Catherine McAuley – Foundress of Sisters of Mercy and Mercy Healthcare

The Venerable Mother Catherine Elizabeth McAuley (29 September 1778 – 11 November 1841) was an Irish religious sister who founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. The women's congregation has always been associated with teaching, especially in Ireland, where the sisters taught Catholics (and at times Protestants) at a time when education was mainly reserved for members of the established Church of Ireland .

Life

Catherine McAuley was born in Dublin to James and Elinor McAuley. Her father died in 1783 when she was five and her mother died in 1798. Catherine and her brother James moved to live with Protestant relatives. In 1803, McAuley became the household manager and companion of distant relatives of her mother, the Callaghans, an elderly, childless, and wealthy Quaker couple, at their home in Dublin and then at their estate in Coolock. For 20 years she gave catechetical instruction to the household servants and the poor village children. Catherine Callaghan died in 1819. When Mr. Callaghan died in 1822, McAuley became the sole residuary legatee of their estate.

The House of Mercy

McAuley inherited a considerable fortune and chose to use it to build a house where she and other compassionate women could take in homeless women and children to provide care and an education for them. A location was selected at the junction of lower Baggot and Herbert Streets, Dublin, and in June 1824, the cornerstone was laid by the Rev. Dr. Blake. As it was being refurbished, she studied current educational methods in preparation for her new endeavor. On the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 24 September 1827, the new institution for destitute women, orphans, and schools for the poor was opened and McAuley, with two companions, undertook its management.

Sisters of Mercy

McAuley as depicted on the Irish £5 note

Catherine McAuley never intended to found a community of religious women. Her initial intention was to assemble a lay corps of Catholic social workers. In 1828 the archbishop permitted the staff of the institute to assume a distinctive dress and to publicly visit the sick. The uniform adopted was a black dress and cape of the same material reaching to the belt, a white collar and a lace cap and veil — such a costume as is now worn by the postulants of the congregation. In the same year the archbishop desired Miss McAuley to choose some name by which the little community might be known, and she chose that of "Sisters of Mercy", having the design of making the works of mercy the distinctive feature of the institute.

She was desirous that the members should combine with the silence and prayer of the Carmelites, with the active labors of a Sister of Charity. The position of the institute was anomalous, its members were not bound by vows nor were they restrained by rules. The church (clergy and people) of the time, however, were not supportive of groups of lay women working independently of church structures. The main concern was for the stability and continuity of the works of mercy which the women had taken on. Should any of them get married or lose interest, the poor and the orphans whom they were caring for would then be at a loss.

Catherine's clerical mentor urged her to form a religious institute. Catherine and two other women entered the formation program of the Presentation Sisters to formally prepare for life as women religious. At the end of one year they professed vows and returned to the House of Mercy. The Sisters of Mercy consider 12 December 1831 as the day of their founding as a religious community.

A cholera epidemic hit Dublin in 1832, and Catherine agreed to staff a cholera hospital on Townsend Street.

The rule of the Sisters of Mercy was formally confirmed by Pope Gregory XVI on 6 June 1841. Catherine lived only ten years as a Sister of Mercy, **Sister Mary Catherine**.

Death

Catherine McAuley died of tuberculosis on 11 November 1841 at Baggot Street. At the time of her death there were 100 Sisters of Mercy in ten foundations. Shortly thereafter, small groups of sisters left Ireland to establish new foundations on the east and west coasts of the United States, in Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina.

Total worldwide vowed membership is about 10,000. The Mercy International Centre in Dublin, Ireland, is the international "home" of the Sisters of Mercy worldwide.

In 1978, the cause for the beatification of the *Servant of God* Catherine McAuley was opened by Pope Paul VI. In 1990, upon recognition of her heroic virtues, Pope John Paul II declared her *Venerable*.

Mercy Health

Mercy is a not-for-profit Catholic health care organization located in the Midwestern United States with headquarters in **St. Louis, Missouri**. Serving millions annually, Mercy is the **fifth largest** Catholic health care system in the United States and named one of the top five large U.S. health systems in 2016 by Truven. Mercy was **founded in 1871 by Sisters of Mercy** as part of the communal support and developed as part of their mission. Currently Mercy serves communities across four states with 45 acute care and specialty (heart, children's orthopedic and rehab) hospitals and more than 700 physician practices and outpatient facilities. Mercy employs 40,000 employees and more than 2,000 physicians.