1821, with £3,800 spent over the ten years. A cumulative total of £16,737 was spent on maintenance and building costs over the ten years.⁹³ This equates to an average cost of £2,000 per year and is significant, as it is an indication of the potential cost of running the envisioned House of Mercy. This amount is supplementary to the initial cost of the building itself: the deed of the House of Mercy indicates that the building cost was to be £3,981.2.1 and the rent cost on the site, which had been leased for one hundred and fifty years, was £60 per annum.⁹⁴

In 1820 the Dublin House of Industry, another government-run organisation, had found it necessary to limit admissions, focus on local needs rather than national, and reduce the number of paid governors and staff to continue operating in a challenging financial climate.⁹⁵ Therefore, Catherine’s decision to build and run a large house that would provide shelter for young women, and education for young girls, could undoubtedly be perceived as a risky

⁹⁰ Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 147.

⁹¹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 52-53.

⁹² <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ppoweruk/>

⁹³ House of Commons, “Accounts of Salaries, Pensions and Allowances, and Sums Expended on Buildings, for Service of Public Institutions in Ireland, 1811-20,” (University of Southampton, 1821). <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.29945719>.

⁹⁴ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 55-56.

⁹⁵ Cousins, “Poor Relief,” 27.

project, as, factoring inflation, the inheritance would be unlikely to cover ten years of operation, and there were no further promises of funding.

Despite an uncertain future and without any guaranteed sources of further funding, Catherine signed an agreement on 14 December 1824, and the building of the House of Mercy commenced under the direction of the architect John B. Keane.⁹⁶ Catherine was encouraged to proceed by Fathers Michael Blake and Edward Armstrong, priests in the Archdiocese of Dublin who had assisted Catherine in the selection of a suitable site. When construction commenced, Edward Armstrong was designated as an agent with the builders to ensure the project was undertaken satisfactorily.

As the building began to take shape, Catherine's siblings made their thoughts known. Savage writes, "on learning from her what she proposed to do, the family were divided in their counsels; her sister, Mary, supported her plan, but her brother and her brother-in-law were unsparing in their criticism of her wasteful folly."⁹⁷ While Mary Macauley would have known of Protestant and Catholic women's involvement in "little projects" to help the poor, the construction of the House of Mercy was far more than a little project. James McAuley and William Macauley, who were of middle- to upper-class status, were not convinced that Catherine should place her entire wealth into such an undertaking to help the poor.

The Class Approach

In general, philanthropy in Dublin was dominated by class structure. To demonstrate this, Margaret Preston evaluated the language used by nineteenth-century Dublin charities in statutes, advertisements, statements of intent and other documents, for elements of class.⁹⁸ While Preston's examples come from the later nineteenth century, some of Catherine's own writings suggest that similar attitudes also existed in the earlier part of the century. Preston claims that both upper-class Catholic and Protestant philanthropists accepted and applied British theories of class to the Irish poor.⁹⁹ They were willing to offer charity to the poor and

⁹⁶ Original Manuscript held in the archive at Mercy International Centre, Dublin.

⁹⁷ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 63.

⁹⁸ Margaret H. Preston, "Discourse and Hegemony: Race and Class in the Language of Charity in Nineteenth-Century Dublin," in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tadhg Foley and Sean Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).

⁹⁹ Preston, "Discourse and Hegemony," 102.

realised that their assistance could make life more bearable for them but continued to hold the belief that the poor were always destined to be poor because of their own immorality and lack of intellect. Therefore, philanthropic work was generally underpinned by the imposition of bourgeois values and was focused on areas that led to the moral improvement of society, such as work with prostitutes and orphans.¹⁰⁰ What motivated the work was an understanding of class. The predominantly Protestant upper classes believed that they were superior and were, therefore, in an ideal position to assist and give guidance to the poor. This understanding was reinforced by the idea that these acts of service were part of one's Christian duty.¹⁰¹ Unlike the charitable work of the Society of Friends, this kind did not generally seek to address the social conditions that caused poverty. Rather, as in England, charity was a form of aristocratic benevolence.¹⁰² This possibly explains Elinor McGauley's dislike of her husband's charitable activity with the children of the neighbourhood, as it lacked the character of an upper-class act of benevolence and instead involved him directly with the poor.

Preston's analysis of the language of the charities established in the early nineteenth-century provides an insight into the beliefs of the benevolent founders and the social values that shaped their evaluation of the deserving poor. She notes that for Protestants, the statements of intent in various charities aimed to support the deserving class rather than "the noisy importunate beggars," to redeem those "who needed to be saved from the clutches of Romanism in order to reach heaven," to convert Catholics so as "to eradicate pernicious customs and to promote acceptance of the moral code of their superiors."¹⁰³ For example, wayward young Catholic women were trained to wash and mend clothes so that they might become valuable members of society (therefore repairing the scandal they had given to society). The statements of intent at refuges, asylums and other charitable outreach associations frequently identified women who infested the streets, and infected society, as recipients who could be taught to walk a more perfect way and therefore be rendered more valuable to God.

¹⁰⁰ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Preston, *Charitable Words*, 1-2.

¹⁰² Aristocratic benevolence is discussed in Altholz, "Social Catholicism in England in the Age of the Devotional Revolution," 211.

¹⁰³ Preston, "Discourse and Hegemony," 107-09.

There were a number of Protestant charities that provided education for Catholic children. However, the focus was on rescuing Catholic children and converting them. Additionally, there was a belief held that “as the peasantry and teachers became more enlightened so the power of the Roman Catholic priests would decline.”¹⁰⁴ In response to these attempts to proselytise and undermine the Catholic hierarchy, Catholics established their own schools. Magray specifically identifies that Catherine McAuley, on opening her first school at the House of Mercy in 1827, “did so to provide an alternative to the proselytising schools in the Baggot Street neighbourhood that were attracting Catholic children.”¹⁰⁵

Catherine’s writings show some evidence of thinking that is congruent with class prejudice. Generally, the distressed women who sought refuge at the House of Mercy were trained for domestic work rather than receiving a complete education that might improve their standing in society. Carroll claims that “Mother McAuley was no advocate for over-educating, so as to unfit them for their state in life, women who, whether as servants of rich men or wives of poor men, have to earn their bread by the labour of their hand.”¹⁰⁶

This is echoed in the second chapter of the Rule of the Congregation on the work in the schools. Catherine writes, “the Sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity can be more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever be the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence.”¹⁰⁷ The reference to a destined station, in light of the focus on a training predominantly for domestic service, suggests an understanding of class as fixed.

The Rule has other examples that demonstrate some of the thinking that reflected class differences. The fourth chapter, on the admission of distressed women, identifies the women as needing to repair their past neglect. This infers a degree of personal responsibility for their situation, rather than placing emphasis on any social or economic disadvantage the women

¹⁰⁴ Harold Hislop, “Inspecting a Doomed Non-Denominational School System: The Inspectorate of the Kildare Place Society in Ireland, 1811-1831,” *Paedagogica historica* 35, no. sup1 (1999): 181.

¹⁰⁵ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Teresa Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, vol. 1 (Catholic Publication Society Company, 1884), 246.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine McAuley, “Rule and Constitution of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, approved by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, 1841,” in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 297.

may have suffered. This chapter also stipulates that “distressed women of good character, admitted to the House of Mercy, shall if necessary be instructed in the principal mysteries of Religion, and required to comply with their religious obligations. They shall be induced to repair as much as possible their past neglect by piously preparing to approach the Holy Sacraments.”¹⁰⁸ The specification of a woman of good character is the first point to note. Luddy provides two examples of how a woman of good character could be identified. The first was from 1802, when a house of refuge opened in Dublin. Women wanting admission were required to provide “unquestionable testimonies of her modesty, honesty and sobriety.” The second example is from Providence Home, which opened in 1839. It only admitted girls who had a clergyman vouch for them.¹⁰⁹ Catherine herself disparaged the immorality of the poor in the workhouses in a letter to M. Teresa White in 1841, saying, “there is such a mixture of immoral persons - unavoidably admitted, that the reduced, moral, orderly person cannot bear to go.”¹¹⁰ It was not to the immoral persons that Catherine was offering assistance but rather to those who could not bear the thought of entering the poor house. In other words, the House of Mercy was a step-up from the workhouses.

Women philanthropists of the time saw themselves as a good influence, able to go into the homes of the poor and teach home economy and sanitary techniques. Without the vow of enclosure that other religious orders had, the Sisters of Mercy imitated this model. The Rule includes this in a section that tells the sisters, when visiting the sick, “to endeavour by every practical means to promote cleanliness,” and this is supported by an oral tradition claiming that the sisters living at the House of Mercy would take soap to the households they visited.¹¹¹

By the time Catherine established the House of Mercy, philanthropy was generally denominational to avoid suggestions of proselyting.¹¹² The second part of the Rule refers to the religious obligations and the pious preparation for the Holy Sacraments, implying that the admittee is of the Catholic religion. This is not surprising in the context; those served by the

¹⁰⁸ McAuley, “Rule,” 299.

¹⁰⁹ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 84.

¹¹⁰ Catherine McAuley to Teresa White, 31 March 1841, in Mary C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 380.

¹¹¹ Soap is available from the MIA gift shop that names the tradition of taking soap to the poor. Chapter 3 of McAuley, “Rule,” 298.

¹¹² Preston, *Charitable Words*, 55.

House of Mercy were predominantly Catholic, and therefore it was expected that they would receive the sacraments.

Magray claims that the religious orders “were part of the drive of the emerging middle class both to define itself and to reshape the Irish world in its own image,”¹¹³ and the work at the House of Mercy was very much about improving the opportunities for poor Catholic women. While not to become part of the middle-class, the women were to learn the domestic skills necessary to provide a living for themselves. Catherine was also concerned that those leaving the House of Mercy to commence employment, would do so as a credit to the institution. Writing to Father John Spratt, she says, “who can judge of the evil consequences that must follow if we send from this Establishment a person of blemished character,” – the reputation of the fledgling organisation was at stake.¹¹⁴

The women who offered their assistance at the House of Mercy also came from more affluent families. Examples include Anna Maria Doyle, whose family had a merchant tailoring establishment in Dublin; Teresa and Jane White who were the daughters of a magistrate; the O’Connell women whose father was the politician Daniel O’Connell; the four Maguire sisters who were daughters of a wealthy Catholic landowner, and Catherine’s own nieces, the daughters of a prominent physician. These women came from the bourgeois Catholic or Protestant community and would likely have been schooled with the nineteenth-century cultural understanding of class.

Conclusion

Catherine knew the challenges of living in poverty from her experiences when living with the Conways and from visiting the poor of Coolock. She was influenced by the spirituality of the Society of Friends in which Catherine Callaghan had been raised and subsequently modelled through her love for the poor, without religious distinction. This desire to relieve the needs of even the imposters, to ensure that one truly deserving person did not go away empty-handed, was valued by Catherine and motivated her philanthropic actions.

¹¹³ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 44.

¹¹⁴ Catherine McAuley to Rev. John Spratt OCC, 1832, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 50.

Luddy writes that “the founders of the native Irish congregations were women of independent wealth and all of them had engaged in charitable work prior to establishing religious communities,” this was certainly true of Catherine McAuley.¹¹⁵ The women ministering at the House of Mercy before 1831, and after that the Sisters of Mercy, were active in their community. They would go out to the hospitals and into the streets to meet those in need, and provided education and shelter for others at the House of Mercy. While they were ambitious and hoped to relieve the needs of all, their actions were impacted by class and religious differences. What cannot be ignored is that these were nineteenth-century Irish Catholic women, and the societal values that had impacted their lives up to the point of joining the community at the House of Mercy had come with them to the work.

Societal values influenced the choice of ministries undertaken at the House of Mercy, particularly with the focus on training for domestic service. As well as providing religious instruction, Catherine also ensured that useful skills such as literacy and needlework were taught. The provision of education was in keeping with a reformist model of philanthropy, and to that extent Catherine can be called a social reformer. However, the scope of the education was restricted by conventional attitudes on social class. It did not therefore have the full impact of the non-sectarian charitable outreach of the Society of Friends. What was also missing from Catherine's reformist philanthropy was the promotion of change at a governmental level. The following chapter will describe the control that clergy attempted to exercise over religious women, and how this effectively curtailed any political action they might have undertaken.

¹¹⁵ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 24.

Chapter 3 - Relationships with Catholic Hierarchy

Nineteenth-century Ireland was a male-orientated society, and as a single Catholic woman, Catherine required male supporters to act on her behalf at times. Lacking such support from her brother and brother-in-law, who disapproved of her extensive plans for charitable outreach, Catherine instead relied on several clergy to assist her. Despite the visible support of some Catholic clergy, other relationships with clergy, who held positions of responsibility in the Archdiocese of Dublin, were negative experiences.

This chapter will provide an overview of the Catholic Church in Dublin in the early nineteenth century, identify some of the clergy with whom Catherine had a beneficial relationship, and analyse the implications of her other interactions with the Catholic clergy. The post-penal law church was visible in the spires adorning the newly built Catholic churches throughout Dublin, and in the previously hidden and oppressed Catholic priests who had become public authority figures. Unfortunately, this recently found authority resulted in rampant clericalism.

In the first part of the century, as the clergy worked to entice Catholics back to the full practice of their faith, they promoted a moral reform, effectively seeking to control the lives and moral thinking of the people. One reason why such clericalism was allowed to flourish was due to the status that the Catholic Church had gained from the abolition of the penal laws. There was no desire to return to such a state of oppression, and as Connolly notes, “Catholics were reminded of the toleration which had been granted to them by the government.”¹¹⁶ This fostered a fear that the government would reinstate these laws if Catholics caused any disturbances. In response, the clergy became vocal in promoting obedience to temporal rulers, and in doing so, effectively claimed obedience for themselves.

Maria Luddy claims that “all women’s charitable societies had basically the same structure. They began with a group of like-minded women coming together for a specific purpose,” and she concludes that “the primary link was adherence to a particular religious denomination.”¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, when the House of Mercy opened in 1827, adherence to Catholicism was not the primary link, as both Protestants and Catholics were involved in the charitable activities. It

¹¹⁶ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 221.

¹¹⁷ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 178.

was improving the plight of poor women and children that united those engaged in the work. However, as Catherine was an active member of the Catholic Church at the time, it is not surprising that she brought her fledgling organisation under the auspices of the Catholic Church by seeking the sanction of Archbishop Murray.

Women and Clergy

Despite the ecumenical nature of the House of Mercy when it opened, religion was generally an entry point for middle-class women to engage in philanthropy. The charitable outreach of the religious groups became a way to engage with the world in meaningful work when most professions were not available to middle- and upper-class women. The role of married women, in particular, was to be found in the home, and while the Marriage Bar did not come into legal force until later in the nineteenth century, the practice was in place, and women who were married were not encouraged to work. During the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, Luddy notes that Protestant women and those who were members of the Society of Friends developed philanthropy without any form of clerical influence, yet Catholic women did not.¹¹⁸ While faith was a motivator for charitable actions, the Catholic faith was inextricably connected to the institutional Church, and therefore the clergy were able to exert substantial control. Catherine was associated with a remarkable number of clergy, and, as noted by Catherine Byrn, the daughter of Ann Conway Byrn, a number of these clergy acted as her spiritual advisors and confessors. One such priest, named by Byrn, was Father Andrew Lubé, a friend of Catherine's for eighteen years, who "by his charitable counsels contributed more than any other to the preservation of her Faith."¹¹⁹ Lubé also engaged Catherine's voluntary assistance at the school in Middle Abbey Street.

For single women, who did not have a husband to act on their behalf, the priests proved to be a valuable ally when trying to progress their charitable endeavours. As previously mentioned, Catherine relied on Fathers Blake and Armstrong to help her secure the site for the House of Mercy and to act on her behalf to ensure the plans for the House of Mercy were carried out to the required standard.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 23.

¹¹⁹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 33.

¹²⁰ Harnett, "Limerick Manuscript," 150-51.

When the House of Mercy was opened, a recurring theme in the stories of those associated with it is that they were encouraged to serve there by their spiritual confessors: Elizabeth Moore (who entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1832 and eventually became superior of the Limerick foundation) had Blake as her confessor and friend, a strong advocate of Catherine's work and the House of Mercy.¹²¹ Frances Warde, who joined the community in 1828 and went on to found the Sisters of Mercy in the United States in 1844, initially had Edward Armstrong as her confessor.¹²² He encouraged her to teach a few classes at the House of Mercy that introduced her to the ministry.¹²³ When Warde wanted to move into the House of Mercy, Carroll wrote that "Catherine referred her to her confessor, Rev. Father Lestrangle (sic), a Carmelite Friar, remarking that, in the important step of choosing a state in life, the director is the surest exponent of God's will."¹²⁴ In fact it was not just women referred to the House of Mercy as volunteers by their directors, the *Positio* states that "in 1828 Daniel O'Connell¹²⁵ became a benefactor of the Baggot Street charities, probably through the advice of Father Francis L'Estrange."¹²⁶ In time O'Connell's daughters were also volunteers at the House of Mercy.

Another reason the clergy held such considerable power could be attributed to the shortage of priests. Connolly names two reasons for this shortage: firstly, the lack of educational facilities to train priests after seminaries in France had closed during the French Revolution; secondly, Irish Catholics could not financially support additional clergy, as most came from poor communities, without money to provide for themselves, let alone another clergyman.¹²⁷ Those who were ordained were frequently engaged in what Connolly calls ecclesiastical beggary, a dependency on voluntary offerings. This beggary evolved because the average annual salary for a Catholic priest in 1801 was only £65 if he was in a parish by himself, and if he had one

¹²¹ "Mother Elizabeth Moore," Mercy International Association, 2018, accessed 15 September, 2021, <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/mercy-foundresses/mother-mary-elizabeth-moore/>.

¹²² Frances Warde initially visited the House of Mercy by day to help before joining the community in 1828. She was received as a Sister of Mercy in 1832, becoming Sr M. Francis Xavier..

¹²³ Kathleen Healy, *Frances Warde: American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 30.

