

Chapter 1 Prelude

In trying to capture the true meaning of Salve Regina College from its earliest beginnings to the present, we must look beyond its chronology to the spirit which engendered and which to this day sustains it. It is the history of those who sought to make visible in our time the reality of an ideal rooted in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy.

We must, then, go back in time to another century, to another place, and to another group of courageous women who found in the Venerable Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, the leadership and strength to confront the many problems of nineteenth-century Ireland.

We look at Mother McAuley essentially as a liberator. Her study of the Gospels gave her an intuitive sense of what it means to be human, to be a wayfarer in the midst of light and darkness, of the known and unknown, of the possible and seemingly impossible. She understood the restrictions to human liberty caused by hatred, bigotry, ignorance, poverty, and the uncertain conditions peculiar to her time and place. Her study of the Gospels gave her the courage to oppose and to remove those restrictions.

Catherine McAuley stood on the threshold of a period of Irish history which was critical for the liberation of her people politically, socially, and religiously. She witnessed the gradual repeal of the Penal laws,¹ the passage of the Act of Union which paradoxically protected the privileged and subjugated the powerless.² The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 and the Education Act of 1831, while theoretically removing civil disabilities against Catholics and giving them legal equality before the law, failed to eradicate both ethnic and religious prejudice.³ It is significant, however, that in this moment of crisis Catherine McAuley stood with the poor at a time when the Church needed to reach out to its people in a determined effort to right their wrongs and guarantee for them the fullness of a freedom that was theoretically theirs. For Catherine McAuley the response was above all practical. She felt herself moved by God to act, for she saw within this historic moment "some of the fire of Christ kindling

¹ M. Bertrand Degnan, RSM, *Mercy unto Thousands* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1957), pp. 2, 4 note that the Penal Codes had subjugated Irish Catholics not only on religious grounds but also by the limitations on land tenure and prohibition of education.

² M. Joanna Regan, RSM, and Isabelle Keiss, RSM, *Tender Courage* (Chicago, Ill.: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), pp. 10, 11, 17 note that the act of Union and consequent dissolution of the Irish Parliament had heightened hostilities between Catholics and Protestants. The abject misery of the Papists was the result of decades of degradation forced upon them by laws that protected privilege and penalized the defenseless.

³ P. S. O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland under the Union 1801-1922* (London: Methuen, 1952), pp. 4-5, 41-42, 54-56

fast."⁴ Her principal solution to Ireland's problems lay in education defined in its most comprehensive and essential signification; namely, in its power to liberate wherever and however people were subjugated by ignorance of any kind. True liberty, she felt, was grounded in education.

Hence, in her plans for Baggott Street, the first House of Mercy, she provided first for classrooms. She saw to it that the illiterate and unskilled young girls who found refuge there would not only receive instruction in the Faith and in good manners, but would be trained according to their capacity to find proper employment in order to be able to take their places in society with dignity and self-respect.⁵ Moreover, she taught her Sisters that even in their visits to the poor their purpose was not only to console and to care for their needs, but to instruct them so that they themselves might become more self-sufficient and more aware of their dignity as persons. Thus, she was guided by a realism that saw in ignorance the most devastating source of human depravity. For Catherine McAuley, intellectual poverty was as debilitating as financial poverty. She sought to dispel it by the humanizing, liberating power of the ministries of Mercy.

She herself became an educator in a more formal and specific sense. As a teacher in St. Mary's Poor School, she had become acquainted with the teaching methods developed in the most reputable schools, even visiting France to observe methods used for the instruction of larger classes.⁶ Thus, she did not come unprepared to direct the Sisters in their formation as teachers; nor did she hesitate to identify herself with the public concerns that grew out of the National Education Act of 1831 and, with it, the establishment of the National Board of Education. As early as 1829 Catherine McAuley established herself as a pioneer in the struggle for the emancipation of those hundreds of poor children who were victims of the proselytizing tactics of the Kildare Place Society, the Royal Schools, and the Charter Schools.⁷ Her firsthand experience in visiting the schools sponsored by the Kildare Place Society impelled her to open the Baggott Street Poor School, gathering the poor from the highways and byways.⁸ She saw, then, the value of the National Education Act, which theoretically, for the first time, gave Catholics the opportunity to receive instruction in the national schools in their own religion. So she endorsed, along with Archbishop Murray, the National Education Board, which at that time did not receive full

⁴ Mary Ignatia Neumann, RSM, ed., *Letters of Catherine McAuley* (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1969), p. 226

⁵ Regan and Keiss, p. 27

⁶ Degnan, p. 44

⁷ Anthony Gallagher, OSF, *Education in Ireland* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1948), pp. 49-53 note that Kildare Place Society received grants to the extent of £268,925 supposed to help the poor. These funds were given to all other proselytizing societies for the support of the schools. Every conceivable means was used to lure Catholic children into Protestantism.

⁸ Degnan, p. 49

Catholic support.⁹ Mother McAuley realized its potentiality as an instrument for the advancement for the education of Catholics under different leadership. She was not proved wrong.