¹²⁴ Mary Teresa Austin Carroll, *Life of Catherine McAuley, Foundress and First Superior of the Institute of Religious Sisters of Mercy* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1866), 149.

¹²⁵ Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), known as the Liberator, was a lawyer, politician, and leader of Catholic Emancipation.

¹²⁶ Mary Angela Bolster, *Positio: Documentary Study for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Catherine McAuley*, 1985, 67, Union of Sisters of Mercy of the Dioceses of Cork and Ross, Cork.

¹²⁷ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 34-35.

curate, it was then around £100 for both clergy.¹²⁸ When men were going to the Irish seminaries in Italy, France and Spain, it was common for them to be ordained before commencing their studies so that they could preside at Masses throughout their studies and use the stole fees they earned for their keep. With the financial situation in mind, it is also possible that the role of spiritual confessor provided some recompense for the clergy, as this was effectively a spiritual director role. While direct payment for confession was prohibited, it is conceivable that a spiritual director could accept a donation for the spiritual direction given outside the confessional.

While there is little written about the actual role of the confessors in the biographies of lay and religious women in the early nineteenth century, their role is significant in helping women “interpret a call from God,” according to Carmen Mangion.¹²⁹ Although she is discussing the situation in England and Wales, it is congruent with Ireland when Mangion notes that clerical recommendations were a way for women to enter religious life. Their support was essential when the congregations were new, and the visible presence of the sisters in ministry was not as prolific as in later years. Family connections were also important as, of the sixty-five women to enter the community in Dublin prior to Catherine’s death, at least one-quarter had a sister/aunt/niece in the community, and a few others had brothers or uncles who were priests.¹³⁰ One such woman was Anne O’Grady, who joined the community in 1829; her uncle was Father John McCormack, who had prepared Mary Macauley, Catherine’s sister, for death. He “took a deep interest in her sister’s undertaking, and now brought his niece . . . to assist in the good work.”¹³¹ Once the congregation established schools another seedbed for aspirants emerged.

Mary Peckham Magray, discussing the role of the clergy in the formation of religious orders, asserts that “the assumption that religious orders did not initiate their own development has been uncritically accepted.”¹³² This chapter will show that the clergy did have influence.

¹²⁸ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 48.

¹²⁹ Carmen M. Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 64.

¹³⁰ Data from the International Register of Sisters of Mercy held by Mercy International Association, Ireland.

¹³¹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 84.

¹³² Magray, *Transforming Power*, 15.

However, in agreement with Magray, the examples will also highlight the atypical autonomy that Catherine demonstrated in developing the Sisters of Mercy.

The Archbishops

John Troy

John Thomas Troy was appointed archbishop of Dublin in 1786 and died in 1823, and it is from his episcopal actions that the nature of Catholicity in Dublin during Catherine's early life can be ascertained. He and his successor Daniel Murray were supportive of religious women. Thus, in 1798 there were three convents in Dublin, and by 1848 there were thirty convents.¹³³

Throughout Troy's episcopacy, there was a struggle to maintain a suitable ratio of priests to laity in Dublin and, compared to other European countries, the ratios were less than desirable. Between 1770 and 1840, the number of priests in Ireland increased by fifty percent to 2,400, yet this did not match the increase in the Catholic population, and by 1840 the ratio of priests to people was one priest to one 2,750 people.¹³⁴

A significant focus for Troy, toward the end of his life, was the building of the metropolitan pro-cathedral. Fundraising for this church was a monumental task, and one of the donors was Catherine, exercising philanthropy. She gave £50 in 1824 that went towards the outfit of the interior of the cathedral.¹³⁵

Daniel Murray

Daniel Murray was born in 1768 near Arklow in Ireland and educated in Dublin at a school run by a priest in the Society of Jesus, Father Thomas Betagh, before training for the priesthood at the Irish College in Salamanca. After his studies, Murray returned to Dublin and was appointed curate at St. Paul's Church in Arran Quay. It is at St. Paul's where Catherine

¹³³ Roland Burke Savage, *A Valiant Dublin Woman: The Story of George's Hill (1766-1940)* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd., 1940), 204.

¹³⁴ Emmet J. Larkin, *The Pastoral Role of the Roman Catholic Church in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1750-1850* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 10.

¹³⁵ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 54.

may have met Murray. In this church, Catherine allegedly received the sacraments of (first) Eucharist and Confirmation (although records have never been found).

Murray was appointed to the metropolitan chapel of St. Mary's, Liffey Street, Dublin, in 1800 and remained there until at least 1811. Doyle records meetings between Murray and Catherine when Catherine "sought instruction from Most Revd., Dr Murray, then a curate in the old chapel in Liffey St."¹³⁶ With the timing of Murray's appointment to this chapel, the meetings would have occurred while Catherine was living with the Callaghans.¹³⁷

Murray was ordained as coadjutor archbishop *cum iure successionis* (with the right of succession) to Troy and consecrated to the position in 1809. As a priest, he was held in high regard by both the clergy and the people, which is why his appointment to coadjutor archbishop, whilst he was still a curate, was not a surprise.¹³⁸

Murray's work as coadjutor archbishop was dominated by the Catholic petition for emancipation. He went to Rome as the representative for the Catholic bishops of Ireland to plead the case that the proposed royal veto on episcopal appointments in the Catholic Church in Ireland be rejected. Despite being rejected, this proposed veto was repeatedly introduced into parliament and seen by those against Catholic emancipation as the necessary *quid pro quo*. However, Daniel O'Connell was able to facilitate a political consensus amongst the Irish bishops, clergy, and laity against the veto and to generate enough pressure that resulted in emancipation becoming a reality in 1829.¹³⁹

Murray's early years as coadjutor archbishop also saw a beginning of the educational opportunities for the poor that would become a feature of his prelacy. Morrissey states that during the years 1812-1813, Murray advised and assisted Edmund Rice and Mary Aikenhead, two people who went on to make a significant impact by establishing religious congregations. Murray had contacted Rice, who had already established schools in Waterford, Cork and Limerick for the sons of the poor. He offered him a location in Dublin to open another

¹³⁶ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 43.

¹³⁷ Thomas J. Morrissey, *The Life and Times of Daniel Murray. Archbishop of Dublin, 1823–1852* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018), 36.

¹³⁸ Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 40.

¹³⁹ Larkin, *Pastoral Role*, 88.

school.¹⁴⁰ Morrissey writes that the school's aim was "to provide the pupils with basic numeracy, literacy in English, and the necessary social skills to function in an increasingly bourgeois society."¹⁴¹ Murray also invited Aikenhead to form a new religious organisation in 1811. She undertook a novitiate with the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Bar Convent in York and was accepted for profession in August 1815. The women in the newly formed group took temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as a fourth vow of service of the poor. Notably, there was not a vow of enclosure, and in September 1816, they commenced visitation of the sick.

Catherine McAuley could have been included in this list outlined by Morrissey of those Murray advised and assisted, as sometime before he left St. Mary's parish, Catherine approached him for counsel. The story, as told by Harnett in the *Limerick Manuscript*, explains:

One day she alleged some excuse for going into Dublin alone; she went to a Milliner's shop, and having purchased some trifling articles of dress, desired the servants to wait with the carriage until she should return. It was not far from the Roman Catholic church then in Liffey Street, and almost breathless with haste, and trembling from the excitement of her feelings, she applied at the residence of the clergymen, and inquired whether any of them were at home. The answer was in the affirmative, and she was introduced to the presence of Revd. Dr. Murray, then a curate attached to that parish, and afterwards archbishop of Dublin.¹⁴²

This meeting led to Catherine preparing to receive the sacraments again and wholeheartedly embracing the Catholic faith of her baptism. The Callaghans, although Protestant, did not prevent Catherine from attending Mass and permitted her the use of the carriage for travel.

Morrissey's biography of Murray does not do justice to the influence he had in the formation of the Sisters of Mercy, with just a fleeting sentence noting that "he encouraged the Sisters in their work of teaching poor children in Dublin and across the English speaking world."¹⁴³ Had Catherine not received a positive welcome on her visit to the Liffey Street presbytery, she

¹⁴⁰ Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 51-52.

¹⁴¹ Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 52.

¹⁴² Harnett, "Limerick Manuscript," 143.

¹⁴³ Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 62.

might well have succumbed to the pressure to become Protestant rather than returning to her Catholic roots.

The Role of the Catholic Clergy

Magray writes that “in the early years of the expansion of the orders, the clergy more often acted as supporters and go-betweens than as initiators.”¹⁴⁴ This is certainly true of Catherine’s relationship with Fathers Armstrong and Blake, who proved themselves effective advocates. However, Luddy claims that “the Catholic hierarchy offered fewer opportunities for laywomen to organise” and that “women in lay organisations were at numerous disadvantages when compared to the freedom allowed nuns, especially in gaining entrance to public institutions.”¹⁴⁵ This is an appropriate starting point to explore Catherine’s opportunities and freedom to act, the support or otherwise that she received when establishing the House of Mercy, and differences in this support once the religious congregation was established.

Murray’s role in the establishment of the House of Mercy and the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy was significant and can be extrapolated from some of the letters exchanged with Catherine McAuley and the advocacy on her behalf, particularly when seeking approval from the Holy See for the Rule and Constitutions and apostolic recognition of the Sisters of Mercy. Additionally, Murray’s handwritten comments on the Rule when it was under development are insightful and demonstrate his influence. Despite his being credited with the formation of the Irish Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Loreto and bringing the Christian Brothers to Dublin, he does not receive the same “founding” credit when it comes to the Sisters of Mercy, reflecting Catherine’s autonomy.¹⁴⁶ Magray agrees when she writes, “although clerical pressure was a factor in the formation of the Sisters of Mercy, it was not the cause.”¹⁴⁷

One very public act of support Murray gave to Catherine and the work of the House of Mercy, while it was still a lay-led institution, was a letter soliciting donations. Catherine distributed this to the wealthy houses in the area. Murray’s letter reads:

¹⁴⁴ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 216.

¹⁴⁶ Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 23.

Poor Schools and House of Mercy, Baggot Street, approved by His Grace, The Most Reverend Doctor Murray, superintended by the Reverend Matthew Kelly and kindly assisted by the Revd. Doctor Armstrong, under whose pastoral charge of this parish the intention was formed and building erected.

In these schools, five hundred poor girls may daily experience the blessing of religious instruction, and being practised in various branches of industry, come forward, shielded from all the evils incident to ignorance and idleness - prepared as Christians to discharge the duties of the humble state in life to which it has pleased God to call them.

Young tradeswomen of good character who have employment yet not sufficient means to provide safe lodging are invited to this house at night as their home-practised in prayer and meditation, prepared for sacraments and guarded against the dangers that surround them.

You are most earnestly entreated to contribute to the support of this Institution.
D. Murray, D.D.¹⁴⁸

The letter echoes the educational emphasis of the time on developing skills of industry to avoid ignorance and idleness. It outlines the ministry of the refuge operating for women of good character, with the religious formation of these women occurring in the evenings. The evening formation meetings are also mentioned in one of the letters of William Macauley, Catherine's nephew. He recalls that he would be "sitting on my Aunt's footstool, with my back to Mr Callaghan's oil-likeness above the mantelpiece and Father Armstrong's on my right between the two windows, while she read distinctly some religious book to the Sisters sitting at work around the table."¹⁴⁹ While Murray's letter does demonstrate hierarchical support for the ministry of laywomen, the mention, by name, of the two clergy with no mention of Catherine or any other women involved in the House of Mercy by name is reflective of Luddy's claim that laywomen were overlooked by the clergy.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Daniel Murray in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 38.

¹⁴⁹ William McAuley to Reverend Mother, Convent of Mercy, Bendigo, 15 July 1903, in M. Imelda Keena, ed., *The Letters of William [Armstrong] Montgomery McAuley* (London: Institute of Our Lady of Mercy, undated), 12.

The House of Mercy was intentionally situated in an affluent area of Dublin, with many of the women who found refuge there working in the neighbouring wealthy Protestant homes. *The Dublin Review* claimed that Edward Armstrong said,

It had been formerly too much the custom for Catholics to place their charitable and religious institutions in some obscure street, or narrow lane, that was almost inaccessible; that it would be desirable to make a change in this respect, and place them so that all might see and be edified, that thus they might not be less advantageously circumstanced as regarded the publicity of their benevolent institutions, than their Protestant fellow-countrymen.¹⁵⁰

The statement reflects the increasingly confident attitude of Catholics that emancipation was a real possibility. Catherine also describes, in a letter to John Rice (the brother of Edmund Rice), that “it is the first Convent that was erected in the midst of the Protestant nobility - when they were employing wealth and influence to allure Catholics from their faith.”¹⁵¹ Both Catherine and Edward Armstrong emphasise the importance of the House being situated in a public place to be most visible and accessible to Catholics and help safeguard the Catholic faith. While it could be argued that Armstrong determined the location for the building, Catherine would have likely held a similar viewpoint and agreed with the proposed location.

As well as to Catholics, Murray’s letter was sent to the Protestant neighbours, and his status in Dublin society would have enabled this to be received with openness. Murray had become a notable public figure who was active in the political scene, mainly due to the campaign for emancipation and the Catholic Relief Bill. He was known for his approachability by people from all areas of society.¹⁵²

Murray’s relationship with Catherine appears to have been generally positive, and this could well be attributed to Edward Armstrong, who was a key supporter of Catherine when the House of Mercy was being constructed and in the early days of its operation. Armstrong was

¹⁵⁰ Miles Gaffney, “La Regola e le Costituzioni delle Religiose nominate Sorelle della Misericordia: Roma 1846,” *The Dublin Review* 22 (1847): 9, https://books.google.bf/books?id=L0swAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA536&hl=fr&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁵¹ Catherine McAuley to John Rice, 8 Dec 1833 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*.

¹⁵² Morrissey, *Daniel Murray*, 87.

also the confessor for Murray - this role would very likely have enabled him to share the good intentions of Catherine and the work undertaken by the women with whom she worked alongside.¹⁵³ Shortly before his death, Armstrong wrote to the archbishop requesting his support for Catherine, saying:

The only great solicitude which presses on me is with respect to Miss McAuley. When I shall be taken from her, she will find herself in a great measure bereft of an Ecclesiastical Friend, which is a desideratum for her of the utmost importance. Surrounded on every side by Protestant and prejudiced relatives and acquaintances, she will be much straightened to follow up her good purposes unless protected and supported by some zealous and religious Friend. Could I pledge myself to her that you would be that good Friend, who would support and uphold her good purposes, there could not be any fear for her.¹⁵⁴

How Murray fulfilled this request is only detailed in brief extracts in the letters written by Catherine or in the manuscripts left by her contemporaries. One that is particularly remarked upon is the visit of Murray to the House of Mercy on 22 November 1828. The writings of Doyle record that during the visit, Murray baptised Catherine's eldest niece, Mary Macauley, in the chapel at the House, and on the same day gave permission for the women to visit the poor and to visit Catholics who were in hospital, indicating the significant power of the clergy at the time.¹⁵⁵ Even though the House of Mercy was not a convent, and neither Catherine nor any of the other women working there made any form of temporary vows to the archbishop, his permission was still sought for visitations (at this stage, the hospitals in Dublin were run by Protestants rather than Catholics so the admittance to visit the patients was not even under the archbishop's jurisdiction).

Doyle, writing in the third person, recalls the occasion of visiting the hospitals in the Derry Large Manuscript,

Our dear foundress, Miss Doyle, Miss Byrne and Miss Warde who had become a member in the preceding month, went in the carriage to Sir Patrick Dunne's

¹⁵³ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 69.

¹⁵⁴ Edward Armstrong to Daniel Murray, 16 March 1828, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 40.

¹⁵⁵ Doyle, "Derry Manuscript," 49.

Hospital where the Physicians knowing Miss McAuley's family and friends to be all Protestants and probably supposing she and her companions were of that persuasion not only allowed them to speak to the patients, but also gave a general order for their admission in future.¹⁵⁶

Admittance to Mercer's Hospital, Donnybrook Hospital for Incurables, and the Coombe Lying-in Hospital soon followed.¹⁵⁷ As the admittance appears to have been given because of Catherine's Protestant connections rather than Catholic connections, it raises the question of why the women ever felt that they needed to seek the archbishop's permission.

Murray's level of influence extended even to the wearing of the religious habit in 1831 after the Congregation was formed. When the Sisters of Mercy began to minister at the cholera depot in Townsend Street in 1832, Murray requested that "he wished our outdoor costume might exhibit no remarkable difference from that of secular persons of respectability who did not enter into the vanities of the world, and above all things that the cross and beads might be carefully concealed."¹⁵⁸ This discretion in public continued, and Sullivan describes similar attire on a trip to Birmingham in 1841, where the sisters wore travelling clothes, "a black bonnet with a short veil, black gloves, and a black cloak sufficiently long to conceal the habit—and were thus unidentifiable as religious."¹⁵⁹ The wearing of attire that was indistinguishable as Catholic could be described as a method of ensuring that the sisters' agency was not relinquished. Incognito, they were free to traverse the streets, and engage in ministry, without fear of persecution or difficulty. This directive is different from that of the Irish Sisters of Charity, who in 1817 decided on their habit in consultation with Murray and chose one that was quite distinctive.¹⁶⁰ It is probable that Murray's request of the Sisters of Mercy regarding their dress stemmed from a legal perspective as the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, section 26, actually prohibited the wearing of religious habits. Kevin Costello claimed that "this was because members of the orders wore a 'peculiar habit' which, if it were

¹⁵⁶ Anna Maria Doyle in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 49-50.

¹⁵⁷ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 83.

¹⁵⁸ Doyle, "Derry Manuscript," 64.

¹⁵⁹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 346.

¹⁶⁰ Donal S. Blake, *Mary Aikenhead (1787-1858) Servant of the Poor: Founder of the Religious Sisters of Charity* (Dublin: Caritas, 2001), 36.

worn in public, would cause great offence to the members of the Protestant religion.”¹⁶¹

Although the Act was instigated to suppress the Jesuits and not generally enforced in relation to religious women, this section explicitly prevented the formation of religious congregations and banned recruitment for existing orders, and therefore Murray’s support of Catherine was all the more important.

In April 1829, Catherine established the Baggot Street Trust, naming Murray as the recipient of the House of Mercy should she or her two initial associates, Anna Maria Doyle and Catherine Byrn, be unable to fulfil the purpose of the House of Mercy. This action clearly aligned the ministry of the House of Mercy to the Catholic Church in perpetuity.

Mathias Kelly

Maria Luddy repeatedly argues that lay Catholic women’s involvement in charitable works was inhibited by the male hierarchy’s preference for charitable activity to be undertaken by women’s religious congregations.¹⁶² The following account of Canon Mathias Kelly concurs with this and outlines the difficulties Catherine experienced with him when the House of Mercy was operated by laywomen, and his attempts to curtail the ministry.

It appears that Kelly was one of the instigators of the unfavourable comments that the House of Mercy was receiving in 1829. Harnett wrote that “many well-disposed Catholics had taken offence at the strange and unusual appearance that the Establishment presented; it was observed that it had assumed a religious character without having any claim to it; it was neither a convent, nor a private house; neither a religious community, nor yet a public Establishment.”¹⁶³ The situation was complicated. As the women had established a school and a refuge, and were active in soliciting donations of money and goods for the House of Mercy, the work became public and therefore attracted public comment. Throughout this difficult time, Catherine was without her key supporter, Edward Armstrong, who had died in May 1828.

¹⁶¹ Kevin Costello, “Inoperative But Insulting: Residues of the Penal Laws, 1829–1920,” in *Law and Religion in Ireland, 1700-1970*, ed. Kevin Costello and Niamh Howlin (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 124.

¹⁶² Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 44.

¹⁶³ Harnett, “Limerick Manuscript,” 166.

Kelly was the administrator of St. Andrew's Chapel on Townsend Street. Sullivan noted that he looked "askew at the charitable endeavours Catherine had instituted without having sought any parish sanction," asking "who did this "upstart," this "parvenue," think she was?"¹⁶⁴ While he alleged that Catherine had not sought any parish sanction, this was not entirely correct, as Blake had been the parish priest in St. Andrew's Chapel when the House of Mercy was established. Blake also helped select the site and blessed the foundation stone. As he was the parish priest, the action also gave the sanction of his parish to the work of the House of Mercy. The archbishop had endorsed the work as Catherine pointed out in a letter to Elizabeth Moore in 1837, where she wrote, "Doctor Murray gave his most cordial approbation and visited frequently - all was done under his direction from the time we entered the House - which was erected for the purposes of charity."¹⁶⁵ More revealing is that Kelly expected that Catherine would seek his sanction. Kelly's attitude is described succinctly by Magray, who said he had a "growing concern over the changing sex ratio in favour of women within the workforce of the Irish church. Kelly objected to women's growing involvement in apostolic or parochial work, work that was formerly the sole responsibility of priests."¹⁶⁶ In Catherine's case, this objection was exacerbated by the fact that the organisation appeared similar to the Protestant establishments that provided refuge in Dublin. Additionally, some elements gave it the appearance of a Catholic religious congregation, namely that the women dressed in a similar way in matching black dresses, shared what they had in common, and kept a *horarium* that included daily Mass and other spiritual activities. Both dimensions caused confusion in the minds of local Catholics who were being asked for donations to support this emerging ministry.

There is limited scholarship on the power of the Catholic clergy over the laity in the early nineteenth-century. The most comprehensive work is that of S. J. Connolly. However, this scarcity does not preclude some observations as to the perception that the laity had of the clergy and the power that arose from the pedestal on which the clergy were placed. One point of difference that Connolly identifies is between a priest in the Church of Ireland and an Irish Catholic priest: the Church of Ireland clergy were supported by the state and considered to be wealthy, concerned with their personal advancement, whereas the Catholic priest had no

¹⁶⁴ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 68.

¹⁶⁵ Catherine McAuley to Elizabeth Moore, 13 Jan 1839, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 179.

¹⁶⁶ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 22.

family, fortune or estate.¹⁶⁷ This is only partially correct, as the Catholic clergy who trained at the Irish Colleges on the Continent were generally from wealthy backgrounds; the support of family was what initially enabled them to travel there for formation. However, after the closure of the Irish Colleges on the Continent and the opening of the Catholic seminary in Maynooth, the Catholic clergy were more likely to be local men who knew the situation of the poor well, shared their prejudices and therefore had a personal connection with their parishioners. Those from wealthier families, according to Connolly, “were more likely to send their sons into the more socially prestigious religious orders rather than the secular clergy.”¹⁶⁸ Connolly also notes that, in the early nineteenth-century, the Catholic majority “lived in a state of permanent alienation from their landlords and from other members of the middle and upper classes,” and the Catholic priest was “in most cases the educated man to whom his parishioners could most easily and most confidently turn to for advice.”¹⁶⁹ This added to his status in the community as the priest was often the one who acted as an intermediary in the lives of his parishioners, far beyond their spiritual needs. Perhaps most significant is Connolly’s identification of the “general willingness to defer to authority” that was evident in the relationship of people to priests.¹⁷⁰ These factors combined to create a prominent and influential place for the Catholic priest in Irish society. M. Clare Moore who became a Sister of Mercy in 1831, highlighted Catherine’s respect for priests.¹⁷¹ Clare Moore writes,

Our dear Reverend Mother entertained a profound respect for the sacred Ministers of Religion, and taught the Sisters to observe the same in word and manner. The Chaplain of the Convent, the Reverend D. Burke, had been there for eight years and was consequently a very intimate friend, yet she always used the word “Sir” in addressing him, and told the Sisters they ought to say it also to all Priests.¹⁷²

With this level of respect for the clergy, it must have been even more difficult for Catherine when the situation with Kelly came to a crisis point in late 1829 or early 1830. Doyle recalls,

¹⁶⁷ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 53-54.

¹⁶⁸ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 42.

¹⁶⁹ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 56.

¹⁷⁰ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 57.

¹⁷¹ Clare Moore (birth name Georgiana) came to the House of Mercy in 1828 as a governess for Catherine’s adopted children. She joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1832 and was the foundress of Cork and Bermondsey.

¹⁷² Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 118.

The Revd. Mathias Kelly, the administrator of St. Andrew's parish, came here one day and, having led the foundress through the house, told her to choose one or two rooms for herself, as the archbishop wished to place the establishment under the direction of the Sisters of Charity, though she could have a private entrance and some privileges, etc., etc. She believed him and meekly answered that Dr. Murray could do as he pleased with the house, for it was his.¹⁷³

Kelly's motivation for such actions is alluded to in the early biography written by Carroll, who notes that Kelly was concerned that these unauthorised persons would injure the religious gathered about Mary Aikenhead in the northern part of the city - either by withdrawing women whose vocation attracted them to similar good works, or by dividing the public charity which they administered.¹⁷⁴

Murray visited Catherine in 1829 after Kelly had falsely portrayed Murray as requiring Catherine to give the House of Mercy and ministry over to the Sisters of Charity. Murray's response to Catherine revealed surprise as he never expected that she would be interested in founding a religious congregation. However, as the only other available option appeared to be to hand over the ministry to the Sisters of Charity, founding a religious congregation was preferable. Like Nano Nagle, the founder of the Presentation Sisters, Catherine chose this option to ensure the ongoing success of the ministry. Magray claims that "Nagle and other women like her viewed forming religious orders to carry on the work of their charitable organisations as a sure means of making their social work more effective and of achieving greater permanence than otherwise would have been possible."¹⁷⁵

After a fifteen-month training at the Presentation Convent in North Dublin, Catherine McAuley, Anna Maria Doyle and Elizabeth Harley professed religious vows in the newly founded Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy on 12 December 1831. Importantly, it was at this time that another priest came into Catherine's life, Miles Gaffney.

¹⁷³ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 51.

¹⁷⁴ Carroll, *Leaves*, 1, 30.

¹⁷⁵ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 40.

Miles Gaffney

Records differ as to the spelling of the first name of Gaffney, who was born in Belfast on 7 April 1798, twenty years after Catherine. The Jesuit records name him Myles,¹⁷⁶ and he is called Militius in the 1845 Royal Calendar.¹⁷⁷ However, the correspondence in the archives of the Archdiocese of Dublin has the spelling as Miles.¹⁷⁸

Little is known of Gaffney's early life, although we can gain some information from two illuminated manuscripts marking the membership of his sister, Bridget, in the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin.¹⁷⁹ These manuscripts name the parents as James and Marianne Gaffney, and the parish that Bridget came from was St. Andrew's in Dublin. Gaffney also had a younger brother John, who trained for the priesthood in Belgium before going to the Irish College in Rome, and eventually joining the Jesuits.¹⁸⁰

Gaffney's journey to priesthood was through the Irish College in Paris, although his study was impacted by the French Revolution when the Irish College in Paris was closed by Napoleon; Gaffney transferred to the Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He concluded his time in France as a professor at a seminary in Beauvais. Gaffney returned to Dublin circa 1830 and was assigned to St Andrew's Chapel on Townsend Street.

When Catherine established the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, Gaffney was appointed by Murray to assist her in preparing the Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy. Caitriona Clear suggests that the experience of bishops and priests living on the Continent (and Gaffney could be included here) gave them a personal experience of nuns carrying out social work, something that had been developing in France for a number of years.¹⁸¹ Such an understanding would have enabled Gaffney to comprehend the similar emerging phenomena in Ireland and provide support to Catherine as she developed constitutions for the Sisters of Mercy.

¹⁷⁶ "Irish Jesuit Archives," accessed 24 May, 2021, <https://www.jesuitarchives.ie/gaffney-john-1813-1898-jesuit-priest>.

¹⁷⁷ *The Royal Calendar, and Court and City Register for England, Scotland, Ireland and the Colonies*, (Suttaby). <https://books.google.co.nz/books?id=SUdRAAAAcAAJ>.

¹⁷⁸ Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin Archive

¹⁷⁹ M. Clare Augustine Moore, Register of the Sisters of Mercy, Dublin (Second Register), c.1845, Mercy International Association.

¹⁸⁰ "Irish Jesuit Archives."

¹⁸¹ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 68.

In 1836 Gaffney was transferred to St. Patrick's Seminary in Maynooth, where he remained until he wrote to Archbishop Cullen on 14 October 1855 asking permission to submit his resignation to the Trustees because of poor health. However, the initial appointment to assist with the Rule began a relationship that continued until the day Catherine died, when Gaffney was present at her bedside.

One way he supported the developing community was by leading the first annual retreat in August 1832. Gaffney's encouraging words given at this retreat were oft-repeated by Catherine, including in a letter to Warde, "You remember what Father Gaffney said to us when in retreat - 'If the entire cross upon which Christ died was sent to this House, how impatient would each Sister be to carry it, and she who was permitted to keep it the longest—would be the most favoured. Far better and more profitable for you to receive with all your heart the cross which God will send you in any form or shape He pleases'."¹⁸² In 1833 Gaffney received the vows of M. Teresa McAuley, Catherine's niece, on her deathbed, and two years later the vows of his own sister, M. Mechtildis Gaffney, in similar circumstances. He was therefore present with Catherine as she faced the crosses of the loss of these sisters.

Gaffney was invaluable as a travelling companion to Catherine, going to both London and Birmingham with the founding groups of Sisters of Mercy. Writing to Warde, Catherine alludes to difficulties that may face them in London when she notes that "Father O'Hanlon is alarmed at the angry things said in the English papers (about founding a Convent in London), he gave me a thousand cautions. He and Dean Gaffney sail with us tomorrow."¹⁸³ The Catholic-Protestant relationship continued to be problematic in England. Erecting new Catholic churches in England and the flow of Irish Catholic labourers there had inflamed the situation.¹⁸⁴ Considering that the convent established by the Sisters of Mercy in Bermondsey, London, was the first to be established on a public highway since the Reformation, it is clear that O'Hanlon's concern was warranted and the presence of both priests valuable.

The accompaniment to Birmingham had been preceded by an earlier visit by Gaffney during which he met with John Hardman, the father of Juliana Hardman, who later became the first

¹⁸² Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 22.

¹⁸³ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 17 November 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 218.

¹⁸⁴ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 218, footnote 16.

superior of the Mercy community in Birmingham. A letter from Catherine to Warde on 16 August 1841 recalls this visit,

Mr Gaffney saw him in his bed. He said if he only lived half an hour after our arrival, he would be happy. The whole family have been such generous friends to [missing word] that Dr Walsh writes to Dr Murray begging there may not be any delay. Young Mr Hardman gave 15 hundred £ towards the Cathedral - and now has given five hundred & fifty for an organ and purchased a nice little one for the Convent. Mr Gaffney promised the good old Father he would bring his child to him, and he kindly returns with us on Friday.¹⁸⁵

Acting as an intermediary for women religious is a role, as previously noted, that was often undertaken by priests.

Walter Meyler

Clear says, “there is often mention, especially in the accounts written by members of congregations themselves, of ‘trials’ and ‘crosses’ of an unspecified nature” rather than including specific detail about the situations.¹⁸⁶ The difficulties Catherine had with Dean Walter Meyler were undoubtedly one such cross; Catherine used such words when she described them to Warde, saying, “we have just now indeed more than an ordinary portion of the Cross.”¹⁸⁷

In his 1949 biography, Savage describes Meyler’s opinion of Catherine’s work, saying he conveyed to Murray the “unwisdom of sanctioning a scheme that would inevitably develop later into a religious Institute.”¹⁸⁸ Meyler had a personal interest in stifling the emerging project. He had been the confessor to the Irish Sisters of Charity since their formation, had two nieces within the order, and had taken their Rule and Constitutions to Rome on their behalf in 1824. Meyler was genuinely concerned that the work at the House of Mercy would become a competing organisation for the Sisters of Charity. It is noteworthy that their founder, Aikenhead, did not hold this view. Writing to her sisters in 1833 about the Sisters of

¹⁸⁵ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 16 August 1841 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 431.

¹⁸⁶ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 67.

¹⁸⁷ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde 17 January 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 119.

¹⁸⁸ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 98.

Mercy, she said, “Let us take care of every illusion of false zeal or false love of our own Institute. Both are intended for the same great end of promoting the glory of our Heavenly Father and the good of the poor—we cannot promote either if charity does not reign in our hearts.”¹⁸⁹

The dedication of the Chapel at the House of Mercy was another occasion for division: Murray presided at the High Mass, and Blake preached, extolling Catherine’s work in his homily, which seemed to inflame her adversaries rather than convert them. It also did not help that on this day, the archbishop granted leave to open the chapel to the public and directed that the Sunday collection could be used to meet expenses and help support the residents of the House of Mercy.¹⁹⁰ Meyler took the side of Mathias Kelly, who was concerned that a Sunday collection in the House of Mercy chapel would detract from his fundraising efforts to build St. Andrew’s Church, in Westland Row (where construction commenced in 1832); yet another reason for him to dislike Catherine and the ministry of the House of Mercy.

Meyler was appointed parish priest at St. Andrew’s in 1833 and was therefore placed in an even more influential position to wield power over the Sisters of Mercy. At the same time, he was appointed chaplain to the Townsend Street Magdalene Asylum operated by the Sisters of Charity, strengthening his connection and support of that congregation.¹⁹¹ Initially, a dispute arose when Meyler did not wish the Sisters of Mercy to hold the annual charity sermon in St. Andrew’s Church, something that Blake had initiated when he was parish priest there.¹⁹² In this situation, the archbishop intervened, and the sermon continued in the parish church. This was quickly followed by his request that the Sunday Mass in the chapel at the House of Mercy was to cease, and when Catherine protested this decision, the directive came to close the chapel to the public entirely. This decision had financial implications, as well as personal, as the Sunday collection supported the work of the House of Mercy. It is interesting at this point that Blake, who was now the Bishop of Dromore and who had always been a strong advocate for Catherine, consoled her but did not intervene. Writing to her in October 1834, he said,

¹⁸⁹ Mary Aikenhead to Mary de Chantal Coleman, January 25, 1833 in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 86.

¹⁹⁰ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 104.

¹⁹¹ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 167.

¹⁹² Charity sermons were a popular way to raise funds for many organisations in Dublin at the time. The cost to attend was minimal and larger donations were solicited during the event.

I most cordially sympathise with you and your edifying Community in the great trial which the closing of your chapel must have caused, although I am sure from my knowledge of the natural kindness of your revered Archbishop and of his frequently declared sentiments respecting the merits of your Institution, that nothing short of an imperative sense of duty could have induced him to insist on such a sacrifice. If he has not explained his reasons to you, be persuaded that they are strong and cogent.¹⁹³

However, Blake does go on to encourage Catherine to contact the archbishop directly, “It would be right, however, that you should know clearly the will of his Grace, Dr. Murray, and beg as a favour that he would express it directly himself to you.”¹⁹⁴ No record of Catherine doing this is available, and the directive to close the chapel to the public was carried out. However, a letter the following year from Murray to his secretary, Fr. John Hamilton, suggests that he was aware of the difficulty between Catherine and Meyler as he writes, “It appears that Revd. Mr O’Hanlon is about to give up his charge of Confessor at Baggot Street. Doctor Meyler should take care that his Friend Mrs. McAuley should suffer no inconvenience from this occurrence.”¹⁹⁵ Unfortunately, the context of this letter does not give any clues as to whether this comment was directed in humour against either Catherine or Meyler. Nevertheless, the archbishop continued to try to appease both parties.

The most well-known source of difficulty between Catherine and Meyler was over the appointment of a suitable chaplain for the House of Mercy. As noted earlier, attendance at weekday Mass in Ireland was not well documented, yet it was a priority for those at the House of Mercy. Clare Moore records that in the chapel at Baggot Street (when it was first opened and Mass was permitted), there was “one Mass every day,” as well as “two Masses on Sundays and holydays”¹⁹⁶ When Mass was not available in the House of Mercy, the laywomen working there, the sisters (after 1831), and any women or children having refuge in the House of Mercy would walk to St. Teresa’s Church in Clarendon Street – a journey that would take fifteen minutes.