Reading her letters one sees how she used every means available to retain close connections with the Board of Education, paving the way for much smoother rapport with the Sisters of Mercy. We note, too, that she allowed the superior of one of her foundations to visit a National School then conducted by "a respectable matron."¹⁰ Within nine years after they were established, we find the Sisters permitted by the Bishop to take charge of such schools.¹¹

Moreover, since the National Schools did not provide education for the middle and upper classes, Mother McAuley established the first Pension School (high school) to meet the needs of the middle class.¹² Indeed, if we study her foundations we find she established more Pension Schools than homes for girls.¹³ She even initiated education for adults.

While Mother McAuley was ever concerned that the Sisters be well-prepared as teachers according to the norms of the times, she saw that whatever natural gifts they possessed must first be transformed by the spirit of Mercy. She looked upon all the works of Mercy as a source of liberation for all who were empowered by them. This power had its source in a spirituality consistent with the demands of such a ministry. She insisted, then, on a way of holiness in which the contemplative and the apostolic were unified in the self-giving of a life rooted in the Gospel. To initiate such a way of life she found herself going counter to the approved ascetical practices and multiplicity of prayers of the cloistered communities of the time as well as the accepted status of religious women. "The Walking Sisters of Mercy" became a source of scandal in the eyes of the righteous.¹⁴

She provided a framework through which the Sisters, in the exercise of the works of Mercy, could freely adapt themselves to the demands of any given situation without infringement on their life of prayer. For she bequeathed to her daughters an apostolic spirituality in which the interpenetration of prayer and action were so vitalized that she could truthfully say that "Mercy is flowing all around us"¹⁵ in spite of the overwhelming difficulties which she faced.

⁹ Gallagher, pp. 64-75, 107-9

¹⁰ Neumann, p. 108

¹¹ Neumann, p. 279

¹² Neumann, pp. 85-86

¹³ Kathleen Healy, *Frances Warde* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 249

¹⁴ Regan and Keiss, p. 108

¹⁵ Neumann, p. 337

It is not surprising, then, upon reading today the Pastorals of the Bishops of the United States on Education that we find a consistency with the goals and ideals of Mother McAuley. Both seek to educate for a justice activated by human and religious ideals. Both see the success of the educational mission to the degree in which it involves the Catholic community in search of solutions for the pressing problems of society. Both see that its liberating power depends upon the clarity of the Catholic message, its formation of a community in the spirit, and the quality of its service.¹⁶ We might then rightly conclude that for Mother McAuley in another century, in another context, this was a lived reality.

The Mercy connection, so to speak, between us and Catherine McAuley was made by one who, more than anyone else, knew the mind and heart of Catherine--her closest friend and most capable co-worker, Frances Warde, the pioneer of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States.¹⁷

It was in 1843, two years after Mother McAuley's death, that at the request of Michael O'Connor, the Bishop of Pittsburgh, Frances Warde made the first foundation among her twenty-seven others that touched our shores from "sea to shining sea." Her extraordinary spiritual strength, her singleness of purpose in spite of suffering and hardship, as well as her openness to the call of Mercy wherever it led, made her the instrument through which the spirit and vision of Catherine McAuley became alive in the pioneer society of nineteenth-century America.

March 12, 1851, marks her first presence in Providence and the founding of St. Xavier's Convent and Academy. We find her in 1854, after establishing convents and schools in Connecticut, sailing on the steamboat "Canonicus" to Newport, then called the "Eden of America." Here she founded a convent and school she lovingly called St. Mary's of the Isle, so closely did its surroundings recall the convent in Cork, which still exists today as St. Marie's of the Isle.¹⁸

Thus, both geographically and spiritually Salve Regina College is linked with our early Mercy history. Over a span of almost one hundred and sixty years the continuity of the Mercy charism has been so preserved that today we can almost hear the voices of Catherine and Frances counseling us to make contemporary their spiritual legacy.¹⁹

Catherine, in one of the last exhortations she gave to her Sisters, is conscious of the global dimensions of their mission and the urgency of their fidelity to the spirit of Mercy. She tells them: "We must try to be like

¹⁶ Hugh J. Nolan, ed. "To Teach as Jesus Taught," *The Pastoral Letters of the United States Bishops* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1984), vol. 3, pp. 1962-1974, 1983.

¹⁷ Healy, pp. 149-50

¹⁸ Healy, pp. 238-39

¹⁹ Sisters of Mercy of the Union, "Spirit and Mission," *Constitutions* (Silver Spring, Md., December 12, 1986), pp. 3-5

those rivers which flow into the sea without losing any of the sweetness of the waters."²⁰ For us who a century later share the same mission in a rapidly changing society these words are indeed prophetic.

As we now undertake the narration of the genesis and development of Salve Regina College, it is in the light of this same ideal that we endeavor to convey the spirit that brought it to be and which today continues to animate it.

²⁰ Neumann, p. 386