¹⁹³ Michael Blake to Catherine McAuley, 23 October 1834 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 63.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Blake to Catherine McAuley, 23 October 1834 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 63.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel Murray to John Hamilton, 24 November 1835 in Dublin Diocese, Hamilton Papers PI! 35/ 1-2, no. 38 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 70.

¹⁹⁶ Letter of Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 28 Aug 1844, quoted in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 89.

In August 1837, Father Daniel Burke, a Carmelite priest who had been a generous chaplain to the House since it had opened and presided at both daily and Sunday Masses, was reassigned to Africa. As the vicar general in the archdiocese, Meyler was therefore to supply a chaplain. As well as the parish priest, St. Andrew's had eight curates available for such work at that time. The difficulty came when Meyler proposed that the curates at St. Andrew's would serve on a rotating basis and come when requested. Catherine, familiar with the consistency of Burke, did not feel that this would meet their needs and was adamant that they required a dedicated chaplain for the tasks, which included acting as a confessor (particularly for those preparing to enter the workforce), being available at unusual times in the case of sudden illness, and presiding at Masses. Additionally, Meyler required an annual stipend of £50 for the chaplain, and with many expenses on the House of Mercy, Catherine felt she could only provide £40 per year.

The chaplaincy issue was distressing to Catherine, as indicated in a letter she wrote to M. de Pazzi Delaney saying, "will you relieve me from the distressing business about the chaplain. It is constantly before me, and makes me dread going home. I know it is not possible for me to have any more argument with Dr Meyler without extreme agitation."¹⁹⁷ While the situation was being sorted, the sisters would walk to Mass at St. Andrew's, and when this time included the month of December, the cold and wet weather would not have been pleasant. This is likely to have exacerbated Catherine's distress. The importance of the spiritual formation of those finding refuge at the House of Mercy was never far from Catherine's mind, and the lack of a chaplain was affecting this also. She wrote to Frances Warde, saying, "you know how difficult it is to get the poor women and children out and home again on days of obligation, and their confessions are, of course, neglected."¹⁹⁸

The problematic situation continued, so Catherine turned to Fr. Andrew Fitzgerald for support (Fitzgerald was the president of Carlow College, where Catherine had enrolled her nephews in 1829). Fitzgerald had visited Catherine's assistant superior, Delaney, in the House of Mercy. Delaney was in charge while Catherine was at other foundations and described her agitation, saying, "I saw her on Saturday greatly agitated by the afflicting circumstances in which Meilor has placed her and the community, exposed as they been to the inclemency of

¹⁹⁷ Catherine McAuley to de Pazzi Delaney, 3 October 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 96.

¹⁹⁸ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, December 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 107.

the weather and the inquisitive gaze of the publick on going to the Parish Chappel.”¹⁹⁹ Delaney’s discomfort at the gaze of the public is to be expected; religious women in habits were not a regular sight as the few congregations that existed in Dublin predominantly had vows of enclosure and therefore did not leave the convent walls. Like Coleman, Fitzgerald also sought a meeting with Meyler, who was conveniently unavailable; one of the curates met with him instead. When Fitzgerald asked why he had to ask permission to preside at Mass in the convent chapel on the Sunday, he was told that the archbishop had sanctioned a curate as chaplain. Fitzgerald replied that “it was rather an extraordinary proceeding, seeing all the other Convents had Chaplains, not Curates.”²⁰⁰ Fitzgerald certainly encouraged Catherine to continue her stance, claiming that the situation was “a wanton unwarranted abuse of Church authority” and that she was to “call up all your firmness, and I have no doubt, having such just ground for supplication against the unprecedented intrusion, you will succeed.”²⁰¹ Delaney was well involved in the situation, and at times Catherine asked her to intervene to try to bring resolution; in a letter to Warde, Catherine, referring to herself as an old mother, notes that “no arrangement has yet been made as to chaplain. Poor Sister M. de Pazzi is after getting one of your old mother’s best and strongest lectures and reasoning.”²⁰²

Toward the end of December, Catherine wrote to Hamilton, clearly agitated again, after a meeting with Meyler in which it was agreed that the sisters could pay £40 per year and a designated curate would be their chaplain. However, Meyler wrote to Catherine that same evening to inform her that he could not agree to less than £50. Catherine’s response to Meyler said they could not afford this and suggested £45, and perhaps Meyler himself could furnish the remaining five pounds. This proposal was also rejected by Meyler, which resulted in Catherine taking the matter to Hamilton, her response reflecting much frustration,

We were happily at home today in time for all our different duties, hence for ourselves we ask for nothing - but our poor young women are still about the streets, taking advantage, to be sure, of the irregularity which has been introduced

¹⁹⁹ Andrew Fitzgerald to Catherine McAuley, 6 November 1837, Dublin Diocese, Hamilton Papers P/ 35/ 7, 59 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 103.

²⁰⁰ Andrew Fitzgerald to Catherine McAuley, 6 November 1837, Dublin Diocese, Hamilton Papers P/ 35/ 7, 59 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 103.

²⁰¹ Andrew Fitzgerald to Catherine McAuley, 6 November 1837, Dublin Diocese, Hamilton Papers P/ 35/ 7, 59 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 103.

²⁰² Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, December 1837, Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 110.

among them. I will make one effort more in their regard. I will endeavour to prevail on the Sisters to accompany me to their Bishop - representing that the Chapel and Institute which he blessed in all the ceremonial form, carrying his Benediction to its outer walls is now under some kind of condemnation, that even a friendly priest is not permitted to celebrate Mass, that the Blessed Eucharist has not been renewed for near three months, that the poor inmates are deprived of the Holy Sacraments. We will shew what is lost by the change that has been made, and that far from withholding the necessary compensation, we are promising more than we possess.²⁰³

Catherine also shared Meyler's response to her letter with Hamilton. In it he provoked Catherine further by writing, "When is your procession to take place? I should like to see the Theatrical exhibition - the Bishop must be apprised - perhaps you may not admire the reception you will meet, for he is too straightforward a person to be caught by your Juggle."²⁰⁴ Here, Meyler is clear inferring that the archbishop will take his side, reflecting the close network of some of the senior clergy in the Dublin archdiocese at the time.

It appears that by May 1837, Catherine received a visit from Fitzgerald (although whether this refers to the chaplaincy dispute or the Kingstown situation, which will be detailed later, is unclear), that was comforting to her and indicated a resignation to the situation,

Dr. Fitzgerald was exceedingly kind and affectionate to me when in Town, and really felt like a sincere friend, for he did not care to whom he spoke, or what remarks were made. He exclaimed privately and publicly against what he conceived unjust and unkind. Indeed he gave me great comfort, for while he condemned the proceeding - he reasoned with me so as to produce quiet of mind and heart.²⁰⁵

As was frequently her response to difficult situations, Catherine also turned to her friend and supporter, Blake. In a letter to Warde she tells of the visit of Fr. Coleman at Blake's request,

²⁰³ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton 19 December 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 112.

²⁰⁴ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton 19 December 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 112.

²⁰⁵ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 15 May 1838, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 136.

Doctor Blake mentioned to him how much I was afflicted at the arrangement making as to Chaplain. Though he was then exceedingly weak and the weather most severe, he came here several times - went from me to Doctor Meyler - and used all the means in his power to have it according to our wishes - and when he could not succeed, wrote me a feeling, fatherly letter.²⁰⁶

In this letter, Catherine indicates that Mass had resumed in the House of Mercy, although it appears that it was in the fashion of revolving curates that Meyler designed rather than Catherine's hope for a nominated chaplain. Sullivan notes that no chaplain is listed in the *Dublin Directory* for 1838, although there is an 1839 listing for Father Gregory Lynch, a curate at St. Andrew's Church.

By July 1839, Catherine's playful nature is again appearing in her letters concerning the situation where she describes Meyler and herself at a profession ceremony in a letter to Elizabeth Moore in Limerick, "Sisters Fleming and Whitty - two very nice young persons - not 21 - & Jane Starling were received yesterday by - Dean Meyler - gracious as possible. Mrs McA's a very good child - smiling and praying alternatively."²⁰⁷

An incident separate from the chaplaincy dispute (but one which again reflects the difficulty Catherine was having with Meyler) occurred in October 1836. Catherine had cause to write to Hamilton, as the archbishop was required at the House of Mercy for the profession of vows ceremony of two sisters. Catherine writes, "two Sisters whose noviciate ended in June have been most anxiously waiting the return of his Grace - who has referred me to the Vicar General."²⁰⁸ The vicar general at the time was Meyler, who had himself written to Hamilton in June 1836 saying, "I am told that Mrs McAuley is keeping 36 in reserve for his Grace - only I have just come from the retreat, I would say: May she be disappointed."²⁰⁹ The tone was clearly not in favour of Catherine and greatly exaggerated the number to be received. Catherine's October letter emphasised the importance placed on the archbishop being present for the ceremony, not Meyler. Catherine continued by referring to the elder of the sisters to be professed that she "fears she will not feel happy, as she confided much in the efficacy of the

²⁰⁶ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, late May 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 140.

²⁰⁷ Catherine McAuley to Elizabeth Moore, 24 July 1839 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 202.

²⁰⁸ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton, 14 October 1836 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 78.

²⁰⁹ Dublin Diocesan Archives, Hamilton Papers P1 /35/6, no. 68

prayers to be said by the Bishop - and cannot think they could be supplied by a representative.”²¹⁰ Hamilton did intervene, and the archbishop came for the profession ceremony on 22 October when Cecilia Marmion (who would have been the eldest although her birth year is not known), Martha Walplate and Catherine’s own niece, Catherine Macauley, were professed.

Although Meyler made amends with Catherine on her deathbed, he continued to be a source of difficulty for the sisters at the House of Mercy. One incident comes from M. Vincent Whitty, superior from 1849-1855, who “a few days after her installation as reverend mother, she purposefully took pen in hand to tackle him.”²¹¹ This began another long-running battle over the supply of a suitable chaplain for the sisters, as the one appointed was erratic, and the sisters were afraid to approach him for the sacraments. It would undoubtedly have been a compliment to Whitty when Meyler claimed that her persistence reminded him of Catherine.

The controlling attitude of Meyler was not restricted to the Sisters of Mercy, and Magray describes an incident in 1846 at the Poor Clare Convent in Harold’s Cross whereby the chaplain appointed was also unsuitable, and the orphans under the care of the sisters were not going to confession.²¹² The prioress resolved this situation, suggesting that the archbishop had been informed, at which point Meyler backed down, and the appointed chaplain did not hear the children’s confessions.

Bartholomew Sheridan

The seaside town known to Catherine as Kingstown was the place of a particular controversy with a priest.²¹³ Catherine had purchased a house there in 1835 using the assets of M. de Chantal McCann, who had transferred them to the congregation when she entered the Sisters of Mercy. The house was intended as a place for convalescence for any of the sisters who were sick, the sea air reputedly helping with consumption, a disease that was prolific. Sullivan

²¹⁰ Dublin Diocesan Archives, Hamilton Papers P1 /35/6, no. 68

²¹¹ Mary Xaverius O’Donoghue, *Mother Vincent Whitty: Woman and Educator in a Masculine Society* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1972), 19.

²¹² Magray, *Transforming Power*, 111.

²¹³ In 1920 the Gaelic name of Dún Laoghaire was restored to the town.

comments that “Catherine did not intend that sisters living there would engage in any external works of mercy except visits to the sick.”²¹⁴

However, Luddy’s observation that “the majority of voluntary societies originated from a humanitarian concern for the plight of the poor and the numbers of voluntary societies, managed by either men or women, always increased in times of distress” became true for the situation at Kingstown.²¹⁵ Catherine writes, “when we went to the convent in Kingstown, I expressed to Revd. Mr Sheridan a particular desire to have a school for the poor girls whom we every day saw loitering about the roads in a most neglected state.”²¹⁶ Catherine could not ignore the plight of uneducated children, and a desire to establish a school for them became a focus. To help with the project, Catherine offered the proceeds of the next bazaar to be held.²¹⁷ The bazaar resulted in a profit of £50, that Catherine gave directly to Mr. Nugent, a builder that Sheridan had brought in for the project, as well as “giving the coach house, stable, and part of our garden, with some gates, doors, and other materials.”²¹⁸ However, the cost of the conversion of the coach house and stable came to considerably more than £50, and this was an expense that, from initial conversations, Catherine had believed Sheridan was willing to undertake.

Nevertheless, when the bill arrived, it was addressed to Catherine, who had no expectation, or ability, to pay for all the expenses. Catherine suggested to Sheridan that the parishioners be approached to pay a “subscription” to defray the cost of the building, but this was not approved as Sheridan was already concerned with them paying off the debt of St. Michael’s Church, which had been built and opened in 1834. Savage writes that Sheridan “firmly believed that Catherine was a wealthy old lady quite able to bear the full cost herself.”²¹⁹ While Catherine had inherited a fortune, and at the age of fifty-seven was perhaps considered old for the times, the fortune had been well spent and making ends meet was often tricky. However, as Catherine had directly paid Nugent £50 for the work to begin, he decreed that

²¹⁴ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 175.

²¹⁵ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 176.

²¹⁶ Catherine McAuley to Charles Cavanagh, 20 June 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 86.

²¹⁷ Bazaars were fundraising events in which the handiwork of the Sisters and other donors was sold to fund the community and their outreach. Bazaars will be discussed further in the following chapter

²¹⁸ Catherine McAuley to Charles Cavanagh, 20 June 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 86.

²¹⁹ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 177.

she was responsible for the entire amount and threatened legal proceedings against her in 1838.

The bill came to £400 and remained unpaid despite a request from Catherine to Hamilton to visit her as soon as possible, and she writes, “I think you could settle a matter relative to the sisters in Kingstown which has become too serious for me without assistance.”²²⁰

Unfortunately, it was not settled, and legal proceedings began. Catherine described the situation to Warde in a letter where she said, “I am hiding from some law person who wants to serve a paper on me personally & sent in to say he came from Dr Murray. I am afraid to remain five minutes in the small parlour. This has caused more laughing than crying, you may be sure, for every man is suspected of being the process man and kept at an awful distance by my dear Teresa Carton.”²²¹

The matter was taken to the Four Courts.²²² On 9 May 1838, a magistrate judged in favour of Nugent and Catherine was required to pay £375.15.5.²²³ Nevertheless, it appears that this was never paid and Catherine’s response was to withdraw the sisters entirely from Kingstown. Clare Augustine Moore²²⁴ writes that in the November of 1838, “the Sisters had to come into Baggot St. with all haste to avoid being in the house when an execution should be laid upon it.”²²⁵ Sheridan was involved in this execution order and locked the property to the sisters who were unable to gather any of the contents of the convent. Sullivan suggests that Sheridan had taken possession with the intent to sell the property to pay Nugent.²²⁶ The departure of the sisters was not a move Catherine undertook lightly. Writing to Teresa White, who was the superior of the Kingstown convent when it closed, she said, “I would rather be cold and hungry than that the poor in Kingstown or elsewhere should be deprived of any consolation in our power to afford.”²²⁷

²²⁰ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton, 7 June 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 86.

²²¹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 17 January 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 120.

²²² In Catherine’s time, the Four Courts building housed the four divisions of the judicial system in Ireland: Chancery, King’s Bench, Exchequer and Common Pleas.

²²³ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 221.

²²⁴ Clare Augustine Moore, the sister of Clare Moore, entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1837 and is best remembered for her outstanding illuminated manuscripts.

²²⁵ M. Clare Augustine Moore, “A Memoir of the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland (The Dublin Manuscript) c.1864,” in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 210.

²²⁶ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 232.

²²⁷ Catherine McAuley to Teresa White, 1 November 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 163.

This withdrawal did not go unnoticed by the public and was particularly lamented by the curate in the parish, Fr. William Walsh, who wrote to Hamilton after the departure of the Sisters of Mercy from Kingstown. He said, “I have been for a long time an agonised, though silent, witness to these proceedings. I was unwilling even to allude publicly to the matter for many reasons – the chief of which was that a word from the pulpit on the frightful state of the children might do more harm than good in the excited state of feeling here consequent on the melancholy departure of the nuns. Besides, I hoped to the last they might return,” he concludes, “but, would - to God, our dear Archbishop could see the state of the place as I do, and I am convinced he would soon apply a remedy.”²²⁸ It appears that Sheridan’s controlling attributes were also experienced by the curate who was silenced. On the day Catherine died, Walsh visited her on her deathbed, a possible indicator of where his allegiance lay.

Luddy notes that “in societies organised by Catholics the clergy exerted a powerful control over the direction taken by women philanthropists.”²²⁹ The power and control of the clerical hierarchy are reflected in the story of Kingstown and the eventual outcome of removing the community from Kingstown. It is worth commenting that Murray and Meyler had been curates together at St. Mary’s in Liffey Street and remained good friends after that, sharing meals together and corresponding regularly (as evidenced by letters between them now held in the Dublin Archdiocesan Archives). Sheridan is connected similarly. Murray was known for avoiding conflict, and this effectively compounded the difficulties Catherine faced because he was often not willing to intervene, even when other clergy such as Coleman, Blake and Fitzgerald inferred Catherine was not being treated justly.

Conclusion

Catherine began her work as a laywoman with the clear intention that she would remain such, yet she sought the approval and support of the Catholic Church. From the interactions of various clergy with Catherine, Luddy’s claim that “in some instances (also) there is clear evidence that some Catholic clerics exerted a degree of control over laywomen philanthropists” is certainly applicable.²³⁰ Armstrong and Blake were strong advocates for the establishment of the House of Mercy and saw it as a way to relieve the needs of poor women

²²⁸ William Walsh to John Hamilton, 19 February 1839 in Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 180.

²²⁹ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 23.

²³⁰ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 22.

and children. They both did everything in their power to assist Catherine, including significant financial support and advocating on her behalf, fitting Magray's description of the clergy taking a supportive and intermediary role. However, there were others who were not supportive: Kelly, Meyler and Sheridan were explored in this chapter, clerics who utilised the power they had, particularly through the provision of sacramental services, to wield control.

The assertiveness of Catherine is evident in her various interactions with the clergy. As Rita Valade puts it, "Catherine did not passively consent to clerical decisions when they would interfere with her mission. She encouraged her sisters to be reverential towards clerics, but to engage them in frank discussion about issues if there was a major breach of justice."²³¹ While Catherine would not claim to be political, the skills with which she appeased, when necessary, recruited additional support, and remained staunch at other times for the sake of the ministry and congregation, are worthy of any great politician.

Vincent Whitty's difficulties with Meyler are mentioned in this chapter, and the difficulties the sisters had with Bishops and clergy were replicated across the globe. These included M. Rose Lynch and Bishop Michael Fleming in Newfoundland, Canada,²³² M. Ursula Frayne and Bishop John Brady in Perth, Australia,²³³ M. Frances Warde and many bishops across the United States,²³⁴ and even to New Zealand and the controversy with M. Bernard Dickson and Bishop Philippe Viard in Wellington.²³⁵ The assertiveness these sisters demonstrated is an attribute that was nurtured as the sisters claimed an autonomy that was not prevalent for women in the Catholic Church of the nineteenth century.

²³¹ Rita Valade, "Quaker Influences upon Catherine McAuley," *Mercy Association of Scripture and Theology* 4, no. 1 (1993): 7.

²³² Kathrine E. Bellamy, "Mother Frances Creedon," (2019), <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/mercy-foundresses/mary-francis-creedon/>.

²³³ "Mother Ursula Frayne," accessed 16 March, 2022, <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/mercy-foundresses/mother-ursula-frayne/>.

²³⁴ Healy, *Frances Warde*.

²³⁵ See M. De Porres Flannigan, *No Half Measures* (Wellington: Sisters of Mercy, 2004).

Chapter 4 - The Social Impact of Catherine McAuley and the Sisters of Mercy

Caitriona Clear's question as to whether religious women were "standard-bearers for social reform or timid defenders of the status quo"²³⁶ can be answered, in relation to the Sisters of Mercy, by examining their social impact. This chapter will demonstrate that the sisters quickly established themselves as hardworking, organised and committed to serving the poor. They were willing to undertake new ministries as need arose and, rather than maintaining the status quo, the sisters were instrumental in bringing about the devotional revolution that transformed the Catholic Church in Ireland.²³⁷

Catherine never intended to establish a religious congregation and she did not intend to prevent laywomen from engaging in charitable work. Her dream from the outset was for an organisation of laywomen. However, clerical pressure meant that the formation of a religious congregation became the way to continue the ministry. Many clergy were also in favour of the sisters undertaking the charitable works, as they had an element of ecclesial control over religious groups that they did not have where laywomen were concerned. Despite Catherine not intending to exclude laywomen from active participation, the situation could be described as a perfect storm whereby church, society, cultural and economic factors created an approach to philanthropy that was dominated by the religious orders.

The first part of this chapter will discuss the development of the charitable institute that became the Sisters of Mercy and the support they received from Catholic benefactors. The second part will explore the social impact of the organisation, both from the 1827 beginnings and after the formation of the congregation in 1831, demonstrating that the Sisters of Mercy were standard-bearers for social reform. This section will have a particular focus on the impact of preparation for domestic service, the development of skills in textiles, such as lacemaking, and the prolific educational work of the congregation.

²³⁶ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 100.

²³⁷ The devotional revolution was a term coined by Emmet Larkin to describe the changes in the Catholic Church in Ireland post-famine that resulted in practising Catholics. See Emmet J. Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1984).

The Formation of the Charitable Institute and Contribution of Wealthy Donors

In 1801, there were six religious orders for women, totalling eleven convents throughout Ireland. This grew to 368 convents by 1900. The religious congregations formed in Dublin during the first third of the nineteenth century were a particular response to the emerging needs of the poor, and they adapted in a variety of ways to specific niches. For Catherine, the plight of the women and children she was meeting at Coolock moved her to action when she had the means. The deed of agreement for the House of Mercy, signed by Catherine in December 1824, reflects her intent for the building. In the deed, the architect, John B. Keane, describes the building as a female asylum, and the plans included a chapel, two large school rooms, an infirmary, eight small cells for the ladies living in the house, and two dormitories – one for young women and the other for female children.²³⁸ The fact that it was to be a shelter and a place of education for women, rather than a convent, is evident in the design with dormitory and school rooms marked out on the plans. In a letter to her sister, Clare Moore echoes this when she writes,

I shall also go back to say that dear Revd. Mother's original intention was not to found a convent. So little did she think of establishing a religious Institute that when she went to see the building, she laughed at their putting a choir with a grated window in it. All she designed was that there might be an Establishment where pious ladies might retire for a while to exercise works of charity etc. and return again when they wished to their homes, in fact, a Protestant convent plan.²³⁹

This was how the ministry started, with a small group of women forming the resident core during the first three years; Clare Moore names those residing in the House when she describes their sleeping arrangements, saying that she shared a dormitory with Catherine, Mary Macauley, the young Catherine Macauley, Teresa Byrn, Frances Warde, Ellen Corrigan and Ann Rice, with Anna Maria Doyle and Catherine Byrn sharing another room.²⁴⁰ Other women would come by day and instruct in the school, the Costigans and O'Connells, Miss O'Butler and several others.²⁴¹ The "pious ladies" came from the more affluent families, with

²³⁸ The Deed of the House of Mercy and construction drawings are in the heritage collection of MIA, Dublin.

²³⁹ Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 28 August 1844, in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 88.

²⁴⁰ Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 23 August 1844, in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 86.

²⁴¹ Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 28 August 1844, in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 89.

the exception of Ellen Corrigan and Ann Rice, orphans whom Catherine had adopted at Coolock.

The financial background of these women was an important source of funding for the work, and most brought an annuity or dowry with them. For example, when Angela Dunne moved into the House of Mercy in February 1828, her brother John gave a £300 dowry and promised to pay an annuity of £30.²⁴² It is interesting that dowries were being collected, as the congregation had not been established at this point and did not gain diocesan approval as a secular institute until 24 September 1828 when Murray allowed it to “be called as of Our Lady of Mercy.”²⁴³ The collection of the dowry infers that the commitment to the organisation was for life, and the dowry would not be needed at another time. However, the lack of recognition as a religious institute meant that the money was not protected with the legal safeguards that dowries to religious congregations received. When Clear mentions that “the Catholic business and professional classes were the chief suppliers of the money that went to found and maintain convents,” she is referring to people such as the previously mentioned John Dunne, or the shopkeeper in Carlow who gave £7,000 for the Sisters of Mercy to set up a convent in the area.²⁴⁴ For this reason, Clear also notes that regions where the proportion of wealthy people was small were less likely to have convents.

The Philanthropy of Laity who Supported the Institute

There is substantial evidence for Luddy’s claim that, as the religious congregations developed, laywomen were not able to engage in practical philanthropy, but one area of lay activity that the religious congregations encouraged was the financial support of their work. Laywomen and men were encouraged to participate through donations, annuities, subscriptions, and endowments. One example from the House of Mercy is that “just after the cholera Revd. Mother got printed tickets sent to each house begging old clothing, carpeting, bed covering, etc., and the result was that for a long time, carriages used to stop and hand in great bundles so that the storeroom was filled, and the supply lasted a long time.”²⁴⁵ The practice of subscriptions (a commitment to an annual or other regular donation) was also

²⁴² “Mother Mary Angela Dunne,” Mercy Foundresses, Mercy International Association, 2018, accessed 5 November, 2021, <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/mercy-foundresses/mother-mary-angela-dunne/>.

²⁴³ Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 12.

²⁴⁴ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 42.

²⁴⁵ Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 26 August 1845 in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*.

evident as a way of raising funds and engaging the financial philanthropy of anyone willing to contribute, even prior to the establishment of the congregation. Edward Armstrong was of the opinion that the location of the House of Mercy in a wealthy area of Dublin would elicit favourable subscriptions over time.²⁴⁶ This strategy was utilised as Clare Augustine Moore refers to the early days in the House of Mercy when she writes, “to give some relief to the poor creatures sheltered in the Dormitory she [Catherine] began to solicit subscriptions by notes in her own name.”²⁴⁷ In 1831, it was the newly received sisters who solicited subscriptions for the care of the sick, and they “were accustomed to go two together from door to door in the hopes of procuring a little relief for the suffering members of Christ Jesus.”²⁴⁸ In 1837 the sisters continued to receive subscriptions, Catherine acknowledging one in a letter to Hamilton saying, “I ought to have acknowledged the receipt of your letters and enclosure - two pounds ten for the servant and one pound subscription - for which we are very much obliged,”²⁴⁹

The following three examples of the foundations in Tullamore, Charleville and Birmingham demonstrate how convents were established and maintained because they had the financial backing of a local philanthropist. Luddy claims that the religious orders “built the infrastructure of social welfare which bound the people to the church and the church to the people,” and this can be identified in the following examples where there is evidence of dependent relationships between sisters and lay benefactors, and the desire of the laypeople for religious sisters to undertake the ministries.²⁵⁰

St. Joseph’s Convent, Tullamore and Elizabeth Pentony

Elizabeth Pentony had retired to Tullamore (from Dublin) at age seventy-five. She was a devout Catholic and Bonaventure Brennan notes that she had “left her friends fearing lest the love she had for them might interfere with her duty to God.”²⁵¹ Although she was heiress to a large property, an informality in the will left Pentony without the bulk of it; however, she was given a generous annuity which she used for the poor of Tullamore. When ministering in

²⁴⁶ Doyle, “Derry Manuscript,” 46.

²⁴⁷ Moore, “Dublin Manuscript,” 203.

²⁴⁸ Doyle, “Derry Manuscript,” 59.

²⁴⁹ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton, 19 December 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 111.

²⁵⁰ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 216.

²⁵¹ Bonaventure Brennan, *It Commenced with Two: the Story of Mary Ann Doyle, First Companion of Catherine McAuley* (Dublin: Sisters of Mercy Northern Province, 2001), 59.

Tullamore, she had the assistance of three young laywomen – a story of philanthropy that echoes Catherine’s, notably as the women joined the Sisters of Mercy when established in Tullamore. When Pentony died in 1835, having been unsuccessful in her petition to the Sisters of Charity to establish a convent in Tullamore, she left her property explicitly for any religious congregation who would come. The parish priest, Dr O’Rafferty, was left with the challenge of finding a religious congregation; he too was unsuccessful in convincing the Sisters of Charity to come because of the small means available to the foundation.

Meanwhile, O’Rafferty contacted Father Redmond O’Hanlon, who had been the spiritual advisor of Pentony when she lived in Dublin. O’Hanlon introduced O’Rafferty to Catherine and the Sisters of Mercy. Despite the gift of the Tullamore house and no immediate ongoing source of funding, Catherine still agreed to the foundation, reportedly saying, “if we do not take Tullamore, no other community will.”²⁵²

When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Tullamore, Catherine did comment on the small size of the rooms in the convent, and the Tullamore Annals record that she said, “our rooms are so small that two cats could scarcely dance in them!”²⁵³ It was only a few months before plans were underway for the building of a more suitable convent and school, made possible by the kind and generous help of a wealthy parishioner.²⁵⁴ Although Brennan does not name this parishioner, it is possible that it was Michael Molloy, Esq. a distiller in the region famous for producing whiskey. The Tullamore Annals note that Molloy

Was the foremost of the townspeople in this work of charity and in kind appreciation of the labours of the Community. He even wished to endow a hospital and consign it to the sisters’ care, which benevolent wish was never carried out, being overruled later on by the Poor Laws, which required a Workhouse to be built in the town with its accompanying Infirmary and Hospitals.²⁵⁵

²⁵² No record of Catherine saying this occurs in any of the primary sources, although it is referred to in Carroll, *Leaves*, 1, 87.

²⁵³ Doyle, “The Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, St Josephs, Tullamore,” 67.

²⁵⁴ Brennan, *Commenced with Two*, 70.

²⁵⁵ Doyle, “Tullamore Annals,” 70.

Molloy laid the first stone of the school in April 1838, and the foundation stone for the convent was laid two months later. Brennan also notes that the parish priest, O'Rafferty, supported the sisters and was superintendent of the building projects.²⁵⁶ This is a role that the clergy were well suited to undertake. Raising funds to sustain the ministry remained a focus for the community in Tullamore. In July 1838 a reception ceremony was held for two new members, at which a very large collection was taken up to help with the expenses of building the new convent.²⁵⁷

Raising funds had its share of difficulties, such as when the convent superior invited Father Theobald Mathew, the 'Apostle of Temperance', to speak in Tullamore. Like the charity sermons, these events had a door charge of one shilling and raised considerable funds for the philanthropic work of the sisters.²⁵⁸ However, the Tullamore event needed to be cancelled for fear of upsetting the sisters' benefactors, many of whom were distillers in the area.

It was also when Doyle was in Tullamore that Catherine encouraged her to "get up a lottery or raffle occasionally," selling tickets at one shilling each to everyone they knew.²⁵⁹ This is another example of how the local people were encouraged to support the efforts of the sisters.

St. Joseph's Convent, Charleville and Mary Clanchy

In Charleville, County Cork, the foundation was made possible by the generosity of Mary Clanchy, a wealthy woman who was eager that a religious congregation should be established in the area for the education of the poor. Clanchy promised her best-furnished property to the Sisters of Mercy and £500 (to be paid in £50 instalments) for the foundation, which also had the approval of the parish priest, Father Thomas Croke, and the bishop.²⁶⁰ However, when the sisters arrived in Charleville in October 1836, they found that the house was not ideal; it was small, not furnished well for the purpose, and very damp because of its locality near a stream. Within a few weeks of the sisters arriving, Clanchy married, and by October 1837, the superior was concerned about the ongoing finances and whether the instalments of the

²⁵⁶ Brennan, *Commenced with Two*, 77.

²⁵⁷ Brennan, *Commenced with Two*, 79.

²⁵⁸ In Galway, such an event on 5 October 1840 raised upwards of £100 in Brennan, *Commenced with Two*, 92.

²⁵⁹ Catherine McAuley to Anna Maria Doyle, 24 July 1841 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 418.

²⁶⁰ Fr. Thomas Croke was the uncle, and significant influence, of Thomas Croke, the second bishop of Auckland, New Zealand.

promised £500 would continue. Consequently, Catherine requested that de Pazzi Delaney send £100 from the House of Mercy in Dublin to Charleville. Without a strong middle-class in the area, the prospects for the longevity of the community were daunting, as Clear notes.²⁶¹

The Charleville foundation was also supported by the annuity of M. Angela Dunne (the superior whose £30 annuity from her brother was previously mentioned) and from the dowries of those who were finally professed. While the dowry amount for Charleville is not recorded, in the convent in Cork, founded the following year, the dowry was set at £600, congruent with Magray's observation that the average dowry across congregations was £500 to £600.²⁶² Some bishops required that the dowry not be reduced under any circumstances, while other bishops allowed some leeway. Catherine was flexible on the dowry. Clare Moore noted that Catherine "never refused any postulant for want of temporal means when it was at all possible to provide what was essential."²⁶³

In some areas, the practice of lay sisters emerged as a result of not refusing any postulant.²⁶⁴ Lay sisters usually entered without the entire dowry (or with minimal education), and consequently they expected to be assigned to domestic charges as a way of contributing to their upkeep. At other times a more substantial dowry, from an individual, would have enabled other women to enter as choir sisters without the required amount. Generally, the lay sisters came from less affluent backgrounds, and they had usually received fewer educational opportunities than those who entered as choir sisters. By design, this resulted in lay sisters who were less likely to have the prior education to be able to teach, some were even unable to read and so were excused from duties that would require such skills. Catherine was not in favour of making a significant distinction around lay sisters, and there was no mention of them in the first Rule prepared by Catherine and edited by Murray. However, a chapter on lay sisters does appear in one of the early copies of the Rule prepared by Clare Moore in Bermondsey.²⁶⁵ What the practice does clarify is that there was a place in the convent for all women, regardless of their educational or financial background, but also that the bourgeois values that distinguished between servants and those of a different class were being replicated

²⁶¹ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 44.

²⁶² Magray, *Transforming Power*, 36.

²⁶³ Moore, "Bermondsey Manuscript," 116.

²⁶⁴ Lay sisters were assigned domestic duties, while choir sisters taught in school or undertook other administrative tasks.

²⁶⁵ McAuley, "Rule," 269.

inside the convents. It is not recorded that lay sisters received an education after entering, or that they were able to become choir sisters. However, the Rule from Bermondsey specifies that “as circumstances may occur which would render their assistance in other situations necessary, they ought to be persons who could occasionally accompany the Choir Sisters without any remarkable exterior difference,” suggesting that the duties of lay sisters were not limited to the domestic sphere and may evolve over time.²⁶⁶

Dowries could not be spent by the community but could be invested, and any money gained from the investment was able to be utilised. If a sister left the congregation, her dowry was returned to her, and if she was selected to be part of a new foundation, her dowry was transferred to the new. Upon death, a dowry became the property of the congregation. During the formation period, entrants were expected to contribute to their upkeep. Catherine specifies this in a letter to M. Angela Dunne when she comments on a woman who has decided to leave. Catherine says, “remember you are to charge Jane Taaffe £20 per year from the time she went to you - and anything expended for her. I request you will do this exactly.”²⁶⁷ The return of the dowry was governed by canon law, and the annalist of the Presentation Convent in Wexford records that “by this act, which was legally sanctioned and confirmed, the Community was freed from any further claim being made by her.”²⁶⁸

As well as the dowries that family members usually provided, families would often purchase significant items such as an organ or statue for the chapel. This is particularly evident in Birmingham, where John Hardman was a generous benefactor, as will be discussed in the next section.

Another source of income for the Charleville community (and for Tullamore) came from establishing a pension school in 1840. A pension school charged a tuition fee and provided an education for the middle-class girls whose parents could not afford the convent boarding schools yet did not wish their daughters to attend the poor schools. The money obtained from the tuition fee supported the sisters and enabled the poor schools to run. Another advantage of the pension schools was that they became seedbeds for vocations. Catherine, writing about the

²⁶⁶ Handwritten copy of Rule from Bermondsey quoted in Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 145.

²⁶⁷ Catherine McAuley to Angela Dunne, 20 December 1837, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 115.

²⁶⁸ Deirdre Raftery and Caitriona Delaney, *Nano Nagle: The Life and the Legacy* (Newbridge: Merrion Press, 2018), 72.

school in Carlow, said, “the pension school in Carlow is making great progress. You must get their regulations - it is quite simple and does not seem to add to their toil - some sweet young persons amongst them who bid fair to become Sisters.”²⁶⁹ The pension schools also allowed the sisters “to educate the families of their students to their obligations to the poor.”²⁷⁰ Thus, while the laypeople may not have been as engaged in the practical dimension of philanthropy after the establishment of the religious congregations, the sisters ensured that they knew of their obligation to be generous in supporting the poor (either directly, or indirectly by supporting the work of the sisters as they aided the poor), thereby providing philanthropic options for laypeople.

St. Mary’s Convent, Birmingham and John Hardman

M. Juliana Hardman was the first superior of the Sisters of Mercy in Birmingham, residing in a convent that was made possible through the generosity of her father, John Hardman. The bishop of Birmingham, Thomas Walsh, wrote,

The plans etc. of the building are by the highly gifted Pugin, and have been much admired by all who have seen them. The convent is intended to receive twenty of the Sisters and also to accommodate thirty poor orphans whom they will take under their care. The chief expense will be borne by that noble-minded inhabitant of Birmingham, John Hardman, Esq., whose never-failing liberality in the course of charity and religion can only be rewarded in a better world.²⁷¹

The actual amounts given reveal the full extent of the generosity of Hardman. In 1841, at the cost of £5,335, he gave the land, paid for the construction of the buildings and everything necessary for the use of the sisters. John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury (1791-1852), who was known for his generosity to Catholic charities, supplemented this sum with a donation of £2,000.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Catherine McAuley to Josephine Warde, 18 October 1839 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 209.

²⁷⁰ Healy, *Frances Warde*, 74.

²⁷¹ The Morning Register (Dublin), 22 April 1840 cited in “Mother Juliana Hardman,” 2018, accessed 9 November, 2021, <https://www.mercyworld.org/catherine/mercy-foundresses/juliana-hardman/>.

²⁷² “Transcript of ‘Bibliography notes on Sister Mary Hardman’ ”, Newman University Local History Collection, <https://studylib.net/doc/6594985/transcript-of-a-biography-on-juliana-hardman>.

One example from the Birmingham foundation demonstrates Luddy's claim about the role of the laywomen in philanthropy diminishing after the religious orders were established. Before the Sisters of Mercy arrived, the Hardman family housed young orphans in their own home in Hunters Lane, a ministry that was transferred to the convent on the day it was established.²⁷³ Also, just four days after they arrived at the convent, the sisters commenced visitation of people in their homes. Whether or not this replaced the visitation of laywomen is not recorded.

The philanthropic actions of the Sisters of Mercy in Tullamore, Charleville and Birmingham are examples of ways that the Sisters of Mercy undertook various ministries when they established a community in a specific area. These ministries had frequently been run by laywomen before the sisters arrived. However, not every situation resulted in the laywomen stopping their work as many of them were quick to join the Sisters of Mercy as postulants. What cannot be ascertained is whether the Sisters of Mercy expected the charitable actions to be transferred to them to run exclusively, and the role of the lay people to be merely financial supporters, or whether the sisters also encouraged the charitable actions of the laity. What is also evident is that the financial struggle experienced in each of the communities generated an entrepreneurial stance, prompting the sisters to undertake ministries that might, directly or indirectly, bring in financial rewards.

Fundraising Bazaars and Charity Sermons

In nineteenth-century Ireland, bazaars and charity sermons were popular activities for raising funds for different charities - Luddy noted that £16,000 was raised in Dublin in 1815 through charity sermons.²⁷⁴ Catherine did organise annual charity sermons, and in the early years, these were very successful.

However, the fundraising capacity of such events appears to have diminished over time, as Catherine, briefing Warde in 1838, indicated: "Charity Sermon very bad - Chapel closed - Bazaar unpromising."²⁷⁵ Moreover, on 23 February 1840, another sermon failed to bring in

²⁷³ Barbara Jeffery, *Living for the Church Before Everything Else: The Hardman Family Story* (Bermondsey: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the United Kingdom, 2010), 22, 40.

²⁷⁴ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 180.

²⁷⁵ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 13 March 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 128.

the hoped-for funds, as Catherine notes, “I must now tell you of our poor Sermon. Dr. Cahill commenced so as to attract great attention, and in less than 10 minutes, became so ill as to give up. £25 collected - of which he got 3 and the printer 4.”²⁷⁶

The annual bazaars, held each year after Easter, reflected a similar downturn over time. The first ones were well patronised and, as Sullivan comments, demonstrated Catherine’s ability in the area of public relations.²⁷⁷ In 1832, for example, she arranged for the Band of the Royal Rifles and the 28th Regiment to attend and perform and published a list of bazaar patrons in the *Freemans Journal*. These included the Mayoress, Catherine’s own sister-in-law, and Mrs. George Moore, the mother of two Sisters of Mercy (Clare Moore and Clare Augustine Moore).²⁷⁸ As well as preparing much needlework in the House of Mercy, the sisters sought donations of items to sell. Perhaps the most exciting was the result of a letter that Catherine wrote to Victoria, Duchess of Kent and Strathearn (1786 – 1861), requesting that she and her daughter, Princess Victoria, now fifteen, contribute some handmade items for the bazaar in aid of the House of Mercy.²⁷⁹ The request was favourably received, and at the bazaar, Catherine sold the items, announcing in the newspaper after the event that three hundred and four pounds was raised.²⁸⁰

However, like the charity sermons, the bazaars experienced a downturn, and a comment from Catherine in 1840 suggests that the Protestants, who were generous supporters of the bazaars in the earlier days, were not frequenting them in the same way. She wrote, “the Bazaar, all summed up-after expenses - we will have about forty-five pounds, very unlike past days. Mrs. Sullivan has given us up, and almost all the Protestants. I am told there were not ten Protestants in the room.”²⁸¹

What has not been explored in Magray or Luddy’s work is the changing attitude of Protestants to Catholics, particularly after emancipation, and the impact that this had on philanthropic efforts. Stunt claims that by 1820, the Church of Ireland was experiencing

²⁷⁶ Catherine McAuley to Elizabeth Moore, 29 February 1840 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 253.

²⁷⁷ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 113.

²⁷⁸ “Charity Bazaar Advertisement,” *Freemans Journal* (Dublin) 1832, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000056/18320326/003/0001?browse=true>.

²⁷⁹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 141.

²⁸⁰ Freeman’s Journal, April 4, 1834

²⁸¹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 25 April 1838, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 134.

internal difficulties, with some churchmen embracing the evangelical movement and others “the quietism of contemplative devotion and shunning the busy benevolence of the evangelicals.”²⁸² This internal division added to the diminishing strength of the Church of Ireland as emancipation became a reality.

The relations between Catholics and Protestants could be described as somewhat more amicable prior to emancipation, partly due to the Protestant belief that Catholics “could be made peaceful, industrious and loyal through scripture-based education that would wean them from Catholicism.”²⁸³ Therefore, the bazaars became social occasions and provided an opportunity for the Protestant elite of Dublin to unite with the bourgeois Catholics and demonstrate their philanthropy to an assortment of causes without denominational divisions. It is plausible that the reduced support from Protestants after emancipation reflects the failure of the Protestant Bible-war over time, coupled with the growth and renewal of the Catholic Church, which had become a united force under the leadership of Daniel O’Connell and the Catholic rent campaign. Thus, the division became inevitable.

Social Impact

Magray discusses the impact that the people in the wealthy classes in Ireland had on social and religious change, claiming that “the interaction between nuns and the people of Ireland in the nineteenth century suggests that those changes did not take place without considerable effort on the part of the wealthier Catholic classes.”²⁸⁴ This effort gave the sisters significant influence on the shape of the emerging culture and Catholic identity. In particular, the choices the sisters made as to where their philanthropic efforts would be focused and how donations from the wealthier Catholic classes would be spent, influenced the outcomes and options for those who were poor. For the Sisters of Mercy, the social impact can be demonstrated by their focus on training for domestic service, their support of the temperance movement, their response to situations such as cholera epidemics, and particularly in the extensive educational facilities that they established. Writing about philanthropy in the nineteenth century, Mary

²⁸² Stunt, “Evangelical Cross-Currents in the Church of Ireland 1820-1833,” 215-16.

²⁸³ Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: the "Second Reformation" and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800-1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), xvi.

²⁸⁴ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 89.

Pierce argues that it was “more often accorded to moral reform rather than social reform.”²⁸⁵ This was not the intent of the sisters in establishing the institution, even if moral reform through their focus on Catholic sacraments and values quickly became a secondary focus.

Domestic Service

The disestablishment of the Irish Parliament in 1801, when the Act of Union came into effect, had precipitated a return to England of many of the wealthy families associated with the parliamentary structure. Kevin Kearns describes the magnitude of the situation, saying, “directly following the dissolution of the Irish Parliament, there occurred a mass exodus of prominent citizens who had occupied the spacious Georgian houses. Property values plummeted dramatically. Resplendent Georgian abodes purchased for £8,000 in 1791 sold for £2,500 a mere decade later and by 1849 could be bought for a paltry £500.”²⁸⁶ The flow-on effect resulted in fewer domestic positions for women in the houses of the wealthy, and families were impacted as the income streams of the merchants who supplied wares to such houses were diminished. Despite this, Luddy notes that “domestic service remained the greatest employer of women, an occupation considered by many to be ideally suited to younger single women.”²⁸⁷ (The younger unmarried women were perceived to be stronger, more easily trained, more accepting of lower wages and therefore they dominated the profession).²⁸⁸ A decision was made by Catherine when developing the plans for the House of Mercy to prepare women for domestic service, and this became a focus for the House of Mercy, as it was considered a suitable occupation for the women who arrived there. This decision also reflected a cultural ideology, previously discussed, in which domestic servitude was one of the few occupations acceptable for lower-class women. Domestic service was seen as a way for them to win redemption for any past failings and to teach them morals, along with hygienic practices in the process. As the domestic servitude market gave opportunities for employment and a high turnover in the House of Mercy, the decision to train women for domestic service was a prudent one, yet the preference for domestic service, rather than a broad education that would have opened opportunities for more highly paid positions, effectively maintained the status quo, keeping

²⁸⁵ Mary Pierce, “From Lace Making to Social Activism: the Resourcefulness of Campaigning Women Philanthropists,” in *Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Laurence M. and Oonagh Walsh Geary (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 206.

²⁸⁶ Kevin Corrigan Kearns, *Dublin Tenement Life: an Oral History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), 6-7.

²⁸⁷ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 11.

²⁸⁸ Maria Luddy, “Women and Work in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ireland: an Overview,” in *Women and paid work in Ireland, 1500-1930*, ed. Bernadette Whelan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 52.

poorer women in domestic work, rather than opening new possibilities for the women's potential to be realised.

An aspect of domestic service was laundry work, and in the original plans for the building, one of the basement rooms at the House of Mercy was designated as a laundry. This was not fully realised until 1838, when a donation from a Mr. O'Hanlon of £1,000 enabled the construction to commence. However, the construction was not as quick as Catherine would have liked, as she indicated to Warde in May 1838: "what would I not go through to see it at full work. We have got all information on the matter. You would be surprised to know all that can be earned by this means - new persons coming into the neighbourhood every day. We are asked to take washing."²⁸⁹ In the same letter, Catherine describes the potential profit from such an endeavour, "in one Institution they earned 7 hundred pounds in 14 months, clear of all expenses."²⁹⁰ However, progress was slow and in mid-1839 Catherine wrote that she was still waiting for the laundry to open: "our Laundry will soon open, please God - how I rejoice to have a resource within doors - for the support of our poor people. The Poor Law Tax is breaking up all contributions."²⁹¹ Catherine's reference to the Poor Law Tax is to a reduction in donations because an 1838 Act to relieve the needs of the destitute poor included a poor tax levy on property owners. The owners felt that they were already contributing to the poor through the tax and that it was therefore unnecessary to give other charitable donations. However, the levy was being used in governmental institutions, for example the poor houses and workhouses, and not supporting the work of religious organisations such as the House of Mercy.

Nevertheless, by March 1841, the laundry was in operation and had emerged from the initial teething problems. Catherine wrote of the difficult financial situation the House of Mercy was experiencing, suggesting that the laundry was now bringing a profit, "My poor Sr. Teresa is as usual indefatigable trying to sell tickets at one shilling to her customers for servants...and fifty pounds is the extent of our hope, which added to the profit of Laundry work will get us through this year."²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 15 May 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 138.

²⁹⁰ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 15 May 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 138.

²⁹¹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, May-August 1839 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 199.

²⁹² Catherine McAuley to Teresa White, 31 March 1841 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 380.

Admission of Distressed Women

The Rule of the Congregation was initially based on the Rule of the Presentation Sisters. Therefore the sections that are unique to the document give an insight into the particular charism of the Sisters of Mercy. One such section is on the admission of distressed women.

This section of the Rule articulates the values that underly the ministry with the women who found themselves seeking refuge at the House of Mercy. The most succinct section says,

The sisters shall feel convinced that no work of charity is more productive of good to society, or more conducive to the happiness of the poor than the careful instruction of women, since whatever the station they are destined to fill, their example and advice will always possess influence, and wherever a religious woman presides, peace and good order are generally to be found.²⁹³

Along with the necessary skills for domestic work, the aim was to develop the spiritual dimension of the women, which was seen to have the most significant effect on their future. This is the transformative element that Magray identifies throughout her text. The intent was to influence and shape any of the women who came to the sisters so that they would ensure peace and good order wherever they resided or presided. Carroll, in her biography, notes that children should be taught to “live on earth in a manner that will not unfit them for heaven.”²⁹⁴ Similar in sentiment is a letter from Catherine where she reminds Elizabeth Moore that she is to be “the “guide to Heaven” for the sisters in her care.²⁹⁵ Eschatological theology also influenced a desire for the women to be good, and for that, an example was set by the sisters.

This focus on the spiritual dimension took a number of forms: the women in the House of Mercy were required to attend Mass each Sunday; they were expected to visit a priest for confession; and for those who were engaged in service during the day, there were classes in religious instruction in the evenings (for some this would have been preparation to receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church). This would have been an intense process because the stay in the House of Mercy might well be brief. The Rule noted that “they shall not be encouraged

²⁹³ Chapter 2, paragraph 5 in McAuley, “Rule,” 297.

²⁹⁴ Carroll, *Life of Catherine*, 57.

²⁹⁵ Catherine McAuley to Elizabeth Moore, 9 December 1837 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 170.

to remain long in the House, as it will generally be found more conducive to their good, to get them soon into the state and employment by which they are to live.”²⁹⁶

The emphasis on religious participation had the effect of maintaining order within the House of Mercy. When the chaplaincy dispute discussed in the previous chapter impacted the availability of confession for the women, Catherine noted the negative impact this had. In a letter to Hamilton she wrote, “since the first of this year, thirty-seven young women went to situations from the House, most of whom merely approached the Sacrament of Penance to obtain a note for admission.” She adds, “they leave us now, as they came, and there is noise and quarrelling amongst them, which the participation of the Holy Sacraments with due instruction used to cure.”²⁹⁷

The number of women who came through the House of Mercy preparing for domestic service during Catherine’s life was estimated by Clare Moore when she noted that “in the course of ten years of her religious career she procured comfortable situations for more than a thousand female servants.”²⁹⁸ Catherine herself, as above, refers to thirty-seven women in the space of just over five weeks. In another letter, she noted, “the House crowded, twenty went to situations in one week, and twenty more came in,” both indicators of the scale of the endeavour.²⁹⁹ The emphasis for the sisters was on finding suitable employment, and great care was taken to place the women “in situations for which they are adapted, in order that they may continue such length of time in their service, as shall establish a character, on which they can depend for future support.”³⁰⁰

The Effect of Subcontracting

From the school in Middle Abbey Street where she ministered before opening the House of Mercy, Catherine gathered the sewing completed by the students and sold it on to a ready market, acting as an intermediary, a role that connected the wealthy to the poor. While similar activities are not recorded for the House of Mercy, it is possible that Catherine continued to sell the sewing of the students, even if just at the bazaars which were previously discussed in

²⁹⁶ Chapter 4, paragraph 2 in McAuley, “Rule,” 299.

²⁹⁷ Catherine McAuley to John Hamilton, 6 February 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 124.

²⁹⁸ Moore, “Bermondsey Manuscript,” 127.

²⁹⁹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 17 January 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 120.

³⁰⁰ Chapter 4, paragraph 2 in McAuley, “Rule,” 299.

this chapter. While the Industrial Revolution increased the number of factories, Luddy describes the industrial work of women at the beginning of the nineteenth century as predominantly taking the form of outwork or homework.³⁰¹ One example of the Sisters of Mercy engaged in this is in Limerick, where Elizabeth Moore

Secured a government contract for the making of shirts for the Navy. Tait's factory supplied the cut-out garments, and the finished work was returned there. The contract was lucrative for the orphans and young women of the House of Mercy, as well as for housewives who took on the work which earned them a much-needed income.³⁰²

However, as Luddy indicates, the wages paid for such work were generally lower than the wages that the workers in the factories earned, and the homework was inconsistent depending on the demand in the market.³⁰³

Elizabeth Moore also undertook the task of helping the local girls learn lacemaking to gain well-paid local employment.

She had been informed that if she could succeed in getting Valenciennes lace made, it would be a very financially rewarding industry. Consequently, she employed two teachers from Belgium to teach the craft to local girls, who when they mastered the craft, were paid according to the quality and quantity of their output.³⁰⁴

This example is interesting, as Elizabeth Moore is recorded as having paid the Belgian teachers, so that the tuition was provided by the philanthropic action of the Sisters of Mercy.

Theobald Mathew and the Temperance Movement

Theobald Mathew was a priest of the Capuchin order. He was ordained in Cork and, when in his fifties, undertook a campaign to introduce a pledge of abstinence from alcohol into Irish society. Those who belonged to the Temperance Society promised to abstain from all

³⁰¹ Luddy, "Women and Work," 49.

³⁰² Bugler, "Mother Elizabeth Moore," 7.

³⁰³ Luddy, "Women and Work," 50.

³⁰⁴ Bugler, "Mother Elizabeth Moore," 7.

intoxicating drinks, except for medicinal and sacramental purposes. Catherine was inspired by his success, telling Josephine Warde that “his fame has reached the most remote corner [sic] of the land - the walls of Dublin covered with placards proclaiming the good he has accomplished.”³⁰⁵

Mathew became a good friend of Catherine’s. She took the pledge in Galway, as is evidenced in a letter she wrote to M. de Sales White, “Father Mathew has been to visit Carlow - administered the pledge to 25 thousand, celebrated Mass for our Sisters, ‘and to my great mortification,’ says Sr. Aloysius, ‘told before several Priests, that Revd. Mother had taken the pledge and one of her daughters in Galway’.”³⁰⁶ Catherine describes the social impact that Mathew had in a letter to Warde:

It is said that the Publicans of Dublin are in terror at Father Mathew’s approach, another visit, they say, will break them up. You can scarcely form an idea of the moral improvement throughout the country. We passed through populous towns on fair and market days without hearing one angry voice. Men, women & children dressed-and all so peaceable and happy.³⁰⁷

This impact was something that the Sisters of Mercy were keen to be involved with, and many took the pledge themselves (by December 1840, Catherine named that 21 had done so).³⁰⁸ Elizabeth Malcolm notes that “Irishwomen did not play an active independent role in the temperance movement.”³⁰⁹ Luddy is even more specific, noting that “Catholic women do not appear to have organised any public temperance societies.” However, she does go on to point out that “temperance was encouraged in the sodalities and confraternities run by nuns.”³¹⁰

In 1839, this was demonstrated in Limerick by Elizabeth Moore, who established “a Christian Doctrine Society for women, making it a condition of membership to take the pledge. The

³⁰⁵ Catherine McAuley to Josephine Warde, 18 October 1839, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 208.

³⁰⁶ Catherine McAuley to de Sales White, 31 October 1840, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 308.

³⁰⁷ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 13 November 1840, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 320.

³⁰⁸ Catherine McAuley to de Sales White, 7 December 1840, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 327.

³⁰⁹ Elizabeth Malcolm, *Ireland Sober, Ireland Free: Drink and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 161.

³¹⁰ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 208.

members soon swelled to thousands, from all parts of the city. Every Sunday, they met at the 'Cell,' and, having listened to a stirring instruction and joined in some short prayers, each was supplied with a good book from a library established for their use."³¹¹

By 1839, the sisters had been ministering amongst the people in Limerick for two years, with Elizabeth Moore as their leader. They were providing several opportunities for the local women, including adult education, the lacemaking previously mentioned, and subcontracting of piecework, and had thereby secured society's respect. This respect likely enabled the sisters to be successful in promoting the temperance pledge as part of their other societies and endeavours, and if the sisters were doing this well, then there would be no need to establish other temperance organisations. As Luddy put it, "nuns always expanded the facilities of the societies they took over and catered for larger numbers of individuals than any of the lay societies which engaged in similar work," a fact that aided the longevity of their organisations.³¹²

Prison Ministry

As Clear describes, Catherine's initial scheme saw the poor "as an amorphous group to be visited, counselled and helped in every way." What evolved, however, was influenced by a broader societal tendency of all organisations "to put people who were vulnerable or deviant, or both, into institutions."³¹³ These institutions had a secondary effect of removing the vulnerable and deviant from others whom they might negatively influence (the sisters were clearly deemed immune to such immoral influences). Prisons were among the institutions in which the sisters were involved.

Carroll was certainly echoing the sentiments of the time when she wrote that "the reformation of a female prisoner has long been acknowledged to be a harder task than that of a male. She has sinned more against the instincts of her better nature; the consequences of her crime have had a more hardening effect upon her."³¹⁴ The involvement of the Sisters of Mercy in prison ministry was encouraged, as the "nun" was perceived to be exemplary in the modelling and teaching of morals. Their work at Dublin's Mountjoy prison was well-received, and a new

³¹¹ Carroll, *Leaves*, 1, 293-94.

³¹² Luddy, "Women and Work," 36.

³¹³ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 106.

³¹⁴ Carroll, *Leaves*, 1, 54.

ministry emerged in the 1850s at Goldenbridge, also in Dublin, whereby women released from prison went to a halfway house operated by the sisters. Clare Augustine Moore, an artist, taught the women how to paint on china, a skill that would enable valuable employment once released from the house of correction. Luddy commented that “their success [at Goldenbridge] further enhanced the position of female religious in the provision of institutional services to the needy and outcast.”³¹⁵ This sentiment can be applied across the various ministries of the Sisters of Mercy: their success ensured that more was entrusted to them.

In the annual reports of the various asylums and refuges established for former prisoners, Luddy notes that “subscriptions generally declined after the first few years of an institution’s existence and the homes had to rely on the work of the inmates to continue.”³¹⁶ This decline perhaps correlates with the longevity of the institutions run by the Sisters of Mercy (and other religious congregations). Unlike laywomen, the sisters were better able to sustain the management of their institutions because their own members were supported by the convent finances, such as the ongoing interest from dowries and acquisition of such when sisters died.

The Cholera Epidemic of 1832

“Since fatal Cholera appeared
you’ve scarce been seen to stand,
nor danger for yourself e’er feared
when death o’erspread the land.”

Catherine McAuley to Anna Maria Doyle³¹⁷

Ireland experienced a significant cholera epidemic in 1832 when Asiatic cholera struck. The first five cases were detected on 27 March. The Sisters of Charity administered a hospital at Grangegorman for the victims and, because of the impression made by their service, the Sisters of Mercy were asked to look after the running of a soon to be opened depot in Townsend Street. When Catherine received this request, she wrote to Archbishop Murray

³¹⁵ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 166.

³¹⁶ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 173.

³¹⁷ Catherine McAuley to Anna Maria Doyle, c.1832, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 52.

requesting permission for the sisters to care for the cholera patients. His approval allowed the sisters to commence this healthcare ministry early in May.³¹⁸

Murray had written a pastoral letter in late April supporting the religious and addressing widespread fears that those with cholera were being poisoned by the medical staff or even buried alive. The sisters worked on countering this fear, and patients were calmer in their presence. Catherine's experience of living and socialising with Protestants, as well as the connections through her extended family with those in the medical field, was reflected in her ease with the chief physician at Townsend Street. Savage writes, "Dr. Hart, the chief physician, gave her the fullest control and used to attribute the fewness of deaths (about 30%) in comparison with the high percentage elsewhere, to her wise administration. Though himself a Protestant, he was delighted with Catherine and often held long consultations with her on the affairs of the hospital."³¹⁹

When the depot was first opened, there was provision for fifty patients, but it was expanded quickly, and 3,700 patients were treated at the depot in the eight months of operation.³²⁰ However, due to the number of patients, there were more than just the sisters working there. Clare Moore recalls the work in the Bermondsey Annals, writing, "in the year 1832, when the cholera was raging in Dublin, the Sisters attended the cholera hospital in Townsend St daily. There were always four there from nine in the morning till eight at night, relieving one another every four hours, and although our Reverend Mother had a natural dread of contagion, she overcame that feeling and scarcely left the Hospital."³²¹ The sisters' role was very much consolation to the patients, many of whom were dying, and accounts suggest that as they sat with those who were dying, there were many conversions. At one point, a formal complaint was made against the sisters converting the patients, but Dr. Hart stated that they "were the greatest use and that the Hospital could not be carried on without them; for they kept the eight nurses in order, a hard thing to do."³²² Whilst the records are vague, the report of Dr. Hart suggests that Catherine took on a leadership role at the depot. The nurses she kept in order would likely have been no more than domestic servants rather than women who had received formal nursing training. Luddy's claim that religious women replaced laywomen in

³¹⁸ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 116.

³¹⁹ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 150.

³²⁰ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 151.

³²¹ Moore, "Bermondsey Manuscript," 112.

³²² Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 151.

philanthropic efforts is not an entirely accurate description of what happened here, as both lay and religious worked together.

However, Catherine may have found it easier if the depot was staffed entirely by sisters, since the laywomen were known to need strong supervision, even at times taking the medicinal brandy themselves rather than giving it to their patients.³²³ The laywomen had not received the training and mentoring that the sisters had on entering convents. The exponential growth in religious orders over time resulted in enough sisters to undertake such ministries without the need for untrained laywomen. Here, at least, the evidence supports Luddy's argument that the sisters replaced the laywomen. This was also the beginning of the involvement of the Sisters of Mercy in healthcare, their reputation opening up new opportunities for ministry, with nursing of the Jervis Street Hospital in Dublin coming under their control in 1854 and the Mater Hospital opening in 1861.

Education

Education was seen as a method to produce useful citizens with Christian morals and support the rising profile of Catholics in post-emancipation Ireland. Catholic educational efforts also aimed to prevent the proselytising initiatives of the Protestant Church. Walsh notes that the English Catholic community, both lay and clerical, were wary, if not sceptical, of reliance on the benefits of state-funded aid," and this can be applied to Ireland also.³²⁴ The Protestant Ascendancy generally believed that the Catholics in Ireland, like those in Wales and Scotland, could be weaned from their traditional allegiance to Catholicism through scripture-based education.³²⁵ This belief underpinned education, and the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland was established in 1811. More commonly known as the Kildare Place Schools, the Society was the focus for the attempt to provide scripture-based education. Catholic suspicion of this initiative resulted in significant support for educational initiatives of the sisters where people could be confident of Catholic teaching.

As a laywoman herself, Catherine involved other laywomen in the educational work of the fledgling organisation. However, after the decision to form a congregation had been taken,

³²³ Savage, *First Sister of Mercy*, 151.

³²⁴ Barbara Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales, 1800-1937: a Social History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002), 24.

³²⁵ Whelan, *Bible War in Ireland*, xvi.

and Catherine went to the Presentation Convent to complete a novitiate, the teaching was restricted to the women living in the House of Mercy. It is not recorded whether laywomen were included again on her return.

Catherine utilised the educational theories of both Joseph Lancaster (an English Quaker born in the same year as Catherine) and Andrew Bell (a Scottish Episcopalian born in 1753 who developed his educational theories when ministering in India). Both had developed an education model based around more able students, or monitors, teaching others under the supervision of a teacher. This system allowed large numbers of students to receive an education from a small number of teachers. This was a satisfactory solution to the post-penal law society where prior restrictions on education for Catholics resulted in few suitable Catholic teachers being available. The laywomen working alongside Catherine were able to utilise this system of education and therefore instruct large numbers of students. Murray's earlier mentioned letter of 1828 claimed that 500 girls were educated and, yet Clare Moore records only nine living in the House at that time, and some such as Veronica Corrigan, the orphan Catherine adopted and who later became a lay sister, may not have been educated sufficiently to be a teacher, or even a monitor. When cholera struck in 1832, the number of sisters available to minister in the school was reduced again, with those who were nursing at the cholera depot otherwise occupied.

The education that the students received consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic and needlework, and it also had a religious focus, with Catherine placing great importance on preparation to receive the sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation and learning how to pray at Mass.³²⁶ In 1831 the government established the National Education Board to fund primary education for all students. This education was intended to be non-denominational and required that students be separated into Catholics and Protestants for religious instruction. The Sisters of Mercy deliberately chose to link into this system rather than continue independently, as the alliance provided them with government funds to run their schools. The national system was not favoured by all Catholics as the texts provided were colonial texts printed in Britain. The Christian Brothers are an example of a group who chose not to join the National System and published their own texts that promoted a Catholic and nationalist

³²⁶ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 182.

stance.³²⁷ Catherine's political stance toward Britain and the colonial rule is never specified and undertaking the national system may reflect greater openness to Protestants and British rule because of her upbringing. Catherine also found that the opportunity to partake in the national examinations, if the school was within the national system, was an incentive for the students to achieve highly. At a later date, the sisters in Kells removed their school from the national system because an inspector had reprimanded them for making the sign of the cross in class. However, most schools run by the sisters found a way to remain within the system and still include a robust religious education.

Religious Rituals

Magray discusses the impact of religious rituals in bringing about religious change, that is inextricably linked to social change and often centred around education.³²⁸ Such rituals were part of the ministry at the House of Mercy and the early foundations of the sisters. One example is the 1828 (and in subsequent years) Christmas dinner for the poor to which "several charitable persons had sent in contributions of beef, fruit, etc. and Protestants, as well as Catholics of the best fashion, came in great numbers to assist." Ever loyal to the house, Daniel O'Connell carved the turkey.³²⁹ Magray notes that such events would have been an opportunity for religious instruction.³³⁰ This is similar to the visitation undertaken by the sisters, where they may have gone to provide practical support and deliver essentials such as food or clothing, yet, the sisters never overlooked opportunities to attend to the spiritual needs of those they visited. When the sisters went to Birr, a town experiencing a significant schism in the church, Catherine described those she visited in a letter to M. Cecilia Marmion. She said that "they are all replenished with the perverted Texts of Scripture" and continued to tell Marmion of the ways she encouraged them to explore alternative interpretations of Scripture.³³¹

³²⁷ Christopher McCormack, "'Straw Bonnets' to Superior Schooling: The 'Failure' of the Charity School Movement in the Context of Nineteenth-Century Ireland - a Reappraisal," *Paedagogica historica* 48, no. 5 (2012): 713.

³²⁸ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 88-99.

³²⁹ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 73.

³³⁰ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 91.

³³¹ Catherine McAuley to Cecilia Marmion, 4 January 1841, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 342.

Were the Sisters of Mercy Timid Defenders of the Status Quo?

That the formation of the Sisters of Mercy had the effect of inhibiting the work of laywomen post-famine, as Luddy claims, could perhaps better be attributed to the influence of society and the control of the clergy: the supporters who encouraged the formation of a religious congregation for longevity and stability, and the priests who were eager to have the female philanthropists under clerical control. Luddy summarises Catherine's situation well when she notes “the inability of McAuley to continue in her work outside the structure of a formal religious congregation underlines the power which the Catholic clergy exerted over groups of philanthropic women.”³³² Magray also points out that religious communities “effectively and significantly participated in the social and religious transformation of Irish society that the nineteenth century witnessed.”³³³

Although not the focus of this study, the impact of the famine in the 1840s should be considered in the scope of Luddy's argument that the establishment of religious congregations effectively prevented the involvement of laywomen in charity. The famine led to widespread destitution and the loss of land, homes and income. Without such necessities, the laywomen were now more likely to be the recipients of charity than those administering charity to others.

Catherine did not allow clergy to stifle their endeavours and maintain the status quo, rather she found new solutions. For example, when priests would not provide the required liturgical services in the chapel at Baggot Street, the sisters obtained the services of all the visiting priests they could to preside at Mass. When bishops or clergy would not lessen the dowry required for a woman to enter the congregation, the sisters would look for another diocese for her to enter. One example is Anna Maher, who the bishop would not permit to enter in Carlow because her dowry was insufficient. Instead, the superior in Carlow tried Baggot Street, Galway, Charleville, and Birr to see if they could take her, but as Catherine wrote from Birr, “Poor Miss Maher - no chance here. Money, money is the theme. I entreated in favour of a candidate, with £16 per year & £100 in hand - it was regarded quite insufficient.”³³⁴ Maher was eventually accepted in Kinsale (and went on to lead a group of sisters to Cincinnati).³³⁵

³³² Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 25.

³³³ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 34.

³³⁴ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 3 February 1841, in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 357.

³³⁵ Margaret Molitor, “Mary Teresa Maher of Cincinnati,” *Mercy Association of Scripture and Theology* 5, no. 1 (1994): 24.

What is clear is that the sisters were actively engaged in an extensive range of ministries, responding to new invitations to form foundations in new towns and cities, and responding to local needs in novel ways, such as the previous example in this chapter of employing tutors in lacemaking. The sisters could not be accused of maintaining the status quo as apostolic religious life was only emerging in Ireland when Catherine established the congregation and so was new in itself.

Conclusion

The Sisters of Mercy successfully initiated, developed, and sustained various ministries, as described in this chapter. While there is no evidence of a deliberate intent to exclude laywomen from philanthropic activities, several factors contributed to such an outcome. The clergy supported the work of the sisters and relished a level of control, that they acquired by default, over any convent in their parish or diocese. Another factor was that the sisters cared for the poor and socially deviant, which suited those who did not wish to associate with such. The sisters had increasing numbers of members and the financial support of wealthy philanthropists to establish and expand the number of their ministries. Lastly, their success in helping the poor and destitute, establishing credible educational institutes, and caring for the sick resulted in further opportunities unfolding for them that did not emerge in the same way for laywomen – their reputation ensured that more work would be given to them.

The various ministries established by the new religious orders, and the members themselves, according to Magray, "were part of the drive of the emerging middle class both to define itself and to reshape the Irish world in its own image," and this is evident in the examples given of the Sisters of Mercy.³³⁶ For the Catholic Church, in Ireland, the nineteenth century was focused on consolidating a presence and repairing the damage that the penal laws had inflicted.³³⁷ Even the exterior grandeur of many of the convents established at this time (despite very austere interior living areas for the sisters) also signified, according to Clear, the "fixed prominent position which the institutions and rituals of a modernising Catholic Church secured for themselves in the minds of all Catholics."³³⁸ As the Sisters of Mercy (and other

³³⁶ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 45.

³³⁷ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 160.

³³⁸ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 157.

religious orders for women) became an integral part of this emerging church, they effectively became the female face of the Catholic Church for the majority of Irish people.

A comment of Magray's also highlights the competition that arose between the different religious communities. She writes of a situation in Cork whereby, "the Sisters of Charity decided to apply for the management of the proposed hospital because, as the reverend mother of the Cork community remarked, "if we do not take it, no doubt the S[isters] of Mercy will."³³⁹ Such competition resulted in laywomen not getting the opportunity to undertake the ministry, adding weight to Luddy's claim that the religious congregations prevented laywomen from engaging in charitable work.

Clear's discussion on social activism is also worth exploring in this context; she claims that the dominance of the nuns in the area of charitable action, constantly exposed to the social problems of the day, "secured a hold on the hearts and minds of the Catholic poor and gave meaningful activity to well-off Catholics."³⁴⁰ Despite a common charism, the individual convents of the Sisters of Mercy were autonomous, providing no general forum in which the social problems and their responses to them could be discussed, thus ensuring philanthropy occurred at a local level. Embedded in the mercy ethos was a value on the hidden life.

[Catherine] "told them that their very tone of voice and manner of walking should be humble and subdued; that they should carefully shun speaking of themselves, or of their works" and "she taught them to love the hidden life, labouring on silently for God alone, for she had a great dislike to noise and shew in the performance of duties. "See how quietly," she would say, 'the great God does all His mighty works; darkness is spread over us, and light breaks in again, and there is no noise of drawing curtains or closing shutters'."³⁴¹

This meant that the work they undertook, the poverty and the desperate situations they encountered remained private. In general, nineteenth-century Ireland did not encourage women to speak out, and religious women, either under a vow of enclosure or under the control of the clergy, had fewer rights than most.

³³⁹ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 30.

³⁴⁰ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 160.

³⁴¹ Clare Moore in Sullivan, *Tradition of Mercy*, 110.

According to Clear, this silencing had the consequence that “the Catholic middle and upper-middle classes were effectively quarantined from the largest body of Catholic social workers.”³⁴² She notes that the dependence on the charitable donations of the comfortably-off Catholics meant the sisters were also not likely to jeopardise their support by identifying employers who paid starvation wages and who exploited the poor.³⁴³ Lastly, Clear observes that “nuns did not undertake critical analysis of society based on their working experiences because they were, quite simply, too busy.”³⁴⁴ This chapter has outlined a small number of the ministries that the sisters were engaged in, and these were replicated across Ireland and the United Kingdom. Within ten years of Catherine’s death, the Sisters of Mercy were in Canada, the United States, Australia, Argentina and New Zealand, and they were undoubtedly busy.

³⁴² Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 161.

³⁴³ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 161.

³⁴⁴ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 164.

Chapter 5 - The Impact of a Decision

Catriona Clear claims that as the “Catholic Church grew in influence and authority” it became “an essential component of Irish nationality” that caused “an upsurge of enthusiasm for the religious life.”³⁴⁵ This final chapter will outline the reasons for forming a religious congregation, identify why women would be inclined to join, and detail the common-sense approach toward the Rule of the Congregation that focused on the sisters’ needs and the ministries of the community. The unparalleled leadership opportunities afforded to women who joined the Sisters of Mercy will be explored and will show that membership of a religious congregation was the most common way for women to undertake a leadership role within nineteenth-century Irish society. Magray points out that “an understanding of convent experience requires that we take notice of the ways in which women attempted to challenge and expand the boundaries that surrounded and limited their lives.”³⁴⁶ The women doing the challenging were demonstrating extraordinary leadership for their time. Those inclined to undertake philanthropic activities, particularly a leadership role in them, often saw a religious life as the pathway for their gifts to be utilised. This exacerbated the exclusion of Catholic laywomen from philanthropic activity.

Establishing a Voluntary Agency

Luddy claims that “throughout the nineteenth-century, Irish middle-class women of all religious persuasions developed an enduring tradition of establishing voluntary agencies and societies which catered for the needs of the destitute of their own sex and for children,” (something that can be correlated with the establishment of the House of Mercy) but she argues that this activity was not as prevalent in the latter part of the century when the religious orders had an established presence and undertook most new ministries in an area.³⁴⁷ Catherine did not desire to form a religious congregation. For other women, such as her first companion Anna Maria Doyle who was attracted to religious life, the lack of enclosure ensured they maintained the necessary freedoms to continue to care for their parents or meet other responsibilities. In a letter to Father L’Estrange, Catherine detailed this when she described the work of the House of Mercy: “Ladies who prefer Conventual life, and are prevented

³⁴⁵ Clear, *Nuns in Ireland*, 135.

³⁴⁶ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 51.

³⁴⁷ Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 21.

embracing it from the nature of property or connections, may retire to this House.” Therefore, this form of societal philanthropy attracted volunteers to the House of Mercy in the manner described by Luddy, and the ministry commenced.

Establishing a Religious Congregation

In 1829, when Daniel Murray met with Catherine after Mathias Kelly had effectively tried to evict Catherine from the ministry she had established, forming a religious congregation was not the archbishop’s intention. Catherine took time to make this decision, inferring that she had autonomy. Taking into account her own background and experiences, the role of the clergy, the emergence of a bourgeois Catholic Church in Ireland, and an understanding of the nineteenth-century political situation, Catherine felt this was the best option for the organisation. Despite this, Catherine continued to see religious life as in some sense contrary to natural inclinations. Describing the five English novices to Warde in 1840, she said, “It is very animating to see five persons most happily circumstanced, leave their friends and country, to enter on a mission so contrary to our natural inclinations.”³⁴⁸

Why join a Religious Community?

Magray claims that “the primary religious and cultural justification for the great numbers of women joining active orders throughout Europe at this time was the achievement of personal salvation. This meant that a primary goal of religious communities was to provide a meaningful spiritual experience for its members.”³⁴⁹ In the case of the House of Mercy, this is not as evident, as it appears that the women joined to engage in the works of mercy, and small examples suggest that the religious practices that some participated in were not compulsory. One such example comes from Clare Moore, who writes, “as to the form of life it was primitive Christianity. All rose at 6, but Revd. Mother and myself and sometimes Mother Frances used to rise at 4 and say the whole Psalter “by moonlight” often, read some of The Sinner’s Guide, and transcribe I forget what.”³⁵⁰ So while Catherine, and one or two others, did rise early to pray, it was not the norm for the rest of the community; the devotional revolution, when the focus for all Catholics was on frequent acts of piety (“retreats, charity

³⁴⁸ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, June 1840 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 270.

³⁴⁹ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 47.

³⁵⁰ Clare Moore to Clare Augustine Moore, 23 August 1844 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 86.

sermons, tridua, novenas, stations of the cross, forty hours' adoration, and benediction of the blessed sacrament"), had not yet occurred.³⁵¹

In 1984 when Emmet Larkin prepared a revised introduction to his work on the devotional revolution, he admitted that "a good deal more was achieved before the famine" than he was prepared to admit when he first wrote the text.³⁵² Before the famine, Catholics were engaged in pilgrimages to holy sites such as Croagh Patrick in County Mayo (often with an added penance of walking barefooted or on one's knees), the frequent sprinkling of holy water for protection, and other such practices that later became a hallmark of the devotional revolution. Yet many of these practices had their origins in the non-Christian supernatural and were later assimilated into Catholic practices (holy wells being dedicated to saints is one such example).³⁵³

Meanwhile, Catherine retained what could be described as a Protestant aversion to promoting extreme practices or penances to the sisters. Two examples demonstrated this when she encouraged the breaking of the great silence.³⁵⁴ The first was pre-empting a visit to Tullamore with an instruction to Mary Delamare, "you might contrive to put the clock out of order- though that would be almost a pity. By some means, we must have till ten o'clock every night not a moment's silence - until we are asleep - not to be disturbed until we awake."³⁵⁵ Clare Augustine Moore recalled a second example when Catherine, remembering the sisters ministering in the cholera depot described them "returning at past 9, loosening their cinctures on the stairs and stopping, overcome with sleep."³⁵⁶ By this time, the House of Mercy was a Convent, and the great silence began at eight o'clock at night, before these sisters were even in the door home. There is no mention of evening prayer (the chapel being on the ground floor and the main staircase leading to the dormitories on the second floor) – common sense prevailed over the piety associated with the strict adherence to the Rule.

³⁵¹ Emmet J. Larkin, "The Beginnings of the Devotional Revolution in Ireland: The Parish Mission Movement," *New Hibernia Review* 18, no. 1 (2014): 75.

³⁵² Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism*, 8.

³⁵³ Connolly, *Priests and People*, 100-01.

³⁵⁴ Emerging from the monastic tradition, the great silence begins at the evening prayer of Compline and continues until after the first prayer (Lauds) of the following day.

³⁵⁵ Catherine McAuley to Mary Delamare, June-July 1836 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 75.

³⁵⁶ Moore, "Dublin Manuscript," 207.

When Catherine prepared the Rule, she based it on the Rule of the Presentation Sisters but chose to omit the section on the *horarium*; what was added by the Vatican authorities for the final version was the following, “in every House, there shall be a fixed Horarium, approved by the Ordinary, suited to the circumstances of the place, and the duties of the Congregation.”³⁵⁷ Catherine would undoubtedly have approved of the freedom that this gave; writing to Warde in 1838, she had said, “every place has its own particular ideas & feelings which must be yielded to when possible.”³⁵⁸

Leadership Opportunities

Many of the women who worked with Catherine in the early years undertook leadership roles in the organisation before the congregation was formed, which would have been less accessible to them should they have chosen married life. Magray presents an informative discussion on the conviction of convent superiors and novice directors that they acted as “the equivalents of Christ on earth,” particularly referencing M. Paul Higgins from the Presentation Convent.³⁵⁹ Magray notes that this “conviction was not accepted by the Mercy sisters. Catherine McAuley, who was a novice under Higgins before she began the Mercy Order, felt that this ideology created relationships within the convent that were too hierarchical.” This statement offers considerable insight into the breadth of leadership opportunities distinctive to the Sisters of Mercy as they reflected an ideology contrary to the norm.

In writing about the influences of the spirituality of the Society of Friends on Catherine, Rita Valade claimed that she “did not replicate in the Institute the relationship with authority, structure, governance or community style that she experienced during her novitiate.”³⁶⁰ The non-hierarchical ideology that emerged echoes that of the Society of Friends and is likely another influence of Catherine Callaghan. As Valade identified, the Society of Friends possessed “no centralised or hierarchical system of governance, each Meeting communally discerned decisions that would affect the Society.”³⁶¹ This is similar to a situation at the House of Mercy, recalled in a letter to M. Aloysius Scott, where a decision was required as to

³⁵⁷ Chapter 15 in McAuley, “Rule,” 281.

³⁵⁸ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 17 November 1838 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 168.

³⁵⁹ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 48.

³⁶⁰ Valade, “Quaker Influences,” 5.

³⁶¹ Valade, “Quaker Influences,” 6.

whether sisters would undertake a foundation to Charleston, South Carolina. Rather than Catherine, as superior, making the decision, she summoned the entire community to hear the bishop and respond, “After Breakfast we assembled all the troops in the community room, from all quarters - Laundry, Dining Hall, etc., etc. - by chance 2 were in from Kingstown. We made a great muster. The question was put by his Lordship from the chair, who will come with me to Charleston as superior?”³⁶²

Another example of Catherine’s humility as a leader comes from the writings of Clare Moore, who says, “in order that she might have the advantage of practising submission, she enjoined one of the junior Sisters to tell her of any fault or omission of duty she might perceive.”³⁶³ The *Annals of St Leo’s Convent of Mercy, Carlow*, recall a similar sentiment when they note of Catherine, “The most amiable trait in her character which we believed we discerned was a total absence of everything in her manner telling, I am the Foundress.”³⁶⁴

Including all sisters in the organisation of the community enabled the development of a range of skills and made for an ideal preparation for future leadership roles. Frances Warde is an example of a woman who was given responsibility at a young age and flourished. She moved into the House of Mercy on 22 June 1828. Warde undertook an administrative role, supporting Catherine closely in the running of the House and taking charge when Catherine completed her noviciate at Georges Hill. Warde was, in 1837, sent as superior on the foundation to Carlow and, in 1844, led the first group of Sisters of Mercy to the United States. She established 108 convents, schools, hospitals, and orphanages during her life. Her biographer, Kathleen Healy, notes that “many religious women of the nineteenth century were women of prayer, but Frances Warde was a strong woman of both prayer and action.”³⁶⁵ This combination of action and prayer was characteristic of the Sisters of Mercy. Like the Irish Sisters of Charity in Dublin and the Presentation Sisters in Cork, they were known as the “walking nuns.” This was a term of criticism rather than endearment, for laypeople and clergy

³⁶² Catherine McAuley to Aloysius Scott, 30 June 1841 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 407.

³⁶³ Moore, “Bermondsey Manuscript,” 109.

³⁶⁴ M. Frances Warde, “Annals of St Leo’s Convent of Mercy, Carlow,” in *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, ed. Mary C. Sullivan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 230.

³⁶⁵ Healy, *Frances Warde*, 476.

were not used to the apostolic religious life and felt that the sisters should remain inside the convent walls.³⁶⁶

Clare Moore was another who matured into an exemplary leader. She often accompanied Catherine as a travelling companion on new foundations until she was appointed the first superior of the foundation to Cork in 1837, and then Bermondsey in 1839. Clare Moore's leadership qualities were recognised by Florence Nightingale, the English nurse with whom she worked alongside during the Crimean War. In 1856 Nightingale wrote to Clare Moore saying, "You were far above me in fitness for the General Superintendency, both in worldly talent of administration & far more in the spiritual qualifications God values in a superior."³⁶⁷

Luddy's argument that laywomen were less likely to be engaged in philanthropy after the formation of religious orders should be qualified by the fact that increasing numbers of women with leadership potential, like Warde and Clare Moore, actively chose religious life. In Irish society, the place of the laywoman was largely centred in the home and subjection to her husband. In contrast, there were ready opportunities for leadership in a convent.

The decision to form a religious congregation was, in itself, a creative response to a problem. The challenge of doing so was particularly difficult for Catherine herself, as undertaking a noviciate in her late forties with superiors half her age was not common. Even within the first three years of the opening of the House of Mercy, the laywomen faced numerous difficulties in being accepted by members of the local society, particularly some clergy. Like other organisations established by laywomen at the time, it was almost inevitable that the work would be handed over to a religious congregation in order to continue. That it resulted in the formation of a new congregation based around the ministry, was an inspired solution.

³⁶⁶ Sullivan, *Path of Mercy*, 314.

³⁶⁷ Mary C. Sullivan, *The Friendship of Florence Nightingale and Mary Clare Moore* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 71.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Mary Peckham Magray challenges the scholarship of Caitriona Clear and Maria Luddy, claiming that they portray religious women as powerless instruments of the male hierarchy rather than as self-assured, assertive and ambitious women.³⁶⁸ Congruent with Magray's stance, this thesis has outlined how Catherine McAuley was not powerless but became a significant contributor to the unprecedented change that transformed pre-famine Ireland and led to the devotional revolution, and therefore was an atypical philanthropist. The thesis has demonstrated that the sisters did not intend to exclude laywomen from engaging in philanthropy, but rather the exclusion was a result of culture within both the country and the Church.

When Catherine told Frances Warde that "a good beginning is of great importance," she could have been referring to her experiences as a young woman.³⁶⁹ The example of Catherine's Catholic father and socialite mother, the charity that was shown to her by the Conways and Armstrongs, and the extraordinary influence of Catherine Callaghan's Quaker spirituality strongly shaped Catherine's values and philanthropy, as was outlined in chapters one and two. The societal attitudes of the early nineteenth-century, particularly in relation to class, also influenced Catherine and encouraged her to maintain the status quo. This can be seen in the Rule of the congregation where the language is at times restrictive in relation to practices, with one example being lay sisters. This had the potential to replicate class divisions of wider society and limit the training of many of the women at the House of Mercy to domestic work.

The inheritance left to Catherine, by William Callaghan, had given her the means to establish a charitable institute that eventually became the Sisters of Mercy, yet the very nature of a religious congregation gave power to the clergy. Chapter three focused on the influence of the clergy, particularly some local priests who imposed restrictions that proved to be challenging to overcome. However, Catherine and the sisters became adept at asserting themselves when needed for the sake of the ministry and recognising when they needed to find alternative solutions to challenges; therefore, the organisation survived.

³⁶⁸ Magray, *Transforming Power*, 10.

³⁶⁹ Catherine McAuley to Frances Warde, 24 November 1840 in Sullivan, *Correspondence*, 323.

Chapter four provided examples of the Sisters of Mercy leading social action and engaging philanthropic support from laypeople. Unlike other congregations with rules of enclosure, the sisters were visible in the community and provided opportunities for education and the development of skills that empowered women. Chapter four made evident that, while the sisters became responsible for a significant amount of the practical philanthropy occurring in Ireland, it was not the intention to exclude laywomen but rather the outcome of the following factors. Firstly, the clergy supported the congregation and directed charitable work the way of the sisters. Secondly, the increasing number of sisters enabled their initiatives to expand. Thirdly, the training they received when entering the convent meant that the nature of the work was often undesirable to laywomen. Finally, the success of their work encouraged the clergy and laity to give more opportunities for charitable outreach to be the sisters.

Despite clerical pressure resulting in the maintenance of the status quo in some areas, Catherine McAuley's experiences, strongly influenced by the Protestant tradition, also enabled her to transform the face of religious life through the establishment of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831, as is described in chapter five. Catherine modelled a form of leadership that did not stem from a hierarchical tradition but sought to recognise the contribution of all members of the community. Like the Society of Friends, one could almost argue that Catherine recognised a kind of "inner light" in all. Her charismatic and inclusive approach attracted women with leadership potential who would not have undertaken such roles as laywomen. In turn, these women traversed the globe establishing communities in distant lands. While they monopolised philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland, as Luddy and Clear have shown, they made an extensive contribution to a rapidly changing society in response to political and religious influences.

The nomination guide for the 2021 New Zealand Women of Influence awards describes the following attributes as indicators of influence: "demonstrated vision, leadership, innovation and action in and beyond their field; as well as their impact and how it was achieved."³⁷⁰ This thesis has identified all these qualities, and more, in Catherine McAuley, an atypical philanthropic woman who utilised her experiences and financial inheritance to provide leadership and establish a lasting legacy.

³⁷⁰ "Women of Influence Awards," 2022, accessed 21 February, 2022, <https://www.womenofinfluence.co.nz/>.

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